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The Georgian Memory of Zviad Gamsakhurdia

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THE GEORGIAN MEMORY OF ZVIAD GAMSAKHURDIA

THESIS FOR THE RUSSIAN AND EURASIAN STUDIES
MASTER'S PROGRAMME

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1. Introduction

On April 9, 1991, Georgia declared itself independent from the USSR. Though this was the result of a massive nationalist movement which featured a plethora of nationalist figureheads, it can be said that Zviad Gamsakhurdia was the most important among them: as the son of a renowned Georgian writer, a writer himself, a lifelong theorist of the Georgian nationalist narrative, and a lifelong dissident, when the Soviet system opened up in the late 1980's Gamsakhurdia quickly rose to prominence. As one of the authoritative experts on the Georgian national narrative, with his determination and eloquence he was able to give a voice to Georgians' dissatisfaction with Soviet rule and present them with a long-suppressed national identity; an identity they could be proud of. This made him very popular, and when the Georgian SSR held its first truly free, multi-party elections, his political movement was elected with a significant majority of the votes and Gamsakhurdia became the chairman of the Georgian SSR. In the independence referendum and the subsequent presidential elections in the spring of 1991, Georgia nigh unanimously voted for independence with Gamsakhurdia at the helm: it seemed as if his popularity was immense. Despite this apparent popularity, however, as soon as September 1991, he was met with significant opposition in the streets. The fall of this year was marked by clashes between his loyalists and his opponents, yet the violence escalated in December when opposition forces laid siege to the parliament in which Gamsakhurdia was located. After two weeks of fighting in the centre of Tbilisi, Gamsakhurdia was forced to flee. He found shelter in the Chechnya of general Dzokhar Dudayev, where he stayed until he returned to Georgia to lead a rebellion against the government in Tbilisi from his staging ground in Megrelia. This rebellion was short lived, and Gamsakhurdia died in the night between December 31, 1993, and January 1, 1994.

Gamsakhurdia's history raises the question how it is possible that he went from such massive popularity to getting violently ousted in such a brief period of time. Still, what I have found to be even more interesting is how he is remembered: despite his brief presidency, the volatility surrounding his presidency, the coup that ousted him, and his insurrection in Megrelia, he was the president that brought Georgia its independence; for better or for worse, his impact on Georgian history is far too great for him to be omitted from Georgia's national memory - but that is precisely what is seemingly happening. Walking through Tbilisi, I have seen plenty of statues, street names, and museums, many of them in honour of Georgia's national heroes, but Gamsakhurdia does not seem to be one of them. In conversation with the citizens of Tbilisi, many only knew the basics of what had unfolded during the time around Gamsakhurdia's presidency: youngsters were never taught about this period in history class, and older people were surprised I was interested in a collective memory they themselves seemingly never engaged with. In Megrelia, however, Gamsakhurdia is anything but being forgotten: in the Megrelian capital, Zugdidi, his bust is prominently displayed in the middle of the boulevard

named after him, and he has a (albeit small) museum dedicated to him. Moreover, in conversation with the people of Zugdidi I have found he is universally adored: through his Megrelian heritage, Megrelians identify with his determination and his struggle against the ‘elite’ in Tbilisi. Thus, I have two hypotheses: 1) that in Megrelia Gamsakhurdia is venerated as a hero; 2) that the memory of Gamsakhurdia is being suppressed/forgotten in Georgia at large. By testing these hypotheses, I will provide my answer to the research question of this paper: how is Zviad Gamsakhurdia remembered in modern Georgia?

The relevance of this question is in the niche it fills. Whilst academic writing on Gamsakhurdia does exist, he is never the focal point, but rather he is taken as simply one part of a wider context: for example, the academic sources used for this paper are typically about general Georgian history, Georgian political history, or Georgian nation building. In a similar vein, whilst there are scholars that have done research into aspects of Georgian collective memory (e.g. the Georgian memory of Stalin), or scholars who have placed Gamsakhurdia within his contemporary cultural context, the place of Gamsakhurdia in modern Georgian culture, in the Georgian collective memory, is a blind spot. The benefit of researching the memory of Gamsakhurdia lies in its interdisciplinary nature: since the period surrounding Gamsakhurdia’s presidency was chaotic, volatile, and emotional, it remains difficult to find out who was right, who was wrong, what was true, and what was not - for Georgian society and academia alike. It is a difficult past, a past that featured the loss of life, the loss of property, led to the destitution of the 1990’s, and greatly contributed to the current de-facto autonomy of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia; a past which can still be felt today. How Georgians handle this difficult history today can therefore be directly linked to current Georgian culture and politics.

The methodology of this paper will be as follows. The first chapter will feature the history of Gamsakhurdia on the basis of existing literature, from his time as a dissident under Soviet repression, his role as a dissident in the independence movement which formed in the late 1980’s, his time in office, to finally his time in exile and short-lived return. This history featured many uncertainties, theories, and allegations towards both him and his opponents: theories of KGB involvement, accusations of collaboration with the KGB, and plenty of ‘who shot first’ uncertainties were recurring elements in and around Gamsakhurdia’s life. Consequently, political discourse, especially during Gamsakhurdia’s tenure, was extremely hostile. Moreover, his nationalist ideology and his decisions while in office have put him at odds with Georgia’s ethnic minorities who feared a form of apartheid where non-Georgians would be treated as secondary citizens, and led to him often being described as an authoritarian nationalist by opposing contemporaries, journalists, and historians alike. However, Gamsakhurdia, and in turn his supporters, maintained this was not at all the case, claiming his opponents were acting against the will of the Georgian people that elected him with overwhelming support and that his ideology greatly respected Georgia’s minorities. Therefore, the second chapter of this paper will be dedicated to Gamsakhurdia’s ideology through an analysis of his work “The

Spiritual Mission of Georgia” and several of his speeches in order to understand how Gamsakhurdia reasoned, how his supporters interpreted and applied this ideology, and to understand why he is often regarded as a dangerous nationalist. The third chapter will introduce the lens through which the cases will be analysed, which is collective memory theory. The focus will be on the particular elements of this academic theory most applicable to the cases, namely forgetting/suppressing, memory myths, and the interplay between social and national memory. Thereafter, in chapter four and five, will be the cases of the Megrelian memory of Gamsakhurdia and the wider Georgian memory of Gamsakhurdia respectively. In both cases, instances of collective remembrance through e.g. monuments, commemorative practices, and using his name for streets, public spaces, and awards will be combined with accounts from qualitative interviews. These observations of how Gamsakhurdia is remembered will then be compared to history, explained through Gamsakhurdia’s ideology (if applicable), and divergences between history and memory analysed by way of collective memory theory. By extension, these analyses then provide insight in how the regional/national memory contributes to the regional/national identity.

2. The History of Zviad Gamsakhurdia

When Zviad Gamsakhurdia was born in 1939, he already received his first boon: his last name. His father, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, was a popular writer of Georgian literature who had written works with nationalist themes. Although he had been arrested for this once, he largely managed to navigate the Soviet censorship and repression by casting his nationalist beliefs in such a mould that it was permitted by the authorities. By the time of Zviad's birth, the name Gamsakhurdia was well established. This name would not only help Zviad's popularity, it is also thought to have mitigated the force of Soviet suppression. Apart from simply giving Zviad a prestigious family name, Konstantine would also influence the ideas Zviad would develop: from an early age, Zviad had access to and was taught about Georgian literature and (ancient) Georgian culture.¹

Zviad Gamsakhurdia had been involved in dissident activities since he was a teenager, which caused him to be detained by the authorities several times. The first time was in 1956: Khrushchev's announcement of destalinization caused an uproar in Georgia as it was perceived as an attack on the Georgians Stalin and Beria, and thereby an instance of the Russian imperialist attitude vis-a-vis Georgia.² Gamsakhurdia, together with high school friends, his best friend Merab Kostava, and many other Tbilisi citizens took to the streets on March 9th. Afterwards, Gamsakhurdia and Kostava would establish the Gorgasliani movement, through which they criticised the harsh treatment of the protesters on the ninth of March and riled against the communist system. The movement was quickly uncovered and Kostava and Gamsakhurdia were tried. Two years later, he was arrested again for dissidence and barely evaded being sent to a psychiatric ward.³ However, Gamsakhurdia was not dissuaded from dissident activities: he published *samizdats*, self-published underground journals, with themes such as Georgian literature, corruption and incompetence within the system, and human rights violations. In addition, he printed and distributed Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and worked against the government by protesting the destruction of Georgian natural and cultural heritage. He would also establish several dissident groups, the most significant being the Helsinki Union, after the Helsinki Accords of 1975 in which the Soviet Union promised to improve the human rights situation.⁴ In 1977 Gamsakhurdia, as well as Kostava, was detained once more. Additionally, he was expelled from the Georgian Writers' Union since its members were supposed to be 'builders of communism'. Notably, this all happened after the passing of Konstantine Gamsakhurdia - who, according to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, died after being poisoned by the KGB - meaning it is possible Zviad now derived less

¹ Vilius Ivanauskas, "From Establishment to Dissent: The Cases of the Litterateurs Tomas Venclova and Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Soviet Lithuania and Soviet Georgia," *Histoire Politique*, no. 35 (June 1, 2018): pp. 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.4000/histoirepolitique.6377>, 7-10.

² Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 370.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Stephen F. Jones, "Gamsakhurdia, Zviad" in *Encyclopedia of Russian History* (New York, NY: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), pp. 538-539; Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 374.

protection from his family name.⁵ This time Gamsakhurdia was sent to a psychiatric ward. He was quickly released however, and he was sent to a labour camp together with Kostava. Yet whilst Kostava would spend ten years in this camp, Gamsakhurdia was almost immediately released after he repented on television. His followers were not convinced by the broadcast, believing Gamsakhurdia was either drugged or forced to participate, yet nevertheless the broadcast reflected badly on Gamsakhurdia as he was now seen as a KGB puppet and his popularity withered.⁶

Upon his release, Gamsakhurdia moved to Zugdidi, the capital of the western Georgian region of Megrelia. Here, Gamsakhurdia continued to engage in dissident activity, however it was all quite small-scale: only a small group of artists and intellectuals would dare associate with him and join him in his dissidence - most other people did not dare to come near these 'non-conformists'. Moreover, even when operating in utmost secrecy, the KGB sometimes still succeeded in thwarting Gamsakhurdia's dissident activities.⁷ Still, whilst the authorities had a firm grip on dissent, the government in Moscow had made itself less popular. Firstly, the war in Afghanistan cost many Georgians their lives - a war they had to fight for an imperial power they were themselves subjugated to. Secondly, the Kremlin launched several industrialisation projects, the most important of which was the construction of the Enguri hydroelectric dam on the Enguri river between Abkhazia and Megrelia. The reason this irked Georgians was that these projects were used as a pretence for the russification of Georgia, as the projects brought large numbers of Russian labourers to Georgia. Finally, the repression of the Georgian language was increased.⁸ As Gamsakhurdia lived in Zugdidi at this time, the construction of the Enguri dam in addition to the construction of several factories in the region were the issues that most immediately drove him to action. In an attempt to turn the Kremlin's strategy against it, Gamsakhurdia attempted to bring Phereidians, a Kartvelian people living in Turkey, to Megrelia. The idea behind this was that if they worked the factories, fewer Russians would be required, yet ultimately only very few Phereidians arrived.⁹ Apart from these concrete measures, the economy gradually stagnated, leading to further dissatisfaction with the Soviet system.¹⁰

Towards independence

Gorbachev's ascent to power in 1985 marked the beginning of his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Additionally, Shevardnadze was brought to Moscow to become the Soviet minister of foreign affairs. This left Jumber Patiashvili as leader for the Georgian SSR, with the assignment of implementing Gorbachev's reformist policies. However, due to a lack of competence on Patiashvili's

⁵ Ivanauskas, "From Establishment to Dissent," 10-11; Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 374.

⁶ Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 374-75.

⁷ Robert Absandze (artist and co-dissident of Gamsakhurdia in Zugdidi), interview by author, trans. by Tsitsino Shengelia, Zugdidi, October 30, 2022.

⁸ Heinz Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 482.

⁹ Absandze, interview.

¹⁰ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 483.

part and the fact that the Georgian public was not convinced of these promises of reform, these policies were off to a rocky start.¹¹ Especially so, considering it entailed a campaign against alcohol: this campaign would not only cost Georgia monetarily, it was an attack on a core part of the national identity of wine country *pur sang* Georgia.¹² Still, when it became clear there was genuine space for critical voices, Pandora's box was opened. After roughly a decade of stagnation, 1987 marked the beginning of a period during which Gamsakhurdia's movement (among other dissident movements) started picking up more and more speed. This was not only because of the new policies: upon being released, Kostava was quick to announce he would again cooperate with Gamsakhurdia, despite the fact he had served a long sentence, whereas Gamsakhurdia had gotten off the hook easily with his televised repentance. This repentance had haunted Gamsakhurdia, tainting his public image, yet Kostava's renewed cooperation mostly cleared his name in this regard. Furthermore, due to Gorbachev's policies, the duo now not only had more breathing room, but their anti-Soviet ideas were also able to reach further than just the mostly isolated dissident cells of intellectuals. In 1988, Gamsakhurdia managed to fly to the USA to meet with President Reagan. On May 26, 1988, Georgians even dared to publicly celebrate the country's declaration of independence in 1918, and the call for independence was now even heard in public.¹³ Accompanying the demand for an independent state was the surge in nationalist rhetoric. Numerous organisations named after Ilia Chavchavadze popped up in the period between 1987 and 1990. There was good reason why Ilia Chavchavadze enjoyed such popularity with Georgian nationalists at this particular point in time: Chavchavadze, an influential Georgian scholar, writer, and nationalist who had been murdered in 1907, had been canonised in the Georgian Church as recently as 1987 (a process Gamsakhurdia had been involved in) and in addition, he had described the Georgian nation in as few as three words: 'Fatherland, Language, Faith'.¹⁴

The spring of 1989 featured two events that would prove to be decisive for the independence movement. The first of these events took place on March 18th in a village in Abkhazia, Lykhny. Here, possibly instigated by the KGB, Abkhazians, among them Abkhaz politicians and figureheads, appealed to the authorities in Moscow to elevate Abkhazia from an autonomous region with the Georgian SSR to a full-blown SSR directly subjected to Moscow.¹⁵ The rally in Lykhny, though also

¹¹ Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 377.

¹² Eduard Shevardnadze, *Die Zukunft Gehört der Freiheit*, translated by Informationsagentur Nowosti, 1st edition, (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991), originally published as *Budushcheye Prinadlezhit Svobode*, 34-35.

¹³ Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 377; Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 483.

¹⁴ James Forsyth, *The Caucasus: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 676; Stephen H. Rapp, "Dismantling 'Georgia's Spiritual Mission' Sacral Ethnocentrism, Cosmopolitan Nationalism, and Primordial Awakenings at the Soviet Collapse," in *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands*, ed. Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 162-181, 164.

¹⁵ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 485.

mounting unrest in the Tskhinvali region, were clearly in response to the Georgian independence movement - the independence movement, which, as ethnic minorities in Georgia feared, would regard them as second-rank citizens.¹⁶ This, however, is also where history gets murky. For example, Fähnrich mentions how the Ilia Chavchavadze Society of Zurab Chavchavadze (the two Chavchavadze's are not directly related; Chavchavadze is a Georgian noble house) pleaded to terminate Abkhaz autonomy, yet other sources mention how Zurab was one of the figureheads of the independence movement most protective and favourable towards both Abkhaz and Ossetian culture.¹⁷ Similarly, Gamsakhurdia, too, called on unity between Abkhazians, Ossetians, and Georgians in his ideology (which will be discussed more extensively in the following chapter). However, when he, along with Merab Kostava, visited Sukhumi, this did not come across as such - certainly not to the Abkhazians. Rayfield describes how Gamsakhurdia and Kostava roused the Kartvelians, resulting in rioting, whilst Forsyth finds the Georgian national movement hypocritical: he argues that while Georgians firmly resisted Russification, they themselves are guilty of the 'inundating [Abkhazia] with Georgian settlers'.¹⁸ On the other hand, Chervonnaya argues that Abkhazian nationalists had been the ones provoking and discrediting Georgian nationalists.¹⁹ Regardless of who said what exactly and what was and was not true, tensions were rising and the Georgian national movement at large became increasingly fierce and unbudging.²⁰

The second decisive moment of this spring was on April 9th. As the independence movement had grown, it was no longer a marginal movement of intellectuals and students: it now encompassed all layers of society. The movement had reached a critical size and could no longer be ignored. The leadership of the Georgian SSR realised it was unable to handle the situation and asked Moscow for help, which it received: Red Army elements from the Transcaucasian district along with additional troops from the Ministry of Interior were dispatched, and Shevardnadze rushed to Tbilisi in an attempt to get a grip on the situation. Simultaneously, aware of the potential bloody disaster that might unfold, Patriarch Ilia II appealed to the protesters to pray instead of protest. It was to no avail; the protest was simply too large. In the early morning, the troops that had been surrounding the protesters were ordered to attack. Officially, the order came from the leadership of the Georgian SSR, yet it seems

¹⁶ Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 377-78.

¹⁷ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 486-88; Giorgi Gvakharia, "Araghiarebuli 'Resp'ublik'is' Damouk'idebloba da Sakartvelos Uakhlesi Ist'oria" [Independence of the unrecognized "Republic" and recent history of Georgia], *Radio Tavisupleba* [Radio Liberty], September 20, 2005, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1543363.html>; Vladimir Luarsabishvili, "Chavchavadze, Zurab, Literaturismtsodneoba, Kritika, Publitsistika, Targmani" [Literary Studies, Criticism, Social and Political Journalism], *Historia Actual Online*, (2022): 231-33, 232.

¹⁸ Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 377-78; Forsyth, *The Caucasus*, 677.

¹⁹ Svetlana Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, trans. Ariane Chanturia (London: Gothic Image Publ., 1994), originally published as *Abkazia-1992: Post Communisticheskaya Vendeya*, 60-61.

²⁰ David Muskhelishvili, Mikheil Samsonadze, and Alexander Daushvili, *Georgian History* (Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science, 2012), 529.

more likely the order came from general Rodionov. Using brutal methods, such as sharpened spades and toxic gas (certainly tear gas, possibly other nerve gas), the troops violently dispersed the protesters, ultimately murdering twenty protesters in the process. Shevardnadze tried to salvage what was salvageable, but the damage was already done: any last bit of credibility and authority the Georgian Communist Party and Soviet rule in general still had was now forfeit.²¹ To Georgians, this proved negotiating with Moscow was fruitless, and yet again the call for independence grew both louder and more fanatical. The various nationalist groups banded together in a singular entity with the common goal of achieving independence, despite disagreements on how this would be achieved.²²

On October 13th, 1989, on his way to Tbilisi, Merab Kostava died in a car crash - a mysterious car crash widely believed not to have been an accident.²³ For the national liberation movement it was a severe blow, as Kostava was respected and tactful and managed to make the various groups within the national liberation movement compromise with one another.²⁴ For Gamsakhurdia, however, his death was not just a political blow. It was a personal tragedy: upon hearing the news of Kostava's death, Gamsakhurdia broke down in tears, grieving his best friend.²⁵ Despite this personal grief, the independence movement was in full swing and Gamsakhurdia had to move on, however the loss of Kostava would indirectly impact him politically as well: whether it was due to haughtiness, distrustfulness, or overzealousness, Gamsakhurdia was convinced of his own beliefs and often refused to accept other ideas; the fact of the matter is that Kostava was one of the few people who could truly get through to him and influence him.²⁶

1990 would be an eventful year: in a conference held from 13 to 15 March, the abundance of groups which together loosely constituted the national liberation movement united in the National Forum. The National Forum pressured the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR to acknowledge Georgia had not willingly joined the USSR in 1921, but was rather invaded and annexed and that therefore, all laws adopted since were not the will of the Georgian people and thus unlawful. In addition, the National Forum demanded the upcoming elections, scheduled later that month, would be truly independent, multi-party elections. To this demand, too, the Georgian Supreme Soviet bent the knee, however as the Communist Party was still the only officially legitimate party the National Forum agreed on boycotting the elections.²⁷ Despite this success, the common goal of independence, and emphasis on Georgian culture, the National Forum split as early as April 1990. In part, this was

²¹Fährnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 486-87; Forsyth, *The Caucasus*, 678; Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 378.

²² Fährnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 488.

²³ Muskhelishvili, Samsonadze, and Daushvili, *Georgian History*, 531.

²⁴ Fährnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 489.

²⁵ Gia Mamporia (was with Gamsakhurdia when he learned of Kostava's death), interview by author, trans. by Tsitsino Shengelia, Zugdidi, October 30, 2022.

²⁶ Muskhelishvili, Samsonadze, and Daushvili, *Georgian History*, 531; Mamporia, interview.

²⁷ Fährnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 489-90; Muskhelishvili, Samsonadze, and Daushvili, *Georgian History*, 531.

because the national movement revolved not only around political ideals, but around the personalities of the figureheads and leaders of the movement as well.²⁸ More importantly, however, was disagreement on how independence was to be achieved. Within the National Forum, there existed to factions: the radicals, who deemed independence through elections was an impossibility within the USSR, and the moderates, who did see achieving independence through elections as a possibility. True multi-party elections would be held in October 1990, yet as these were not even in the works as of April, whether to participate in these elections cannot have been a direct cause of the split.²⁹ Gamsakhurdia's Helsinki Union was one of the groups that left the National Movement, and he persuaded other moderate groups to join him in the Round Table/Free Georgia party. The summer of 1990 featured a hunger strike by students, as well as Gamsakhurdia's occupation of the railway that connected Georgia to the rest of the USSR. These events, against the backdrop of a rebellious populace and a decaying state apparatus, pressured the Georgian Supreme Soviet to vote in favour of new elections, especially when it became clear Moscow was not intent on dealing with a full-blown revolt and advised the Supreme Soviet to vote in favour of new elections.³⁰ In August, the Supreme Soviet voted to hold these elections on October 28. These elections were conducted in a fair manner, and around 70% of those eligible to vote did so. Gamsakhurdia's Round Table/Free Georgia won a resounding victory, convincing over 60% of the voters to vote for him and thereby securing his party of 155 out of the 246 seats in the Supreme Soviet. On the 14th of November the newly formed Supreme Soviet held its first session, in which it elected Gamsakhurdia to the position of chairman.³¹ Though these elections were regarded as fair, there is a significant caveat: regional parties were not allowed to participate, meaning e.g. Abkhazians were unable to vote for an Abkhaz party. Consequently, minorities either boycotted the elections, or voted for the party they thought would best protect their rights: the Communist Party.³²

Besides these political processes, Georgian society had changed significantly. The ever-growing demonstrations, protests, and public gatherings are indicative of how Georgians had become increasingly politically active. Yet besides coming to protests, Georgians were quickly 'rediscovering' their nationality: Soviet rule had featured the suppression of nationalism and while there had been 'managed' or toothless nationalism, centred around mediaeval figures such as Shota Rustaveli, David the Builder, and Queen Tamar; nationalism which contradicted Soviet doctrine and ideology, for example the history of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), was suppressed. This also

²⁸ Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations: The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder* (London: Zed Books, 1994), 82.

²⁹ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 490-91.

³⁰ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 490-91; Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 379.

³¹ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 491.

³² Ian Bremmer, Ray Taras, and Stephen F. Jones, "Georgia: The Trauma of Statehood," in *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, 2nd ed, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 505-43, 511-12.

means that the figureheads of the national movement were not just rallying Georgian to their political cause; these figureheads also had a function as ‘teachers’ of the national idea - an idea based on a narrative they in large part had developed themselves, as Soviet repression meant there was little to no room for historical research in certain areas and neither public nor academic debate on whichever conclusion drawn by these underground nationalist intellectuals. An example of this teaching would be a lecture on the Georgian nation at Ivane Javakhishvili University given by Kostava, where the attendees ‘rediscovered something within themselves that had long been suppressed’.³³ However, as Georgians educated themselves, some came to deplorable conclusions. Indeed, across the board the nationalist groups and their figureheads were vehemently opposed to the Abkhaz and Ossetian ideals of independence and indeed, some of these figureheads - such as Gamsakhurdia - promoted the idea that an independent Georgia should be culturally as well as demographically predominantly Georgian. As I will explain in the following chapter, whilst these ideas are certainly nationalist, there are (at least in the case of Gamsakhurdia) nuances to be made. However, when Kartvelians and Abkhazians, spurned by their respective nationalist intelligentsiae, brawl in the streets of Sukhumi and found their own universities, or when literal busloads of Georgians move to occupy Tskhinvali, any nuances quickly dissipate.³⁴ And that was just the beginning: the brawling in Sukhumi spread across Abkhazia and turned increasingly bloody. Moreover, representatives of the Georgians in Abkhazia claimed it now involved the Soviet military and that it sided with the Abkhazians.³⁵ As time progressed, the economy and state apparatus disintegrated, giving way to militias, paramilitary groups, criminals, and political gangs, who in turn seized Soviet military stashes.³⁶ The most prominent of these militia’s was Jaba Ioseliani’s *Mkhedrioni*, ‘horsemen’, who had a particularly nasty stance towards other ethnicities. As a result, ethnic violence, political violence, and plain banditry became more and more commonplace.³⁷

Thus, when Gamsakhurdia rose to power in the fall of 1990, Georgia was already collapsing in on itself: infrastructure, energy services, hospitals, and schools had stopped functioning. In an effort to get a grip on the country Gamsakhurdia formed a national guard, however since this national guard consisted of irregulars in support of the government of a deeply politicised country, it may as well have been another militia.³⁸ Moreover, whilst Georgia was now effectively self-governing, the structure of the SSR was still unchanged. The National Forum argued this was precisely the problem,

³³ Maia Kalandia (attended Kostava’s lecture, became active in Zugdidi politics), interview by author, trans. Tsitsino Shengelia, Zugdidi, October 30, 2022.

³⁴ Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 378.

³⁵ Fährnich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 488.

³⁶ Spyros Demetriou, “Politics From The Barrel of a Gun: Small Arms Proliferation and Conflict in the Republic of Georgia (1989–2001),” *Occasional Paper*, no. 06 (November 2002), <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/politics-barrel-gun-small-arms-proliferation-and-conflict-republic-georgia-occasional>, 1, 3.

³⁷ Fährnich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 490-91; Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 379-80.

³⁸ Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 380.

accusing Gamsakhurdia of ‘pouring new wine into old wineskins’.³⁹ Gamsakhurdia had also come to the conclusion that it would be impossible to maintain essentially the same Soviet state structure when Georgia would become fully independent, and announced a transitional period.⁴⁰ The conflict in the Tskhinvali region flared up on December 11, 1990, when the Ossetians declared themselves independent from the Georgian SSR. In turn, the Georgian government stripped the region of its autonomy.⁴¹ Yet aside from this measure from the government in Tbilisi, the most severe reaction came from Georgian armed groups who responded by burning and raiding Ossetian villages. In retaliation, Ossetian armed groups raided Georgian villages. A cycle of ethnic violence had been brought into motion, causing streams of refugees.⁴² Meanwhile, in Abkhazia, Abkhaz nationalists figureheaded by Vladislav Ardzinba had come to rise to power, making the Abkhaz fraction dominant in the Abkhazian parliament despite the fact the Abkhazians were only a fifth of the entire population of Abkhazia. Whilst there were occasional armed clashes, on a political level both sides pursued a diplomatic outcome.⁴³ Finally, whilst Gamsakhurdia’s charisma and nationalist narrative made him popular with many Georgians, his shortcomings put him at odds with the people he had to work with. Convinced of his own beliefs, distrustfulness to the point of paranoia, and black and white kind of thinking, Gamsakhurdia habitually dismissed all criticism, even from the moderate opposition. More outspoken critical voices were often branded as ‘Moscow’s tools’.⁴⁴ Still, for as long as Georgia was not truly independent, Georgia’s independence remained the number one objective and Gamsakhurdia retained popularity and support.

This independence followed rapidly: a referendum was held on March 31st, 1991. 90% of those eligible voted, of which 97% voted in favour. Consequently, independence was declared on April 9th, symbolically honouring those who had perished during the bloody crackdown of the protests on that date two years earlier.⁴⁵ This declaration of independence was on the basis of the declaration of independence of May 26th, 1918, (hence why Georgians celebrate Independence Day in May, rather than April) and elections to the post of president were scheduled for this date. Gamsakhurdia, again, won a resounding victory.⁴⁶ However, this also meant the unifying factor that was the goal of independence was now gone, and it also meant Georgia was cut off from any remaining Soviet subsidies.⁴⁷ Furthermore: the Georgian economy had been designed to be a part of the larger Soviet economy, meaning that essential imports became practically unavailable and

³⁹ Muskhelishvili, Samsonadze, and Daushvili, *Georgian History*, 532.

⁴⁰ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 492.

⁴¹ Muskhelishvili, Samsonadze, and Daushvili, *Georgian History*, 532.

⁴² Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 380.

⁴³ Demetriou, “Politics from the Barrel of a Gun,” 6.

⁴⁴ Jones, “The Trauma of Statehood,” 521-22.

⁴⁵ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgiens*, 492-93.

⁴⁶ Muskhelishvili, Samsonadze, and Daushvili, *Georgian History*, 533.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

exporting became incredibly expensive - inflation skyrocketed.⁴⁸ Gamsakhurdia had always been a dissident and a theorist of the national idea - he had no experience with statecraft. In the context of the dire situation Georgia was in, perhaps it was impossible for him to be a good president. Still, during his tenure he made several moves which cannot be so easily excused by the situation: for this, he was criticised harshly.

Gamsakhurdia in office

Firstly, on the road to independence the Georgians, and certainly Gamsakhurdia, had promoted the idea that the Georgian nation was under threat and that measures would be needed to protect the Georgian nation and its hegemony over its own homeland. Before independence, this had already made minorities within Georgia uneasy, but they had still enjoyed some protections from Soviet law. Additionally, Gamsakhurdia had been attempting to convince ethnic minorities their culture would be protected (yet whether that was convincing is a whole other matter). Now, following independence, promises and ideology would have to be turned into legislation and policy. However, the notion that Georgian culture had been under threat now translated into instating Georgian cultural hegemony. Minority representative bodies were left so toothless they were effectively symbolic, and Christianity became the de-facto state religion. Nominally, ethnic minorities and their respective cultures were protected, respected, and their regions even given some degree of autonomy, however making use of this autonomy was often seen as a threat to the Georgian hegemony over the culture and land of the republic. Tbilisi and Abkhazia negotiated far-reaching autonomy, including the aforementioned Abkhaz dominance within the local parliament, however any decision by the Abkhaz parliament (or any decision by councils in other regions with a degree of autonomy, for that matter) could be annulled or overruled by Tbilisi, particularly by the president. Still the most controversial measure, a measure which also attracted a lot of negative attention from abroad, was the citizenship law: as it was being discussed in the summer of 1990 (before Gamsakhurdia's ascent to power), Gamsakhurdia had suggested a version which considered people whose ancestors did not live in Georgia before 1801 (the year regarded as the beginning of subjugation to Russia) as newcomers. The law that was ultimately passed in the same summer, as well as the law on citizenship passed later by the Gamsakhurdia government, did not include such a clause and were quite in line with the citizenship laws of Western democracies.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, this initial proposal would come to haunt Gamsakhurdia.

Secondly, Gamsakhurdia ruled in an increasingly dictatorial manner. From the 1970's, when he founded the Georgian Helsinki Union, until his ascent to power, democratisation, pluralism, and liberalism were promoted as what would be the basis of the new Georgian state. True enough, Gamsakhurdia implemented Western-style legislation almost immediately, separating the judicial

⁴⁸ Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, 72.

⁴⁹ Jones, "The Trauma of Statehood," 511-15.

system from politics and moving towards a market economy. However, whilst Gamsakhurdia mirrored Western democracies, the state structure was still foundationally the old, Soviet system. Additionally, since he was indeed elected with an overwhelming majority, he did have a strong mandate and the parliamentary opposition was in that sense rightfully weak; such a skewed balance of power, even if legitimate, does pave the way for an authoritarian style of governance, as there is no need for consensus with the opposition. Moreover, even though the Georgian government was now fiercely anti-Soviet, the people within this government lacked experience with any other form of governance. To top off this weak starting position, a cult of personality developed around Gamsakhurdia. In the national narrative of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia was placed as the next iteration of the ultimate Georgian: a successor to national heroes such as Shota Rustaveli and David the Builder, a leader for the Georgian people, and photographs of him were commonplace in workplaces, homes, and newspapers alike.⁵⁰ As a result, whilst Georgia had become a democracy on paper, it lacked experience with democratic checks and balances, and the new system had many loopholes, unclarities, and blind spots. One such loophole was that local prefects answered directly to the president: thus, since these local prefects only held any real accountability to the president whilst simultaneously controlling almost the entire local budget single-handedly, local politics were marked by nepotism, corruption, and loyalty to the president. With regards to democratic involvement and the free press, both were enshrined in the constitution. However, the bureaucracy required to establish a new political party, or participate in elections, was Byzantine, and the laws regarding journalism and political parties both had clauses which forced it to be compliant with the state apparatus and forbade ‘malicious intent’. Though this was defended as necessary to protect the nascent Georgian democracy from ‘provocateurs’, the enforcement of these laws lay with a limited number of officials who were hardly held accountable: banning political parties or persecuting media outlets could be done in an arbitrary fashion.⁵¹ In relation to these legal issues was Gamsakhurdia’s stance towards critical voices, particularly the Tbilisi intelligentsia whom he dismissed as the *nomenklatura* of the old system.⁵² On paper there was freedom of expression, and Gamsakhurdia claimed he was open to criticism, but in reality there was little room to express differing opinions; that Gamsakhurdia had a habit of dismissing the opinions of others, citing alleged Russian influence, inexperience, or a plain lack of intelligence, is nothing new, but now he wielded genuine power and enjoyed the support of fierce loyalists. Though Gamsakhurdia certainly did use strong terms when talking about the opposition, this should be placed in the context of the discourse of the time: superlative accusations were flung back and forth and certainly not exclusive to Gamsakhurdia. Moreover, dramatic as it was, there was some

⁵⁰ Stephen F. Jones, *Georgia A Political History since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 57.

⁵¹ Ibid; Zviad Gamsakhurdia, “...Every permanent resident of the Republic will be a citizen of Georgia,” interview by V. Savichevi, *P’rezident’i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek’a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], (Argumenti i Fakti, n.d.).

⁵² Jones, *Georgia A Political History*, 61.

limited justification to Gamsakhurdia's accusatory rhetoric vis-à-vis the opposition: as the opposition was so small and powerless, parts of the opposition - particularly the National Congress, the reincarnation of the National Forum - had resorted to disruptive opposition via such things as occupying government buildings and barricading streets, in addition to refusing to disband some paramilitaries.⁵³

Finally, Georgia might have freed itself from Russian rule, its northern neighbour had not gone anywhere: diplomatic ties had to be established in order to replace the Soviet interior relations. This is where Gamsakhurdia faced the most resistance from the National Congress, who had established a sort of shadow government meant to be free of the Soviet structure they criticised the parliament of. Besides accusing the Gamsakhurdia government of essentially maintaining the Soviet structure, they also argued that full independence should and could have come sooner and that Soviet troops were not being expelled fast enough. In February, 1991, Gamsakhurdia moved to arrest Jaba Ioseliani and disband his Mkhedrioni: the man may have been a crook, but since Gamsakhurdia was assisted by Soviet troops in this disbanding, Ioseliani had pledged himself to the National congress, and he was put in jail without a trial, the arrest appeared as Soviet-style authoritarianism. The National Congress was outraged once again when Gamsakhurdia agreed to the presence of Soviet troops in the Tskhinvali region, going as far as to accuse Gamsakhurdia of collaborating with the Soviets.⁵⁴ The August coup of 1991 in Moscow further antagonised the National Congress, as Gamsakhurdia was initially hesitant to condemn the coup attempt: within the context of the fervently anti-Soviet sentiment that dominated Georgia at this time, not condemning the coup was seen as condoning it. The final straw was when the leadership of this coup, during their brief position in power, made the demand to Gamsakhurdia to place his National Guard under the Georgian Ministry of Interior, to which Gamsakhurdia caved: despite the fact the National Guard was still firmly Georgian, the fact he caved to Moscow, and communists no less, caused even the head of the National Guard and Gamsakhurdia loyalist, Tengiz Kitovani, to abandon him, taking his army with him.⁵⁵ Simultaneously, Gamsakhurdia's prime minister, Tengiz Sigua, also turned against him, along with some other ministers and around fifty MP's.⁵⁶

In September 1991, Gamsakhurdia came to face a united opposition in the streets, as the ever-disgruntled National Congress, disillusioned former allies, and the critical opposition bound together. On September 2nd, students took to the streets to protest insufficient funding, and the opposition was quick to side with them. As a result, the protest took on a significant size and Gamsakhurdia deployed the part of the National Guard that had remained loyal to him.⁵⁷ Bullets were fired, leaving two people

⁵³ Jones, "The Trauma of Statehood," 518-19.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 517.

⁵⁵ Forsyth, *The Caucasus*, 682.

⁵⁶ Muskhelishvili, Samsonadze, and Daushvili, *Georgian History*, 533; Jones, "The Trauma of Statehood," 518.

⁵⁷ Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, 82.

dead - it is likely these bullets were fired by National Guardsmen, especially since Gamsakhurdia forbade media coverage of the event, but Gamsakhurdia and his loyalists maintained the event had been staged by Moscow and that the opposition was in league with them.⁵⁸ Whichever way, the event both seriously dented Gamsakhurdia's public image, and sparked the powder keg. Gamsakhurdia declared a state of emergency, further extending his authority, and protests turned into skirmishes.⁵⁹ In a press conference given on September 24, 1991, Gamsakhurdia claimed a coup was in process, that the insurgents were supplied, advised, and supported by Moscow, and that their next target would be the TV station.⁶⁰ True enough, the insurgents would indeed later seize the TV tower. Clandestine Russian involvement is difficult to outright prove, though the skirmishing did turn into a full-blown civil war/coup attempt on December 22, 1991, when the insurgents brought in heavy weapons such as tanks and ultimately even a howitzer.⁶¹ In a letter to Boris Yeltsin, Gamsakhurdia points out that Georgia did not have most of such weaponry, and that there had not been any reported assaults on arsenals of the Transcaucasian Military District. Moreover, he links the date the coup started in earnest is too coincidental, as it is only a day after Georgia refused to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).⁶² Are these facts or suspicions? Most secondary sources do not tackle this issue of Russian interference, but the ones that do seem to agree Gamsakhurdia's accusations were justified rather than suspicious speculation.⁶³ The heavy weaponry was effective: as of January 2, 1992, Gamsakhurdia was cornered in his bunker, and the insurgents proclaimed a military government: a triumvirate consisting of Kitovani, Segua, and Ioseliani.⁶⁴ Gamsakhurdia fled, briefly passing through Azerbaijan, then to Armenia, and ultimately to Chechnya at the invitation of

⁵⁸ Jones, "The Trauma of Statehood," 520; Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "Speech at the evening session on September 15," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library].

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASHead9c60e56cbbd5a675a>.

⁵⁹ Jones, "The Trauma of Statehood," 520; Per Gahrton, *Georgia: Pawn in the New Great Game* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 82; Jones, *Georgia A Political History*, 69.

⁶⁰ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "Speech at the evening session on September 15," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library].

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH015b1353a31b955887a96e2d>

⁶¹ Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 382; Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, 83.

⁶² Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "An Open Letter to His Excellency, the President of Russia Mr. Boris Yeltsin," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], February 5, 1992.

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH01eede48e7c00f0d6ad27b1d>.

⁶³ Fähnrich, *Geschichte Georgien*, 494-95; Elizabeth Fuller, "Georgia since Independence: Plus Ça Change," *Current History* 92, no. 576 (Oct 01, 1993): 342.

⁶⁴ Alfonso Rojo, "Georgian Rebels Claim Victory; President says he will fight on," *The Guardian* (London), January 3, 1992.

Dzhokhar Dudayev.⁶⁵ The centre of Tbilisi, particularly the Rustaveli avenue, was left in ruins, and hundreds had lost their lives.⁶⁶

Exile and insurrection

With Gamsakhurdia driven out of Tbilisi, the war in the capital was (mostly) over. Gamsakhurdia's strongest power base, Megrelia, was outraged and resistance against the central power in distant Tbilisi popped up practically immediately after Gamsakhurdia was ousted. Resistance turned into insurgency when the rumour started circulating that Gamsakhurdia had come to the Megrelian capital, Zugdidi. Overly eager, the Megrelians took up arms, or rather, they armed themselves with whatever they had available. The response from Tbilisi took some time, as the new government first needed to restore order in the capital. When the response ultimately arrived, it arrived with great brutality: the Mkhedrioni, who were in fact more experienced and better armed than the National Guard, terrorised the populace, murdering and looting as they advanced. The Megrelians in turn hardly saw the troops from Tbilisi as Georgian: instead, they perceived the long arm of Moscow.⁶⁷ This sentiment was directly fostered by Georgia's new leader: at the invitation of the military council, former leader of the Georgian SSR Shevardnadze had returned to lead Georgia.⁶⁸ Shevardnadze's government and its aligned paramilitaries had bigger concerns than the unruly Megrelians: firstly, the armed groups which did serve the government were more interested in getting rich through smuggling and their control over supply chains than they were in state stability, and local paramilitary commanders were not keen on relinquishing the power they had seized.⁶⁹ More concerning, however, were the situations in the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia. Whilst a ceasefire was brokered between Georgia, Russia, and both North and South Ossetia, the diplomatic route ultimately failed in Abkhazia. Gamsakhurdia had granted Abkhazia considerable autonomy, even if it could be cancelled by the Georgian president at a moment's notice. As Georgia collapsed into chaos, the Abkhazian government cemented its position. On July 23, 1992, Abkhazia ratified the Abkhaz constitution (which had been drafted way back in 1925), establishing Abkhazia as an equal to Georgia in a Georgian federation. This did not evoke a reaction from Tbilisi, however, as Shevardnadze's government had no interest in even more bloodshed, preferring instead to return to normality. However, as government representatives met with supporters of Gamsakhurdia in Zugdidi, they were kidnapped on August 11 by a former bodyguard of Gamsakhurdia, Gocha Bakhia. These kidnappers then fled to Abkhazia. Shevardnadze sent Kitovani to deal with the kidnappers and other pockets of resistance, notably in cooperation with Abkhazians - Ardzinba had been fully informed. Nevertheless, the presence of Georgian military units

⁶⁵ Gahrton, *Pawn in the New Great Game*, 82.

⁶⁶ Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, 83.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 86-87; Rayfield. *Edge of Empires*, 382.

⁶⁸ Jones, *Georgia A Political History*, 75.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 78-83.

was quickly exacerbated by Ardzinba, who spoke of a Georgian invasion, mobilised Abkhazia, and launched a propaganda campaign in which the Georgians were the attackers. Citing Georgian aggression, Ardzinba sought allies: among North-Caucasian leaders, among the Russian military, but remarkably he also reached out to the exiled Gamsakhurdia.⁷⁰ The escalation marked the beginning of a war that would last just over a year: the war was characterised by atrocities, displacements, and ultimately led to the mass exodus of Georgians from Abkhazia.⁷¹

Thus, Megrelia effectively remained out of the control of Tbilisi. This uncomfortable status-quo, which was marked by incidents, fundamentally changed when Gamsakhurdia returned to Megrelia on September 24, 1993; only three days before the fall of Sokhumi. Gamsakhurdia's forces did make a move on the Abkhazian districts bordering Megrelia and apparently had hoped to lift the siege of Sokhumi, yet with the Georgian military trappened and weakened by the Abkhazians, Gamsakhurdia instead quickly took the port city of Poti and then advanced eastwards towards Tbilisi. Shevardnadze had long avoided looking towards the Russians for help, but he was now left without a choice. Poti was recaptured through a Russian naval landing, and with the help of Russian military support the Georgian army managed to push back the Zviadists, taking Zugdidi on November 6. The cost was that Shevardnadze was forced to request admission into the CIS. Now it was a matter of hunting down Gamsakhurdia: officially, there was an arrest warrant against him, but when Gamsakhurdia died on December 31 (or January 1) the official story of suicide was immediately doubted, as many believed he had been murdered by Russian special forces. His supporters lamented his death: they gathered in front of Gamsakhurdia's house in Tbilisi, and some supporters of him still would not come out of hiding.⁷² Others, and among them media in the West, did not shed any tears after the death of the person they had perceived as a "megalomaniac nationalist".⁷³

⁷⁰ Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus*, 115-28.

⁷¹ Jones, *Georgia A Political History*, 97.

⁷² Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus*, 167-70; Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, 113; Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 384.

⁷³ Laura Starink, "Megalomane Nationalist" [Megalomaniac Nationalist], *NRC Handelsblad*, January 6, 1994.

3. Cultural Nationalism, “The Spiritual Mission of Georgia,” and the Caucasian Homelands: Gamsakhurdia’s ideology

As with his life, the story of Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s beliefs starts with his upbringing. Again, his father’s legacy as a veiled critic of the Soviet system and writer of works on mediaeval Georgia and Georgian culture plays a role, yet special attention should be given to the way Konstantine Gamsakhurdia passed this onto young Zviad: emphases on historic continuities and the distinctive nature of the Georgian culture, in combination with the utter conviction of his own beliefs and a feeling of immunity from Soviet repression due to his reputable family, not only explains his beliefs, it also explains the zealotry behind them, leading to Rapp’s observation that Gamsakhurdia’s upbringing fostered “Messianic purpose.”⁷⁴ Moreover, Zviad would take after his father as an adult as well: just like his father, Zviad became a writer. On top of that, he would become a professor of American literature, literary critic, translator of European literature, member of the Georgian Writer’s Union and finally a philologist. Whether he was a self-professed philologist or held an actual degree is, however, something Rapp and Ivanauskas disagree on.⁷⁵

Such credentials already hint at the type of nationalist Gamsakhurdia was, for Gamsakhurdia was not the first philologist to dabble in exploring national history. Cultural nationalism, in comparison to political nationalism, revolves around not just the ‘main’ historical figures and events, but in large part about ‘the people’ - through philology, but also archaeology, folklore, genetic sciences and, importantly, religion, cultural nationalists move away from historiography centred around elites and individuals in an attempt to uncover the ‘nature’ of a particular nation. As with political nationalists, the aim of cultural nationalists is often to (re)establish an independent nation state. However, cultural nationalists do not stop there. For cultural nationalists, it is important that a national community is formed: a nation with a strong emphasis on the national language, arts, literature, and cultural education; the distinctive elements of the nation are emphasised. Emphasised, since though the promotion of such things as the national language may be considered normal, or even a given in established nation states, for a stateless nation in pursuit of independence it becomes a

⁷⁴ Stephen H. Rapp, “Dismantling ‘Georgia’s Spiritual Mission’ Sacral Ethnocentrism, Cosmopolitan Nationalism, and Primordial Awakenings at the Soviet Collapse,” in *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands*, ed. Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 162-181, 162-63.

⁷⁵ Rapp, “Dismantling ‘Georgia’s Spiritual Mission’”, 163; Vilius Ivanauskas, “From Establishment to Dissent: The Cases of the Litterateurs Tomas Venclova and Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Soviet Lithuania and Soviet Georgia,” *Histoire Politique*, no. 35 (June 1, 2018), doi: 10.7591/j.ctvdtph5w.16, 9.

means of resistance. Resistance against foreign rule is justified by the notion that the very existence of the nation is threatened by this foreign rule.⁷⁶

“The Spiritual Mission of Georgia”

A philologist, literary connoisseur, and dissident fascinated with historic continuities and the distinct national culture: Gamsakhurdia fits the description of a cultural nationalist seamlessly. This is clearly apparent in his work “The Spiritual Mission of Georgia”. In this work, presented on May 2, 1990, in the Tbilisi Philharmonic House, Gamsakhurdia presented the attendees with an overview of what his nationalist ideology was based on. Gamsakhurdia’s lecture on May 2 is the one most famous, and its contents were published in print soon after the lecture, but it was not the only speech: in the tumultuous year 1990 Gamsakhurdia gave numerous speeches in which he described how he envisioned the Georgian nation. Moreover, Gamsakhurdia would prove to adhere to his ideology during his time in power, and, considering the overwhelming majority with which he was elected and his still considerable support in Megrelia, he also proved quite capable of convincing Georgians of his ideology.⁷⁷ Another factor which sets apart “The Spiritual Mission of Georgia” from his other speeches, is that this specific speech was aimed not only at Georgians, but also at Western scholars: he starts his speech by announcing he will give special attention to the ethnic origins of Georgians Western visitors might not be familiar with.⁷⁸

“The Spiritual Mission of Georgia” greatly emphasises Georgian ethnic peculiarity based on ancient and mediaeval history. Starting off, Gamsakhurdia explains how the Basque and Georgian peoples are the only two remaining proto-Iberian peoples, albeit from different branches, whereas other proto-Iberian peoples were assimilated by Indo-Europeans. The relations to now extinct peoples, like the Etruscans or the Sumerians, are also theorised. Gamsakhurdia then states the Indo-Europeans, spearheaded by the Hittites, gradually came to become the predominant peoples in Asia Minor and Greece, and that the Trojan War was in essence a war about which ethnicity would become dominant in Greece, Asia Minor, and the region. The distinctive ethnicities are, according to Gamsakhurdia, marked by distinctive attributes, as described in myths: in the Promethean myth, for example, he states Prometheus should be seen as the representation of prophetic or intuitive thinking, whereas his brother Epimetheus should be seen as the representation of reasoning or intellectual thought. Thus, Gamsakhurdia argues, Prometheus is the representation of the proto-Iberian (and thus the ancient Georgian) people, who used their prophetic thinking to deceive Zeus - the representation of the Indo-Europeans (in this case the Hellenic (as opposed to the Pelasgic) Greeks). As punishment for his

⁷⁶ John Hutchinson, “Cultural Nationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 75–94, 75–79.

⁷⁷ Rapp, “Dismantling ‘Georgia’s Spiritual Mission’”, 165.

⁷⁸ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, “The Spiritual Mission of Georgia,” (lecture, Tbilisi Philharmonic House, May 2, 1990), *Iberiana*, transcript, <https://iberiana.wordpress.com/zviad-gamsakhurdia/mission/>.

deception, Zeus chained Prometheus to the Caucasus and had his eagle peck out his liver: the eagle being a symbol of imperial power. To Gamsakhurdia, the myth of the Golden Fleece, for which the heroes travelled to the land of Colchis, a Georgian kingdom, symbolises the quest for “wisdom that no longer existed in Classical Greece,”⁷⁹ hinting at the prophetic kind of wisdom Prometheus, too, possessed.⁸⁰ Gamsakhurdia proceeds to give even more examples of this (proto) Iberian or Georgian essence in ancient mythology, until finally arriving at the mediaeval period, where he draws similar conclusions, yet this time he does so from Christian mysticism.

It is in this section of Christianity in Georgia that Gamsakhurdia links his previous essentialist views with Christianity and the very name of Georgia: Gamsakhurdia argues that Georgia’s namesake, Saint George, is not only the George from the legend in which he slew the dragon; Saint George is also the physical manifestation of the Archangel Michael. As such, Saint George was seen in Georgia as not just a saint, but as a symbol for God himself. Imagining God as a dragon-slaying knight resonated with the Georgians, with Gamsakhurdia claiming that “Georgian Christianity may be said to be militant Christianity.”⁸¹ Based on this worship of Saint George, Gamsakhurdia claims the image of Saint George to be the first aspect of Christian Georgia’s mission: to defend Christianity.⁸² The second aspect of Christian Georgia’s mission is about morals: Gamsakhurdia speaks about how Georgia is linked to the Mother of God. He argues the Mother of God is a worldly manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and while the reverence of the Mother of God has only come with Christianity, the essence of this worship had existed for much longer. For this, he points to other ‘mother-goddesses’, such as Demeter and Hera. Pre-Christian worship of mother goddesses revolving around fertility and familial care were reimagined in Christianity, via the “feminine aspect”⁸³ of the Holy Spirit or the Mother of God. The ‘mother goddess’ duties of familial care are reimagined in Christianity as sanctification, purification, and divine or cosmic wisdom.⁸⁴

In the last section of his speech, Gamsakhurdia starts with a summary of the previous parts through an explanation of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral - Georgia’s most important church, located in the old capital of Mtskheta. Importantly, it is here where, according to legend, Saint Sidonia was buried, clutching the tunic of Christ. On this spot, a tree would later grow, and from the wood of this tree the first church in this location was built. The final column that was fashioned from this tree was said to have remained hovering in place, only coming down after prayers of Saint Nino. From the pillar it was also said that a liquid flowed from it, curing those who drank it from all diseases. From this, Gamsakhurdia argues that the tunic clutched by Sidonia is symbolic for the divine aura of Christ, and that the mystical column is essentially a Christian interpretation of two pagan notions simultaneously:

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

that of a tree of life, and that of a tree of knowledge. Embedded especially in this notion of a tree of knowledge, Gamsakhurdia perceives clairvoyance and foresight; he perceives a Christian mission. From this summary, he moves to his main point in this last section, namely the function of Georgia at a crossroads between cultures.⁸⁵

Firstly, Gamsakhurdia emphasises how Svetitskhoveli is essentially an allegory for Solomon's temple and how through this, Jewish mysticism is a part of Georgian Christianity. Through Christianity, Gamsakhurdia sees links with Europe, touching on the stories of the Holy Grail. However, he does perceive differences with Western Christianity/Catholicism, arguing Western Christianity has done away with the esotericism still present in Georgian Orthodoxy. To illustrate this, he invokes examples from Wolfram von Eschenbach's poem *Parzival*. Gamsakhurdia argues the Western Christian interpretation of *Parzival* is much more literal and focussed primarily on the trials and virtues of Percival; Percival is the personification of the trials a Christian faces. For Georgian Christianity, however, Gamsakhurdia looks more towards Percival's half-brother, Feirefiz. In the poem, Feirefiz' skin is half black, half white. To Gamsakhurdia, this signifies the "blend of a white race with a darker one".⁸⁶ In Feirefiz, Gamsakhurdia continues, Western Christian wisdom is merged with Arabic wisdom. In this, he sees similarities with the Templars: a path of Western initiation which is then shaped by Arabic and Persian wisdom. Gamsakhurdia gives two reasons this connects to Georgia: firstly, he argues King-Priest John (otherwise known as Prester John) is both the son of Feirefiz as well as an allegory for the Georgian king David the Builder - widely regarded by Georgians as one of their greatest kings. Secondly, he argues that Georgian knights and nobility had extensive links with the Templars and that Georgians were thus heavily involved in this Western-Oriental cultural exchange. It is from these examples that Gamsakhurdia then comes to a conclusion on Georgia's cultural mission: "to synthesise the Western and Oriental cultures, presenting them as an integral whole".⁸⁷

Suffice to say, Gamsakhurdia makes a lot of claims. Whether these claims are objectively true or not is a matter far beyond the scope of this paper. What is important to the subject of this paper is whether Gamsakhurdia made claims that sounded credible to his audience. In this regard, Gamsakhurdia does have some credentials: again, his famous family name and upbringing which featured great attention to Georgian history and antiquity, and experience as a philologist (whether self-professed or not). Moreover, Gamsakhurdia's nationalism essentially picks up where the Georgian nationalist thinkers of the 19th century left off: these nationalist thinkers had already then begun to imagine the Georgian nation as present since antiquity and had proposed the Christianisation of Georgia (4th century A.D.) and the Georgian Golden Age (11th - 13th centuries A.D.) as

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

cornerstones of Georgian history and nationhood. Thus, Gamsakhurdia's claims in "The Spiritual Mission of Georgia" are not entirely new.⁸⁸

Gamsakhurdia interpreted history in a similar manner to the nationalists of the 19th century: namely, as a continuous, logically progressing story. This means that historical events that do not fit the perceived narrative are easily omitted, and if there are multiple theories regarding a historical period or event, the theory most 'fitting' is deemed true. Therefore, that Gamsakhurdia perceives historical continuity even when it is not necessarily present is not particularly unique. He does, however, take it to a whole other level with such claims as that Georgians are essentially one of the oldest nations in the entire world. Especially so when he then takes this ambitious claim a step further by arguing that these 'proto-Georgians' stem from 'proto-Iberians' who - if we are to believe Gamsakhurdia - called the land all the way from Italy to India their home.⁸⁹ With these claims of the proto-Iberian homeland, Gamsakhurdia moves away from 19th century nationalism: whereas these nationalists adhere quite strictly to the defining aspects of the 'essence' of the Georgian nation (Fatherland, Language, Faith, according to nationalist Ilia Chavchavadze), Gamsakhurdia's approach to the 'essence' of Georgia depends less on concrete, defining aspects and more on vague allegories and similarities between archaeology, history, and religion. As such, Gamsakhurdia is both able to reach farther into history for his claims, as well as present himself as somewhat more cosmopolitan, since it is Georgia's mission to synthesise East and West.⁹⁰

Caucasian homelands, Caucasian brotherhood?

Despite theoretical differences in the nationalist narrative, in a more practical sense Gamsakhurdia had to stick a lot closer to the words of Chavchavadze. After all, whether Gamsakhurdia's claims held true or not, by the time he held his speech Georgians had called the region in the Southern Caucasus roughly coinciding with the borders of modern Georgia their home for millenia. Tales of how grand and peculiar the Georgian ancestry was meant little for the more political nationalist rhetoric with which the post-independence borders had to be negotiated: the fact of the matter was that within the area regarded by Georgians as their homeland there lived sizable ethnic minorities who feared that if Georgia would become independent, it would be a vehemently nationalist Georgia in which non-Georgians would be marginalised. This was not unfounded; autonomy enjoyed by minorities was practically curtailed, and ethnic violence indeed flared up. The issue with the historical accounts of these atrocities is that much is still unclear: through the chaos of the time, political biases, and mis- or even desinformation, discerning what Gamsakhurdia was and wasn't responsible for has become quite difficult. Still, Gamsakhurdia's nationalist rhetoric undeniably played a pivotal role in exacerbating the tensions between Georgians and ethnic minorities within Georgia. It is therefore important to

⁸⁸ Rapp, "Dismantling 'Georgia's Spiritual Mission'", 166-67.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 169.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

understand what kind of views Gamsakhurdia had towards these minorities, particularly the Abkhazians and the Ossetians, as this makes it possible to ascertain more precisely how Gamsakhurdia contributed to the rift conflict that erupted. The following analyses of speeches given by Gamsakhurdia serve to further this understanding.

Firstly, there is one major difference between Abkhazians and Ossetians according to Gamsakhurdia. He regards Abkhazians as an “aboriginal population of Georgia” and thus deems it as logical that the Abkhazians enjoy autonomy.⁹¹ Moreover, as of 1991 Georgians - not Abkhazians - were the dominant ethnic group in Abkhazia. Hence, when the referendum for Georgian independence was due, Gamsakhurdia felt confident Abkhazia would vote in favour of Georgian independence.⁹² Rightfully so, as Abkhazia did vote in favour of Georgian independence. However, in the meantime Gorbachev had organised his referendum on the reincarnation of the USSR as the Union of Sovereign Republics. The leader of the Abkhazian independence movement, Ardzinba, supported this referendum and despite a boycott of the referendum by the government of Georgia and most Georgians, the referendum was held in Abkhazia. Essentially to the Georgian/Abkhazian case, this referendum was on the matter of whether Abkhazia should be recognised as an independent republic within this new Union of Sovereign Republics, thus becoming independent from Georgia.⁹³ This had invoked the ire of Gamsakhurdia, who denounced the referendum as falsified and a Kremlin ploy. Invoking the result of the March 31 referendum, Gamsakhurdia argued Gorbachev’s referendum could not have been conducted in a proper democratic manner and that the Abkhaz people would surely hold Ardzinba responsible.⁹⁴ Evidently, Gamsakhurdia still had faith in the Abkhaz people, whom he regarded as brothers; he did not regard Ardzinba and his movement as representative for the Abkhaz. Therefore, Gamsakhurdia appealed to the Abkhaz people several times, appealing to the historic, cultural, and ethnic ties between Georgians and Abkhazians. Time and time again, Gamsakhurdia stresses he not only respects, but intends to protect Abkhaz culture and autonomy and

⁹¹ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, “‘Let’s See...’ Zviad Gamsakhurdia Answered the Question Whether Abkhazia Will Still Be Soviet or Not,” interview, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Moscow), December 20, 1990, retrieved from *P’rezident’i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek’a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH644757896f9a75a2ed174f>.

⁹² “Press Conference with Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia for Georgian and Foreign Journalists,” *P’rezident’i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek’a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], May 30, 1991, <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH01632c32f52459a1c264d5e1>.

⁹³ “Chronology of Abkhazia through August 1999,” U.S. Department of State, September 1, 1999, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/13517.htm>.

⁹⁴ “The Press Conference of the President of the Republic of Georgia Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia for Foreign and Georgian Journalists on May 27, 1991,” *P’rezident’i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek’a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], May 27, 1991, <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH01e5f7559ffce360afdad31f>.

that he hopes he can convince the Abkhazians of this.⁹⁵ In the eyes of Gamsakhurdia, Abkhaz separatism threatens the brotherly relation between Abkhazians and Georgians, and the only ones who would benefit from this brotherly infighting were in the Kremlin.⁹⁶

The Ossetians, however, are regarded differently, as according to Gamsakhurdia the Ossetian homeland is North-Ossetia. He argued that the notion of a South-Ossetia was a Soviet invention (as Ossetia was in the Northern Caucasus) and that it was under Soviet rule that South-Ossetia had been granted autonomous status within the Georgian SSR - against the will of the Georgians.⁹⁷

Gamsakhurdia claimed it was his intention to maintain this autonomy, but that the Ossetians forced his hand by moving to establish a South-Ossetian SSR and declaring independence from Georgia.⁹⁸

Though this matter of territory sets the Ossetian case apart from the Abkhazian case, most of

Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric to the Ossetians was quite similar to how he approached the Abkhazians.

Calling the conflict in the Tskhinvali region a "fratricidal war"⁹⁹ in a region where Ossetians and

Georgians have lived peacefully together for centuries, along with promises of further cultural rights and autonomy, Gamsakhurdia appears to attempt to win the hearts and minds of the Ossetians.¹⁰⁰

Again, the blame for the conflict in the Tskhinvali region is put on Moscow. Gamsakhurdia claims the

⁹⁵ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "Appeal to the Abkhazian People," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library],

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH9926ff2e02b62ef6ad04a9>; Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "Address to the Deputies of the Supreme Council of the Abkhazian SSR," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], July 8, 1991,

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH01d990fd0b202efe63afc847>.

⁹⁶ Gamsakhurdia, "Appeal to the Abkhazian People"; "The Press Conference"; Gamsakhurdia, "Address to the Deputies."

⁹⁷ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "Law of the Republic of Georgia on the Abolition of the Ossetian Autonomous District," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library],

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH012ec2fb42909a72f292e377>; "President of the Republic of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia Will Answer the Questions of Journalists and TV Viewers," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], November 10, 1991,

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH013754cca4841859a4c69b32>.

⁹⁸ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "Resolution of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia: On Decisions Made by the Council of People's Deputies of the South Ossetia Autonomous District on Changing the Status of the District," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library],

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH0103b536d9ad24ef305d52e4>.

⁹⁹ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "Appeal to Shida Kartli and [Statute] To the Ossetian Population of Tskhinvali," *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], March 4, 1991,

<http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH01aef795df9c7ec381fa8683>.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Ossetians are armed by the Soviet military, that the Kremlin is waging an information war, that an economic blockade is in effect and finally that Gorbachev personally made Gamsakhurdia an ultimatum: sign an alliance agreement, or the situation in Tskhinvali region will escalate. According to Gamsakhurdia, “the so-called South Ossetian conflict is Moscow's punitive operation.”¹⁰¹

This stems from a belief greater than mere political pragmatism, or general egalitarianism: Gamsakhurdia had greater ideals for the Caucasus - particularly the Northern Caucasus, where Caucasian peoples had not had their own SSR's. Gamsakhurdia envisioned a Caucasus where every nation would have their own state along the borders of their homeland. By his logic, all these nations were aware of their homeland and border friction would therefore not be an issue.¹⁰² Gamsakhurdia recognised there would be problems in the Northern Caucasus: the Northern Caucasian peoples did not have a state of their own, and thus he did not regard a Transcaucasian state as a possibility.¹⁰³ Still, he appealed to the Caucasian peoples: “It's time to come to our senses! Let's not fall into the trap laid by the center to our detriment! Let's invent the wisdom and foresight of our great ancestors! To restore brotherhood, mutual respect and trust.”¹⁰⁴ Gamsakhurdia thus had two main ideals for the Caucasus: to maintain amicable relations, and to form a bloc against the ambitions of Moscow.

Recurring in Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric are the referrals to the (distant) past: whether this is about the Georgians themselves, where Gamsakhurdia went to great lengths to explain the nature and peculiarity of the Georgians, or about the Abkhazians, Ossetians, and sometimes even other Caucasian peoples, where he often refers to historical brotherhood and friendly or at least peaceful neighbourly coexistence, Gamsakhurdia uses his perception of the past as an inspiration for how the Georgians should regard themselves and their Caucasian neighbours. He regards history not as a historian focussed on objective truths, but rather as a writer creating a flowing narrative; a narrative meant to inspire Georgians. Are his claims - which can be quite bold and presumptuous - objectively true or false? His claims may ultimately be grounded in history and may contain a degree of truth, but historical uncertainties are taken as objective truths: it is abundantly clear that he uses history for his narrative without any room for nuance. Nevertheless, what is important to this paper is the extent to

¹⁰¹ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, “Kremlin Talks to Us with Ultimatums,” interview by Andrey Karaulov, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow), April 7, 1991, retrieved from *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH6374e58e7cbcd7460718d1>.

¹⁰² Zurab Akhalaia, interview by author, trans. Tsitsino Shengelia, Zugdidi, October 29, 2022.

¹⁰³ “Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, Answered Journalists' Questions at the Press Conference Held in the Press Center on December 8,” *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASH01bb48840439b2ea19ccad91>.

¹⁰⁴ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, “Appeal to the Peoples of the Caucasus,” *P'rezident'i: Mamardashvilis Tsipruli Bibliotek'a*, [President: Mamardashvili Digital Library], <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/greenstone3/library/collection/preziden/document/HASHafa076f2dfb0781d73cf91>.

which he himself - and consequently, his supporters - believed in his ideology, as this can help explain his popularity as well as shed light on the chaotic and accusatory discourse in both internal and external Georgian relations during Gamsakhurdia's period of prominence. Looking back at his upbringing as a "Georgian prince"¹⁰⁵, his dedication to the national Georgian cause well before it became more accessible in the late eighties, as well as his determined, matter-of-fact style of speaking, I would argue dismissing Gamsakhurdia as a populist that propagated a narrative purely for political gain is too simple; I do think Gamsakhurdia was utterly convinced of his ideology - and refused to deviate from it. The culmination of this, or the point where Gamsakhurdia's ideology collided head-on with reality, was how he regarded the situation in Abkhazia/the Tskhinvali region. To Gamsakhurdia, the territorial integrity of Georgia was sacred and as such his ideas for Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region were fundamentally incompatible with the Abkhazian and Ossetian demands for independence. Still, his words do suggest he respected Abkhaz and Ossetian culture, and perhaps even wished to protect them. This seems contradictory to reality: the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region erupted in large part due to the fear of becoming second-class citizens in an independent, nationalist Georgia - including the ethnic violence these conflicts entailed. Moreover, why would his rhetoric not be purely political in nature, mere words meant to appease without all too sincere intentions? Once again, as with his ideology, I would argue Gamsakhurdia was so convinced of his ideas of Caucasian brotherhood he truly hoped he would be able to convince the Abkhazians and Ossetians of this 'truth'. Any failure to do so was not because of the ideology, the Abkhazians, or the Ossetians, but could be easily placed on the Kremlin.

¹⁰⁵ Ivanauskas, "From Establishment to Dissent," 9.

4. Collective Memory Theory: Mythmaking and Forgetting in the Collective Memory

In the introduction of this paper, I have proposed two hypotheses: that Gamsakhurdia's memory has been suppressed and forgotten throughout Georgia, with a focus on Tbilisi, and that in Megrelia the polar opposite has happened, namely that Gamsakhurdia has come to be venerated both as a national and as a regional hero. These claims are grounded in collective memory theory, as the theories in this field tie the past, the recollection of the past by a collective, and collective identity together.

Therefore, it is first necessary to clarify the formation of collective memory and its function.

Following this, this chapter will cover the specific concepts most relevant to the cases, namely suppressing/forgetting and mythmaking.

As Aleida Assmann identified, the issue with collective memory is that there is strictly speaking no collective memory. In a narrowed-down, technical manner, she suggests it is rather the formation of memory which, supported by cultural symbols and together with loyalty ties, leads to a strong sense of 'us'. Therefore, creating memory and creating identity happen simultaneously.¹⁰⁶ The first step of collective memory is the social memory: though based on the memories of the individuals, the act of recollection takes place in the interpersonal communication. (Symbolic) media can then be used to support the memory of these individuals.¹⁰⁷ This does not have to be media like photographs, texts, or the like, but it may also be traditions, or oral communication. It should be noted, however, that in these events the recollection is still in the hands of a community, rather than a cultural authority. Since the social memory is based on individual memories, it is naturally restricted to last only a few generations.¹⁰⁸

For this social memory to then become cultural memory, the agency over the memory then needs to be institutionalised. However, social memory does not become cultural memory overnight; it is a long process, and differing perspectives of the collective memory, as well as the democratic possibility to participate in the political decision-making are important factors for the form this collective memory is to take.¹⁰⁹ This is especially true for the national memory: though in many ways the national memory is another form of cultural memory, there are immediate political interests. Politicians may call upon the national memory to legitimise their actions or gather support, or may be forced to as citizens make the national identity a part of their own. Moreover, political institutions

¹⁰⁶ Aleida Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, 4th ed. (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2021), 34-36.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 33.

¹⁰⁸ Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 109–18, 117.

¹⁰⁹ Erik Meyer, "Memory and Politics," in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 171-80, 178-79.

have additional functions as cultural institutions as they reinforce and embed the national memory. As such, whilst the social memory is collective memory constructed bottom-up, the national memory is constructed top-down.¹¹⁰ As the latter stems from the first, these processes collide, potentially leading to conflict. If, in a democratic society, citizens almost unanimously agree on how the national memory should be shaped, this conflict will be minimal. Should, however, different groups within society disagree on how the national memory should be shaped, this conflict can become sizable and problematic. A dominant group might push their narrative, antagonising other groups, the construction of a national memory might take a long time as the memory is carefully negotiated and discussed, or the construction or institutionalisation might even be put on the back burner as to avoid conflict.¹¹¹ Especially problematic can be memories of war, particularly civil war. One group or side in the conflict might incur fewer losses or might be more on the perpetrating end of the violence, whilst another group or side might find themselves incurring more losses and more on the receiving side of the violence. As a result, the perpetrators are more inclined to forget after the war, or at least not commemorate the war, whilst the victims are more inclined to remember the injustices faced. Incorporating the contradictory ways of handling memory in a singular national memory, with the same national, mnemonic institutions, can therefore be a serious challenge.¹¹² Finally, practical constraints might come to play a role: there might be the desire to construct a monument, hold a parade, or otherwise commemorate the national memory, however this does require possibly scarce resources and funding.¹¹³

Another issue with memory, be it neural or collective, is that it is simply limited; there are practical constraints to how much can be remembered. Forgetting is therefore common, and most instances of forgetting are passive. Still, through purposefully negating the past, destroying artefacts, taboo, or censorship, active forgetting is possible. Similarly, there is active and passive remembering. Passive remembering would be the accumulation of ‘pieces of the past’ and keeping these pieces safe for future reference. Thus, passive remembering is the domain of historians and archaeologists, not that of the community. It is only when the collective memory survives either passive or active forgetting and avoids falling into the passive memory that it becomes the highly selective active memory; the canon. The canon, and especially the canon of the national memory, is meant to reinforce the collective identity and endure for multiple generations. Through monuments, textbooks, and national celebrations, the national canon is taught and perpetuated, enabling the nation to commonly engage with the national memory and reinforce their common identity.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ A. Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten*, 36-40.

¹¹¹ Meyer, “Memory and Politics,” 178-79.

¹¹² A. Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten*, 107.

¹¹³ Meyer, “Memory and Politics,” 178-79.

¹¹⁴ Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 97-107, 97-101.

For the canon, by its selective nature, forgetting is not just common; it relies on forgetting. Historical individuals and events are recollected to serve as icons, inspirations, and examples of and for a nation to identify with. Essentially, history is made into national myths, of which historical figures are the heroes. As such, objective, historical analyses are often not satisfactory, as objective historiography is too open for different perspectives and explanations; the national memory requires a singular narrative which leaves no room for divergent perspectives. Thus, that which does not fit the narrative is subject to strategies of active forgetting.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the national myth is laden with and protected by emotion, impeding the pragmatic analysis of history as criticism of the national myth is essentially an attack on the national identity.¹¹⁶ In that sense, such processes of mythmaking could be seen as blatant falsifications of history. However, it is important to reiterate that myths are not created to portray history; they are formed to imagine the past in the present for the sake of reinforcing the national identity and provide guidance for the nation as it moves into the future.¹¹⁷ Still, it is important to emphasise that, despite discrepancies between history and the national myth, the national myth is grounded in history. Therefore, whilst the national myth might not be true, that does not mean it is false; depending on the myth in question, there is a greater or lesser degree of truthfulness to it.¹¹⁸ Notably, mythmaking does not solely revolve around recalling feats of greatness and glory: the difficulties of the past, too, have an important place in the national memory. The reason for this is that, while national pride may feel good and strengthen the national identity, common losses and grief are more potent in their ability to call the nation to action.¹¹⁹

For mythmaking, different methods of suppressing and forgetting may be employed to separate the foundational history of the myth from its uncomfortable parts. These methods may, however, also be employed to suppress and forget a memory in part or altogether, should a memory be too painful, incompatible with the national identity, or otherwise undesirable. Whilst forgetting can be passive and natural, suppressing cannot: it is a deliberate effort to actively forget - in the frame of collective memories, it means to prevent (parts of) the memory from gaining a presence in the social memory and to keep it out of the cultural (or in this case, the national) memory after the last bearers of the individual memory have passed. Aleida Assmann has proposed five such methods, and while she supports her ideas with examples from how postwar Germany/Germans handled their guilt and complicity during the Second World War, I would argue most of these methods are applicable to the cases of this paper. Therefore, I will briefly touch upon all of these methods for the sake of clarity, but for a deeper understanding of the concepts I would refer to Aleida Assmann's book *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*.

¹¹⁵ A. Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten*, 40-41.

¹¹⁶ Michael Morden, "Anatomy of the National Myth: Archetypes and Narrative in the Study of Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 3 (2016): 447-64, doi: 10.1111/nana.12167, 449-50.

¹¹⁷ A. Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten*, 40-41.

¹¹⁸ Morden, "Anatomy of the National Myth," 449-50.

¹¹⁹ A. Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten*, 42-43.

The first method is *aufrechnen*; to set off the guilt from both sides. It bears resemblance to the logical fallacy of ‘whataboutism’: the own mistakes or guilt of the past are set off to the mistakes or guilt of the opposing side in an effort to justify why these mistakes were made. Essentially, by ‘subtracting’ the guilt from others from their own guilt, the ‘net sum’ of guilt becomes zero or otherwise insignificant.

The second method is *externalisieren*, to externalise. The guilt is acknowledged, yet the blame is pinned on others in an effort by the defendant to distance themselves from the perpetrating group they are/used to be a part of. This may be explicitly, by clearly stating a perpetrator, or implicitly, where the perpetrator might not be clear, but it is made abundantly clear the group or person defending themselves is not responsible.

The third method is *ausblenden*: best, yet not perfectly, translated, it can mean hiding, fading away, or ignoring. In this context, perhaps obscuring fits best: when recalling a memory, both individuals and collectives require a ‘path’ - a way to contextualise a memory and place it in its logical sequence of events, or at least in its narrative. Ausblenden is thus a way to obscure, distort, or disrupt this path, thereby making it more difficult to recall or even create a memory in the first place - one cannot recall what was never remembered. And even if it was remembered, it gradually becomes more and more difficult to remember as the memory is interacted less and less with. It should be noted that ausblenden sits on the cusp of passive and active forgetting: it is not quite active forgetting in the sense that a memory is purposefully distorted, but rather a half active, half passive willingness to forget about an event too large or impactful to passively forget naturally.

The fourth method is *schweigen* - to simply remain silent. Schweigen is, in practice, complicated, as it can be difficult to assess why people might choose to remain silent: it might be because they wish to avoid discussing their own complicity, yet it might also be because a memory is too painful to discuss. In the case of the former, the word *verschweigen* is more fitting, for this more precisely communicates the deliberate decision not to discuss one's own involvement. Effectively, if individual memories are not shared, it cannot be a part of the social memory, let alone the national memory.

The fifth and final method is *umfälschen* - to falsify. In a sense, umfälschen bears resemblance to mythmaking, yet whereas myths shape history to identify with the national narrative, via umfälschen people shape their social memory to align with the national identity. This may also mean the national narrative, yet it might also mean such things as national or even universal values.¹²⁰

From this chapter, there are several takeaways to be kept in mind when going into the cases. First and foremost, that collective memory may be based on the past, its presence and its purpose is in the present. At its core, the collective memory is about a sense of ‘us’; about the collective identity. Secondly, the temporal distance to the case should be considered: Gamsakhurdia became politically

¹²⁰ A. Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten*, 168-81.

active in the late fifties, but his period of prominence only came in the late eighties and abruptly ended the night 1993 moved into 1994. There are still many people alive who remember him, and we are thus looking at the social memory. However, if his memory is to become cultural, national memory that persists after those who remember him have passed, action is required in the here and now: is his memory being institutionalised? Are monuments being erected? Are celebrations being held? Is his death commemorated? In short: is the memory of Gamsakhurdia undergoing a process of canonisation? As per the hypotheses of this paper, the answer to this question is wildly different in Megrelia compared to the rest of Georgia. However vastly these cases may vary, the issue of active forgetting is present in both cases. In the case of Georgia as a whole, the question is firstly if memory is actively being suppressed (or if the process of forgetting is more passive), and if so, how and why the memory of Gamsakhurdia is repressed. In the case of Megrelia, the suppression of memory ties into the process of mythmaking; as a myth requires a singular, unambiguous narrative, that which does not fit needs to be suppressed. As truthful as they may or may not be, memory myths do rely on the past - but its function is to reinforce the collective identity. It serves to provide the collective with an icon to rally around, to identify with, and to be inspired by in both the present and the future. Thus, in the Megrelian case the question is firstly if there is a process of mythification of the memory of Gamsakhurdia, and if so why his memory is awarded such a prominent place in the Megrelian regional memory and identity.

5. The Process of Regional Mythmaking: Venerating Gamsakhurdia in Megrelia

Megrelia has always had a special position within Georgia: while Megrelians are undeniably a part of the Georgian nation, they do have a strong regional identity, including their own language, which was present in Megrelia well before Gamsakhurdia was even born. Thus, picturing Gamsakhurdia as a Megrelian acting against the political elite of Tbilisi fits in a larger picture of Megrelian regionalism, which entails resistance against the ‘domineering attitude’ of Tbilisi.¹²¹ In the fall of 2022, I travelled to Zugdidi twice in search of the Megrelian memory of Gamsakhurdia. Here, I found his bust adorning the avenue named after him, a plaque with his image on the building from which he had briefly governed in 1993, and even a small museum. Moreover, I spoke to several Megrelians, all of whom held Gamsakhurdia in high regard. Not only was the fact that they eagerly, extensively, and positively talked about him completely different from how he is regarded in Tbilisi, but what these Megrelians told me was unambiguously positive: only one of the interviewees had some criticisms of Gamsakhurdia, the rest had none. The prevailing opinion was that he inspired and enlightened Georgians with his ideology and that he was a true Megrelian who was sabotaged by the Russians and took it up against the Tbilisi elite. Therefore, this chapter will compare the accounts of these Megrelians to the history of Gamsakhurdia, separated between Gamsakhurdia versus the ‘elite’ and Gamsakhurdia as an inspiration. Then, inconsistencies between history and memory will be analysed through collective memory theory.

Gamsakhurdia versus the ‘elite’

The death of Kostava, the violent coup that came so quickly after Gamsakhurdia’s ascend to power, and ultimately his own death: the Megrelians I spoke to habitually saw these events as instances of covert meddling, scheming, and plotting against Gamsakhurdia. The first instance of this sentiment I encountered was the museum dedicated to Gamsakhurdia. While the museum is registered as such, it was only one room, not more than 20 square metres, filled to the brim with pictures of Gamsakhurdia and other memorabilia. The owner of the museum gave her account of Gamsakhurdia’s history. She emphasised how many people had been ‘murdered’: she showed several pictures of different people, people who had worked with or supported Gamsakhurdia, and then died. The most prominent of these people was Merab Kostava. In all these cases she was certain who was to blame: Shevardnadze and Russia, which she saw as one and the same cause. Her logic was that Kostava and Gamsakhurdia posed too big of a threat to ‘their’ power. Consequently, she also held Shevardnadze and Russia responsible for murdering Gamsakhurdia, thereby dismissing the notion he might have committed

¹²¹ Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, 85.

suicide: ‘Gamsakhurdia was a Christian, so he was forbidden to commit suicide’, as she reasoned.¹²² Gia Mamporia, who had been a part of the Round Table party and a signatory of the declaration of independence, agreed Gamsakhurdia’s movement had been infiltrated by the KGB. To this, he added the death of Kostava meant Gamsakhurdia lost someone who was able to identify this infiltration. Mamporia also argued Gamsakhurdia’s Megrelian identity played a part in the action against him: as Mamporia put it, the Tbilisi nomenklatura feared for its position as Gamsakhurdia brought in people from all over Georgia to serve in his administration instead of them, and that this was the reason they opposed him.¹²³ Or, as Kalandia put it, ‘betrayal by the Tbilisi elite’.¹²⁴ Robert Absandze, who had been a dissident together with Gamsakhurdia in Zugdidi but had refused an offer by Gamsakhurdia to join his government, illustrated how the shift from being a local dissident in Zugdidi to being a figurehead of the national liberation movement presented difficulties. In Zugdidi, Gamsakhurdia had worked with a small number of intellectuals, most of whom he could trust. As the movement grew larger, however, it also became more susceptible to infiltration as Gamsakhurdia was forced to work with people he did not know as well. Absandze, too, pointed out the death of Kostava was an important development in this regard, and implied that Gamsakhurdia was naïve when choosing the people he worked with. A particular problem he perceived in this regard was that the people Gamsakhurdia chose for his government had not had a lifetime of dissidence behind them, and were thus unable to cast aside their Soviet thinking. In addition, Absandze had two other examples with which he aimed to illustrate how Gamsakhurdia was more of an idealist and less of a politician: in the first example, he portrayed how Gamsakhurdia launched a poorly planned campaign of privatisation, where the government granted control over factories to workers which resulted in the factories being scrapped for parts which were then sold. The second example was how Gamsakhurdia refused Western aid, adhering to his proud, nationalist image of a truly independent Georgia.¹²⁵

When comparing these accounts to history, there is similarity, and I would dare to claim continuity, between how Gamsakhurdia feared Russian subversive elements and their alleged allies in Georgia, and how Megrelians claim Gamsakhurdia was sabotaged and betrayed. Though some of this Russian meddling does indeed have considerable plausibility, or has even been (more or less) proven, the presence of some meddling is generalised and taken as proof of a wider conspiracy. Starting with the claims that are most plausible, Absandze’s description of Gamsakhurdia’s dissident movement in Zugdidi aligns with history: repression during the Brezhnev-era was indeed harsh, and there was a policy of industrialisation which in reality mainly brought many Russians to Georgia. A bit more unclear is the death of Merab Kostava: the death of Merab Kostava, regarded by Megrelians as an

¹²² Dali Lataria (owner of the Gamsakhurdia museum in Zugdidi), interview by author, trans. anonymous, Zugdidi, October 13, 2022.

¹²³ Mamporia, interview.

¹²⁴ Kalandia, interview.

¹²⁵ Absandze, interview.

assassination, is widely considered to be suspicious by historians and Georgians alike. Moreover, the Megrelians I spoke to did provide solid arguments, which were in accordance with observations made by historians, with regards to why the Soviet system would benefit from the death of Kostava. Nevertheless, his death has never been outright proven to be an assassination. Whilst the notion that Kostava's death was an assassination thus does enjoy plausibility and recognition outside of Megrelia, this notion is then seen as proof and a precedent for further struggle of Soviet forces against Gamsakhurdia: perhaps Gamsakhurdia's movement and later government was indeed infiltrated, there is truth to the claim that the nomenklatura resisted Gamsakhurdia, and I do not see why the Gamsakhurdia museum would lie about the deaths of the people in the pictures shown to me. The problem is, however, how these deaths are then interpreted and who are deemed guilty of them: the words KGB, Shevardnadze, Russia, and nomenklatura are used interchangeably; the imperial centre and its collaborators took it up against Gamsakhurdia. This notion dismisses both Gamsakhurdia's and Georgians' own responsibility and mistakes: Gamsakhurdia's tenure (and even some time before that) was marked by hostile, accusatory public and political discourse, and Gamsakhurdia himself left almost no room for diverging ideas. The resistance against Gamsakhurdia, represented by the National Congress, consisted of a broad coalition of parties who all had their own, sometimes personal, gripes with Gamsakhurdia: intellectuals, democrats, students, and former members of his government had valid criticisms of his rule, but had been silenced and insulted by Gamsakhurdia. Therefore, even if the resistance against Gamsakhurdia entailed unsavoury types such as Ioseliani, or indeed those who could genuinely be described as the nomenklatura, it cannot be said there was a singular, Soviet/Russian conspiracy, or, as Gamsakhurdia himself put it, a "nomenklatura revanche".¹²⁶

Gamsakhurdia as an inspiration

There are two main reasons the people of Megrelia draw inspiration and a sense of belonging from Gamsakhurdia's memory: his Megrelian heritage and his ideology. Firstly, his Megrelian heritage: the people I spoke to universally spoke of Gamsakhurdia as a 'true Megrelian': determined and headstrong, when Megrelians truly want something, they will get it - and Gamsakhurdia wanted Georgian independence. True enough, Gamsakhurdia had Megrelian heritage, and he lived in Zugdidi for a while. Moreover, Megrelians like to picture Gamsakhurdia as another instance where Megrelians make life difficult for the central government in Tbilisi. Still, Gamsakhurdia was born and raised in Tbilisi, and he never regarded Megrelia as distinct from the Georgian nation.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, his heritage has ensured him the loyalty of the Megrelians when he rose to power and when he was removed from it; it was Megrelia that rose in rebellion, clung to hope of his return, and fought with him when he did. Doing so, they, too, resisted central power from Tbilisi. Secondly, Gamsakhurdia's

¹²⁶ Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "The Nomenklatura Revanche in Georgia," ed. Christopher Story, *Soviet Analyst* 21 (1993), http://www.geocities.com/shavlego/zg_1d.html.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

ideology inspired Georgians and provided something they could identify with. This is thus not unique to Megrelians, but whereas Gamsakhurdia's ideology faded from Tbilisi and most other parts of Georgia, it remained popular in Megrelia. There are multiple reasons for this: again, it seems likely his Megrelian heritage plays a part, but Megrelia's geography also plays a role. For one, Megrelia borders Abkhazia: many Megrelians lived in Abkhazia, and Megrelians and Abkhazians had lived side by side in peace - until the war came to them.¹²⁸ When the call for independence came from Abkhazia, this therefore antagonised many Georgians who lived in Abkhazia and those who had family there.¹²⁹ For these Megrelians, Gamsakhurdia's ideology thus not only provided a source of identity and inspiration, it also provided a solution to the conflict with the Abkhazians. This is exemplified in the conversation I had with Zurab Akhalaia, who had served as the press secretary of Gamsakhurdia. Despite the fact we had not made an appointment, works of Konstantine Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava lay upon his desk; Zviad Gamsakhurdia's national project (for which Kostava and Gamsakhurdia senior had been of pivotal importance) evidently still was a part of Akhalaia's life. Akhalaia gave a history lesson, or rather, a lesson on Gamsakhurdia's ideological interpretation of history: Akhalaia described how the peoples of the Caucasus had ancient ties to their land, and that since the rough landscape made for many natural borders, the peoples of the Caucasus knew exactly whose land was whose. Akhalaia explained that based on this observation, Gamsakhurdia came to the conclusion that there would be no conflict within the Caucasus over homelands, as the different peoples would establish their respective republics in accordance with these ancestral homelands. From that point, he argued Caucasian cooperation would take the form of a multinational union.¹³⁰

Obviously, Akhalaia knew Gamsakhurdia's ideology incredibly well, and from the certainty with which he spoke it was clear he, too, truly believed in it. However, this essentially puts him in the same spot as Gamsakhurdia when it comes to the issues with this ideology. It is evident neither the Abkhazians nor the Ossetians were convinced of Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric of brotherhood, and understandably so: despite his rhetoric and laws protecting local culture and autonomy, in reality these laws were conditional, replaced similar Soviet laws, and were accompanied with other laws which promoted Georgianisation. Consequently, like Gamsakhurdia, Akhalaia attributed these failures not to Gamsakhurdia or his ideology, but to the Kremlin's influence and the political leaders of Abkhazia and Ossetia. Moreover, it is easy to see why this belief seems justified in Megrelia: separatist sentiment started in Abkhazia before Gamsakhurdia's presidency, and the war began after his presidency - a war which greatly affected Megrelians. Thus, even though Georgian nationalism, spearheaded by Gamsakhurdia, was what alienated Abkhazians, Megrelians adhered to Gamsakhurdia's idea of Georgian-Abkhaz brotherhood. When Shevardnadze, who they were already

¹²⁸ Jones, *Georgia A Political History*, 96.

¹²⁹ Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, 84.

¹³⁰ Akhalaia, interview.

rebellious against, then found himself in a war he was perceived the instigator of, the Megrelian perception that it was his fault becomes understandable. Especially so, considering that after the fall of Sokhumi the central government in Tbilisi again, this time with Russian support, sent troops to Megrelia in order to quell Gamsakhurdia's uprising, resulting in more suffering for the civilian population. A Megrelian, standing amidst the rubble in the wake of an attack, captured the sentiment: "Georgians, Megrelians, Abkhazians - they are dividing us. All of this is Shevardnadze's fault. He did all of this for his seat."¹³¹

Emphasis and negligence in the Megrelian remembrance of Gamsakhurdia

Megrelians to this day are proud of 'their' Gamsakhurdia's ascend to power in 1990, despite his troubled presidency, the violent coup against him, and the civil strife that surrounded this time. And they are not just proud: they are more than ready to defend Gamsakhurdia from any and all criticism. When pointing out Gamsakhurdia's role in the alienation of ethnic minorities, the hostile discourse that dominated his presidency, or any mistakes he made while in office, any blame is deflected towards 'the centre'. Through the lens of cultural memory theory, there therefore exists a pattern of the externalisation of guilt: though in some cases Soviet/Russian meddling can indeed be a justified or plausible explanation, this presence is then generalised and applied in cases where there is lacking or even opposing historical evidence. Moreover, the Megrelian memory of Gamsakhurdia is not just positive, it is unambiguously positive: in the closing remarks in my conversation with Absandze, he mentioned he found it difficult to discuss Gamsakhurdia's flaws with others, as many people rather cherished a purely positive memory of him. It can be said Gamsakhurdia's memory has become a regional memory myth: since Gamsakhurdia is regarded as a 'true Megrelian', a freedom fighter who resisted foreign/central domination, and a visionary of the Georgian national identity, Megrelians deeply identify with him. Thus, criticising Gamsakhurdia in extension is interpreted as criticising the Megrelian regional identity. Another issue is that if historical analysis puts forward the flaws of Gamsakhurdia, this affects the legitimacy of the Megrelian insurgencies and thereby the actions of the Megrelians themselves: a singular narrative with a clear distinction between right and wrong is required for the memory myth; for the regional identity. Furthermore, the Megrelians suffered under the war in Abkhazia, as well as under the brutality with which the government in Tbilisi, and particularly the Mkhedrioni, put down the Megrelian insurgencies. Megrelians are left to wonder: what would have happened had Gamsakhurdia remained in power? Convinced of Gamsakhurdia's ideology vis-à-vis Georgia's minorities and the notion Gamsakhurdia was betrayed, the conclusion seems easy: Megrelians and Abkhazians would have continued to live side by side in peace, and there would have been no need for rebellion against Tbilisi. Therefore, whilst the memory of Gamsakhurdia

¹³¹ Chavchavadze Center "Darcheli," *YouTube*, December 3, 2022, Documentary, 7:26 to 7:38, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feV0Tifcfoo&list=PLBgFOzQZlAORx-dAn8B17sK0w8uW-Qr6v&ab_channel=chavchavadzecenter.

may not be as suited for imagining the future - after all, Megrelia is but a region of Georgia and is therefore limited in its ability to translate memory into policy - his memory is well suited for imagining an alternative reality.

6. From a Vague Past to a Vague Memory: Tbilisi's Uncomfortable Stance Towards Gamsakhurdia

Whilst Gamsakhurdia was prominently visible in Zugdidi, in Tbilisi I was left to search for traces of him - and still found almost nothing. Likewise, whereas the citizens of Zugdidi could talk about Gamsakhurdia for hours, it seemed as though the people in Tbilisi hardly knew who I was talking about. He is remembered neither positively nor negatively: he is seemingly not being remembered at all and even when he is, it seems to be with few words or actions. The result is that his remembrance comes across as uncomfortable, indecisive, and/or unconvinced. Another major difference between Tbilisi and Zugdidi is that while the memory of Gamsakhurdia in Zugdidi/Megrelia is regional memory, characterised by its heavy reliance on social memory and lack of institutional support, Tbilisi, being the capital of Georgia, enjoys the strongest institutions in Georgia, yet the social memory seems to be weaker. Moreover, I perceive Tbilisi as the central hub of the national memory of Gamsakhurdia, since the institutions of the national memory are predominantly in Tbilisi, other regions of Georgia do not have a local attachment to Gamsakhurdia the way the Megrelians do, and finally because of the simple fact Tbilisi is by far Georgia's largest city. As the people themselves had so little to say about Gamsakhurdia, this chapter will be focussed more on memory policy. After analysing this policy, Assmann's theories of memory suppression will be applied in order to ascertain how and why this suppression takes place.

Georgia's uncomfortable national memory of Gamsakhurdia

For Shevardnadze, Gamsakhurdia was initially not even a memory: during Shevardnadze's tenure Gamsakhurdia launched his uprising, and after this Shevardnadze had his hands full trying to mend the rifts in the country; memory politics would have to follow reconciliatory politics.¹³² Moreover, Shevardnadze had been invited by, and ruled with, those that deposed Gamsakhurdia: Gamsakhurdia's opponents were quite happy to ridicule Gamsakhurdia's supporters.¹³³ Upon his ascend to power, Saakashvili almost immediately declared 2004 the "year of Zviad Gamsakhurdia."¹³⁴ Saakashvili praised Gamsakhurdia for his commitment to independence, amnestied Zviadist prisoners, made peace with the last pockets of resistance that had remained in Megrelia, and even offered important government offices to close allies and family of Gamsakhurdia.¹³⁵ He also set out to rebury Gamsakhurdia, however since Gamsakhurdia had been buried in Chechnya and the war that had left

¹³² Jones, "The Trauma of Statehood," 527.

¹³³ Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, 81-82.

¹³⁴ Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Georgia: Leader Walks Thin Line Between Patriotism and Nationalism," *Radio Liberty*, April 9, 2004, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1052243.html>.

¹³⁵ Ibid; Robinson Margvelani and Schalva Gvanzeladze, "Der Fall Swiad Gamsachurdia," interview by Marika Ketschakmadze, *Kaukasus TV* (Okto TV, October 10, 2018), 17:14.

Grozny in ruins had also caused Gamsakhurdia's grave to be lost, this had to wait until 2007. In a pompous state burial befitting a former president, Gamsakhurdia was reburied at Tbilisi's Mtatsminda Pantheon; reserved for Georgia's greatest heroes (including Kostava), it was made clear Gamsakhurdia was one of them. In addition, the right bank of the river Mtkvari, which flows through Tbilisi, was named after Gamsakhurdia, and one of Saakashvili's parting acts was to award Gamsakhurdia the status of national hero.¹³⁶ Saakashvili had also launched an investigation of Gamsakhurdia's death, and invited Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (Zviad Gamsakhurdia's son, named after his grandfather) to lead this committee. Interestingly, Zviad Gamsakhurdia's bodyguards (who had found his body) do claim Gamsakhurdia had, in fact, committed suicide, but that the family refused to believe this. These bodyguards also claim an investigation by the Shevardnadze administration had already found Gamsakhurdia had committed suicide, but that the governments that followed really only reopened the investigation, which yielded nothing except that the previous conclusion of suicide was questioned, because the people were not willing to believe Gamsakhurdia had committed suicide. Therefore, these bodyguards claimed, reinvestigating his death possibly had political advantages.¹³⁷ This leaves the word of these two bodyguards versus the gut feeling of almost an entire nation, but true or not, their observation with regards to Georgian unwillingness to believe the story of suicide and consequent political capitalisation is interesting. For the Saakashvili administrations, intent on rehabilitating Gamsakhurdia's image, ruling out suicide and proving murder would be beneficial as it would reinforce Gamsakhurdia's image as a national hero; his failures could be explained by the presence of hostile schemes. But how would Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream (GD), the party that rose to power after Saakashvili and rules Georgia to this date, benefit from the rather unsatisfactory conclusion that neither suicide nor murder could be proven? Following Saakashvili's clear, if somewhat limited, view of Gamsakhurdia as a Georgian hero for his role in reestablishing Georgia as an independent nation state, GD has not fundamentally changed this perspective. In addition to their iteration of a fruitless investigation, GD has opened a memorial museum in the village of Khibula, Megrelia, where Gamsakhurdia had died.¹³⁸ As this memorial museum is in Megrelia, this leads me to believe that the museum was not so much established as a part of the national memory, but rather as a gesture towards Megrelia with its already singular regional memory. Whether this conclusion is cynical or realist I leave to the reader, but Megrelians were seemingly not impressed: at the Gamsakhurdia museum, I was told going there was pointless as the museum in

¹³⁶ William Dunbar, "No Rest for Georgian Leader as He's Dug up for Third Time," *Independent*, February 18, 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/no-rest-for-georgian-leader-as-he-s-dug-up-for-third-time-1903017.html>; Alexi Gugushvili, Peter Kabachnik, and Ana Kirvalidze, "Collective Memory and Reputational Politics of National Heroes and Villains," *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 3 (2017): 464–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1261821>, 469.

¹³⁷ Margvelani and Gvanzeladze, "Der Fall," 17:14.

¹³⁸ "Rehabilitation of Zviad Gamsakhurdia Memorial Museum," *Administration of the State Representative* (2019), <https://szs.gov.ge/eng/news/show/10/2161>.

Zugdidi had already told me all I need to know and that the museum in Khibula was indeed more a memorial than a museum, since no real information was provided.¹³⁹ ‘Gesturing’ does seem to be the way GD involves itself with Gamsakhurdia’s memory: laying flowers at his grave, naming a Kartvelology award after him, proposing to name Tbilisi’s airport (yet ultimately going with Shota Rustaveli instead) after him, and - like Saakashvili - offering symbolic government positions to Gamsakhurdia’s family, this memory policy seems so shallow it can hardly be perceived as such.¹⁴⁰

Is the limited scope of memory politics regarding Gamsakhurdia indicative of Georgian society? Does the state not remember, because the people it represents do not remember? Or are there political/societal reasons to keep Gamsakhurdia’s memory so shallow? Thus: what is Gamsakhurdia’s place in the social memory, and how does it relate to the construction of national memory? Whilst the people I spoke to in Tbilisi had strikingly little to say about Gamsakhurdia, that does not mean there is nothing to say at all: firstly, it should be noted that in a survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers on who were Georgia’s greatest heroes and villains, Gamsakhurdia was deemed Georgia’s greatest hero whilst not showing up in the top six greatest villains. Importantly to this paper, this survey was conducted across Georgia; Megrelians may have played a part in securing Gamsakhurdia’s number one spot, but their exact footprint is unclear. In the paper in which they analyse these results, Gugushvili et al. do note that to both questions more than half of the respondents either did not know an answer or refused to give one: the authors state this is in part because of how the questions were formulated, yet they also theorise this outcome may be due to disillusionment with political leaders both then and now.¹⁴¹ This theory of disillusionment is not unfounded: as Jones argues, whether it was Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, or Saakashvili, they have all favoured the state over democracy. As their respective political parties dominated parliament, none of the Georgian presidents has had to make deals with other parties in parliament, nor have these opposition parties therefore been able to provide any serious resistance in parliament. Apart from the occasional elections, Georgians are thus limited in their ability to influence political decision making.¹⁴² Jones finished his book before GD came to power, yet since GD has an absolute parliamentary majority and unpopular decisions are only reverted after social outrage, his observations still seem relevant.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Lataria, interview.

¹⁴⁰ “Georgian Pm, Parliament Speaker Pay Tribute to Late First President on 84th Birthday.” *Agenda.ge*, March 31, 2023. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/1292>; “New Name for Tbilisi Airport - but Which?,” *newstodate*, June 30, 2015, <https://www.newstodate.aero/22454>; Zaza Bibilashvili (chairman of the board of the Chavchavadze Center), interview by author, videocall, June 7, 2023; “Zviad Gamsakhurdia Prize Competition announced,” *Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia* (2020), <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=10220&lang=eng>.

¹⁴¹ Gugushvili, Kabachnik, and Kirvalidze, “Collective Memory,” 468-69.

¹⁴² Jones, *Georgia A Political History*, 177.

¹⁴³ GD’s half-baked commitment to the conditions for EU candidacy, the proposal of the foreign agents law, the imprisonment of Nika Gvaramia (director of a prominent TV station), and hesitance to distance Georgia from Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have all led to large-scale

Whilst Jones' observation is based on political structures, Nodia back in 1995 argued Georgians' disillusionment with Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze was based on experience: Georgians believed the zealous Gamsakhurdia's promises of national pride and the abolishment of the Soviet structure in favour of democracy, and trusted the experienced, internationally acclaimed Shevardnadze who was to reconcile the country with itself and bring back Georgia from the brink. Neither delivered, leading Nodia to the expectation that this disillusionment would lead to a "more realistic historical vision for their country."¹⁴⁴ Another factor which may affect a person's perception of Gamsakhurdia as a national hero seems to be age: those that were in their twenties during Gamsakhurdia's prominence are somewhat more likely to perceive him as a hero, whereas those that were born in or in the period thereafter are somewhat less likely to perceive him as a hero. Whilst Gugushvili et al. do state these differences are statistically insignificant, there is logic to this difference: the former group may have supported, or even participated in Gamsakhurdia's movement.¹⁴⁵ The latter group was either far too young, or not even born, to have a personal impression of Gamsakhurdia: as they have no individual memory of Gamsakhurdia, they are entirely reliant on collective memory. Since in nation states the state education is tasked with teaching the canon of the national memory to the youngest generations, the question is: are school pupils taught about Gamsakhurdia? Briefly put: no, they are not. In conversation with a small group of students of Tbilisi State University, born during or briefly after the 1990's, they testified they had not been taught anything about Gamsakhurdia. Yet it had not merely been their history books that had remained silent on Gamsakhurdia - upon further inquiry, it became clear these students more generally knew quite little about Gamsakhurdia, thereby indicating he had hardly entered the social memory.¹⁴⁶

Absence from the social memory?

This is precisely the predicament of this paper: whilst Gamsakhurdia clearly has a place within the Megrelian social memory, and his limited presence within national memory politics can be demonstrated, outright proving his absence from the social memory of Tbilisi/Georgia is far more complicated; there has been little to no research into the matter, and neither does there seem to be continuity between how Gamsakhurdia was regarded during his tenure and how he is remembered now (except with those who venerated him then and still do now). Coming to clear, findings-based conclusions on Gamsakhurdia's place in the social memory across Georgia (outside of Megrelia) is

demonstrations in 2022-23, yet only the foreign agents law was shelved due to the potentially dangerous resistance to the law. Gvaramia was pardoned by the politically independent president Zourabishvili, antagonising GD.

¹⁴⁴ Ghia Nodia, "Georgia's Identity Crisis," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 104–16, doi:10.1353/jod.1995.0014, 115.

¹⁴⁵ Gugushvili, Kabachnik, and Kirvalidze, "Collective Memory," 475.

¹⁴⁶ Various students of TSU, open conversation with author, November 26, 2022; Bibilashvili, interview. Whilst the interview with Bibilashvili was about seven months later, he did confirm Gamsakhurdia's absence from Georgian school books.

therefore, unfortunately, impossible at this point. However, by looking at the history of Gamsakhurdia it is possible to ascertain which elements from collective memory theory are logically most applicable.

Of Assmann's methods of suppression, there are two I logically deem applicable to this case. Firstly, I propose that the case lends itself perfectly for the obscuring of memory; *ausblenden*. Gamsakhurdia's time was marked by unclarity, mystery, accusations being thrown around, suspicious deaths, and the shadow of the KGB. Therefore, when attempting to remember what happened during this time, individuals and communities alike have to ask themselves: did what happen really happen the way we remember it, or has our memory been affected, altered, or even manipulated? Gamsakhurdia claimed he was the rightful, democratically elected president, yet the opposition claimed he was an authoritarian dictator; Gamsakhurdia claimed the violence of the September 2 demonstration was sparked by subversive Soviet elements, yet the opposition claims the National Guard opened fire; Gamsakhurdia's bodyguards claim he committed suicide, yet his supporters are convinced he was murdered - already as the memory of Gamsakhurdia was formed, it was obscured and made difficult to form a clear 'path' to this memory to later fall back on. And this path did not become clearer as time went on: Georgia's 1990's were problematic enough as they were, and there were hardly any resources spent on either clearing up these accusations or forming a memory narrative. After the Rose Revolution, both Saakashvili and, to a lesser extent, GD did engage in some efforts to place Gamsakhurdia in the national memory, yet praising Gamsakhurdia for making Georgia independent hardly contributes to the clarification of history necessary for proper recollection. In short: because the murky history of Gamsakhurdia and his tenure has never been clarified, there are still too many uncertainties to form a satisfactory collective (whether social or national) memory. Consequently, since those who lived during this time have trouble determining which parts of their individual memories are and are not true (or at least truthful) is difficult enough, they are poorly equipped to educate younger generations about Gamsakhurdia.

The second method of suppression I deem applicable is *schweigen*: Gamsakhurdia had many opponents: during his brief rule, Gamsakhurdia has been criticised for his authoritarian style of governance, his treatment of minorities, his relation to Moscow, and his personality to name a few. Especially after his unsatisfactory response to the Moscow coup and the subsequent response to protesters in Tbilisi, which featured outbursts of violence, his opponents united against him. The goal to depose Gamsakhurdia, which became increasingly feasible, was pursued and ultimately achieved: but at what cost? Gamsakhurdia certainly had his shortcomings, and the opposition's justification for their coup certainly entailed honest and valid concerns - but was Gamsakhurdia such a terrible president that it justified the destruction of the centre of Tbilisi, extensive loss of life, and even further destabilisation of an already struggling Georgia? However obvious it may be to say 'no' to this question in hindsight, many people back then of course had no idea history would unfold the way it did - yet it did, and the consequences were disastrous. Any good intentions and valid concerns with

Gamsakhurdia's rule are overshadowed by the consequences of the coup; in hindsight those that opposed Gamsakhurdia are hard-pressed to justify their opposition back then.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, since it is so difficult to defend their opposition to Gamsakhurdia, it is easier to simply stay silent on their actions and opinions back then.

¹⁴⁷ Bibilashvili, interview.

7. Conclusion

There are parts of the history of Zviad Gamsakhurdia on which scholars have reached consensus: that Gamsakhurdia benefitted from his family name and upbringing, that he has engaged in dissident activity his entire life, that he was of pivotal importance to Georgian independence, and that he was a convinced nationalist are examples of this consensus. Chronologically, this consensus lasted approximately until the late eighties; as the independence movement became influential, the issue of the status of Georgia's various (semi) autonomous regions arose. How historians have regarded Gamsakhurdia's response to this regionalism is indicative of their portrayal of him: some portray Gamsakhurdia as an ethnonationalist who wanted a 'Georgia for the Georgians' and treated minorities with hostility, whilst others take a more nuanced approach. This more nuanced approach provides much needed context to Gamsakhurdia's nationalist rhetoric, personality, and, after his ascend to power, policy: indeed, Gamsakhurdia was stubborn, unbudging, and had a tendency of accusing his opponents of treason or banditry, but his opponents - be it the Abkhaz intelligentsia under Ardzinba or the National Congress - were also guilty of pursuing hardline approaches of opposition; indeed, Gamsakhurdia had an undemocratic, even authoritarian style of governance, but he was elected with an overwhelming majority in a system which had neither democratic structure nor experience; indeed, he made some poor decisions during his tenure, but Georgia was in such dire straits it would be unfair to expect him to have worked miracles; indeed, Gamsakhurdia introduced policies which effectively limited the autonomy of minorities, but the Abkhazians and Ossetians (with Russian support) proved defiant and unbudging themselves as well. Likewise, Gamsakhurdia's personal and political flaws contributed to the coup that deposed him, but that does not excuse his opponents' willingness to use such excessive violence. As Gamsakhurdia's 'virulent nationalism' is typically that which he is criticised most for, whilst it is also one of the main reasons he was (and to some, is) so popular, understanding his particular form of nationalism is especially important for understanding history and its consequent remembrance. With regards to his interpretation of Georgian history, as exemplified in "The Spiritual Mission of Georgia", it is clear Gamsakhurdia was a writer, not a historian.

Gamsakhurdia stripped Georgian history of any and all nuances in order to turn it into a national narrative of mythical proportions - literally, given his habit of using myths, folklore, and prose as allegories. Despite the fact Gamsakhurdia's explanation of Georgian history had more to do with storytelling than with historiography, he had thoroughly developed his narrative and was utterly convinced of it. With conviction and determination, he taught Georgians their 'history', setting him apart from other nationalist figureheads who lacked such a deep 'understanding' of the Georgian nation. Gamsakhurdia had also formulated the stance Georgia was to take vis-à-vis its minority populations and other Caucasian peoples: Gamsakhurdia imagined the Caucasus as a region in which, due to its rough terrain, its different peoples knew precisely which parts did and did not belong to

them. From this observation, he concluded that conflict over territory would not naturally erupt and that the various Caucasian peoples should therefore live next to one another as brothers. These were idealistic observations: to think, for example, that the Ossetians would simply ‘open their eyes’ to this ideology and accept their homeland was purely in North Ossetia (or just Ossetia, as Gamsakhurdia would put it) was incredibly naive. This idealistic approach to the Caucasian homelands was thus at odds with reality, contributing to the conflict in Georgia’s (semi) autonomous regions, however since Gamsakhurdia was so convinced of the ‘brotherhood’ between the various ethnicities of Georgia he remained hopeful these ethnicities would not allow themselves to be ‘alienated by nationalists and the centre’. In summary, Gamsakhurdia certainly had his flaws, but he is far from the sole explanation for Georgia’s internal strife and alienation from its minority populations. His ideas regarding the Caucasian homelands were idealistic and out of touch with reality: especially considering his policies fostering Georgianisation and policies which effectively limited regional autonomy, it is therefore logical and understandable Gamsakhurdia was/is perceived as a nationalist threatening minority rights. However, to see Gamsakhurdia’s nationalism, policies, and denunciation of Abkhaz/Ossetian nationalists as indicative of xenophobia is too simple; as idealistic as his ideas of Caucasian brotherhood may have been, he did genuinely believe in them.

How is Zviad Gamsakhurdia remembered in modern Georgia? This question, the research question of this paper, was based on two hypotheses: 1) that in Megrelia Gamsakhurdia is venerated as a hero; 2) that the memory of Gamsakhurdia is being suppressed/forgotten in Georgia at large. These hypotheses have been tested in the two cases of this paper. In the Megrelian case, there is clear continuity between Gamsakhurdia’s promotion of his ideology and his depiction of his opponents as foreign agents, saboteurs, and traitors, and how Megrelians regard Gamsakhurdia as a tutor and visionary of the nation, and how they regard him as a victim of betrayal and illegitimate Soviet/Russian meddling. Moreover, Gamsakhurdia is emphasised as a ‘true Megrelian’, and Gamsakhurdia’s resistance to the Soviet system and the nomenklatura is seen as typical of Megrelian resistance to ‘imperial’ rule; Gamsakhurdia’s role in the regional memory is to inspire Megrelians, to identify with him, and perhaps even to imagine an alternate reality where the hardships Megrelia faced after his deposal would not have come about. In addition, Gamsakhurdia’s mistakes and guilt are pinned onto ‘the centre’: though this was done by Gamsakhurdia himself during his tenure, the way Megrelians do this more than 30 years later can be explained through cultural memory theory as memory suppression by way of externalisation. Since the negatives of Gamsakhurdia are being suppressed and the remaining, unanimously positive memory is taken as a part of the regional identity, my first thesis is that in Megrelia the memory of Gamsakhurdia is indeed in the process of mythification.

In the case that entailed the rest of Georgia, a collective memory of Gamsakhurdia could not be identified as easily. A memory policy towards Gamsakhurdia was only developed in earnest by Saakashvili, and whilst Saakashvili did take some steps in placing Gamsakhurdia within the Georgian

canon, he did not get much further than honouring Gamsakhurdia as a national hero who restored Georgia's independence. Whilst GD did not deviate from this portrayal, they have also not done anything substantial to solidify Gamsakhurdia's position in the national memory. As of 2023, Gamsakhurdia is almost absent from Georgian public spaces: (except in Megrelia,) there are no statues, busts, permanent exhibitions, celebrations, or the like, and he is absent from school history books. Though one survey did show he is regarded as (one of) Georgia's greatest hero(es), this survey also showed it is likely Georgians have been disillusioned with their political leaders. This disillusionment is logical and understandable particularly with regards to the period just before and after Gamsakhurdia's tenure, given the political cacophony of accusations and insults, and the civil strife that caused so much damage. As a result, the chaos, hostility, and accusations of the time have made it difficult to remember; neither at that moment, nor in the time that followed were Georgians able to clarify and make sense of the difficult period that surrounded Gamsakhurdia's tenure. Consequently, being unable to remember properly, the memory of Gamsakhurdia is being forgotten; a process that can be described as *ausblenden*. Additionally, whilst in 1991 many Georgians demanded Gamsakhurdia's resignation for reasons that could be justified back then, the coup that deposed Gamsakhurdia was incredibly destructive; valid reasons that justified resignation were overshadowed by the destruction caused by the opposition. The ends clearly had not justified the means. As, in hindsight, these means could not be justified, those that had supported the opposition before the coup could scarcely defend this support after the coup, remaining silent on their involvement or allegiances is seen as preferable. My second thesis is thus that Gamsakhurdia's memory is indeed being suppressed/forgotten in most of Georgia.

In reflection of this paper, there are several factors that complicate objective scrutiny of Gamsakhurdia as a nationalist and politician. A rigid national ideology is often interpreted as national, even ethnic, populism; concerns about authoritarianism are justified, however the opposition needs to be analysed in an equally critical manner; Gamsakhurdia made mistakes while in power, but it was practically impossible to do well; Gamsakhurdia did have paranoid tendencies, yet this was not entirely unjustified. Leaving out these considerations may lead to the hasty conclusion that Gamsakhurdia was some sort of incompetent, paranoid, fascist dictator. Whilst Gamsakhurdia himself is not in a position to take offence to such allegations anymore, those that still remember him fondly are: travelling to Zugdidi with an idea of Gamsakhurdia as such a dictator will lead to bewilderment and poor understanding of the local adoration of him. On the other hand, however, an understanding of Gamsakhurdia purely based on the Megrelian explanation of his history will lead to a skewed, purely positive perception. Whichever way, Megrelians collectively remember Gamsakhurdia - unlike the rest of Georgia. The chaos and violence of the time around Gamsakhurdia's tenure, and particularly the coup that deposed him, seem to be the factors that inhibit canonising him; inability to correctly, or at least properly, recollect, and shame of support for the opposition that resulted in destruction seem to be the most determining factors for Gamsakhurdia's absence from the Georgian

canon. It should be noted, however, that this conclusion regarding Tbilisi and Georgia at large is based more on logic than it is on tangible evidence.

Therefore, the acquisition of data that would provide insight into why exactly he is absent from the national canon is the most obvious requirement for further research into how Gamsakhurdia is remembered in Georgia. Though the absence of data on both the Georgian national memory and the wider Georgian social memory of Gamsakhurdia is the most immediately obvious, there is also a lack of data on how Gamsakhurdia is remembered in Megrelia: whilst this paper features several qualitative interviews the results of which are in line with secondary literature and the remembrance of Gamsakhurdia in Megrelian public spaces, these interviews are ultimately both quantitatively limited as well as unpublished; this paper illustrates how and why Gamsakhurdia is remembered in Megrelia, yet it does not provide data on this remembrance. As such, the acquisition of this data would provide greater accuracy and would thus be warranted. Finally, the issue persists that Gamsakhurdia has been discussed within academic literature, yet always merely as part of a larger framework; a comprehensive paper or book focussing purely on Gamsakhurdia in which his ideology, personality, and complicated tenure are thoroughly analysed is still lacking.

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