"Unfortunately, Some Mistakes Were Made"

Joseph Stalin and Public History in Post-Independence Georgia

Sergey Salushchev and *Kalina Yamboliev*

ABSTRACT: This paper explores competing narratives of the Stalinist and Soviet past in the Republic of Georgia through examination of two public history sites: the Stalin Museum in Gori and the exhibit of the Soviet Occupation at the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi. While the former remains a site of Stalin's cult of personality, largely unaltered even during the "de-Stalinization" campaigns that unfolded in the decades following the dictator's death in 1953, the latter fails to interrogate Stalin's unambiguous role in the Bolsheviks' 1921 invasion and political terror amidst its strong emphasis on the martyrs to the Soviet regime. Both museum sites, we argue, are invested in larger scale political and ideological contestations of Georgia's past in relation to present concerns that anchor, on the one hand, on economic instability and, on the other, on political assertions of Georgian "Europeanness." The sites raise important questions about the role museums play in the preservation of a contested past and in shaping divergent visions of national memory and identity.

KEY WORDS: Joseph Stalin, Republic of Georgia, de-Sovietization, museums, memory

Memory is blind to all but the group it binds.[1]

Introduction

Joseph Vissarionovich Jughashvili, better known as Stalin, remains among the most recognizable political figureheads of the twentieth century. For many, his reign of terror and draconian economic policies as leader of the Soviet Union have all but assured him a permanent seat in the pantheon of the world's cruelest villains. At the same time, Stalin's mythical cult of personality continues to attract new believers and displays a remarkable endurance, despite the overwhelming volume of evidence that points to the criminal underpinnings of his regime. Indeed, in some places across the Caucasus mountains, local residents still remember Stalin fondly

1 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26, special issue, *Memory and Counter-Memory* (Spring 1989): 7–24, quotation 8.

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 33–60 (August 2020). ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576. © 2020 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2020.42.3.33.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

and admire his ability to wield power, instill fear, and transform the Soviet Union and its people in radical or—if we may—"visionary" ways. These voices of deference are only occasionally challenged with the nonchalant admission that "unfortunately, some mistakes were made" by Stalin in the process.[2] As such, the universal academic consensus with regard to the scale, institutional organization, and indiscriminate nature of violence that was committed in the name of "progress" and "security" has failed to permanently discredit the Stalinist era. On the contrary, the conviction that progress requires sacrifice has allowed for Stalin's image as a decisive "ruler with an iron fist"—to borrow a popular Russian expression—to be rendered a favorable one.[3]

This is very much the case in Stalin's birthplace in Gori in the Republic of Georgia. Gori's fifty-thousand residents have structured their urban identity around the public memorialization of Stalin, encapsulated by posters they place along streets named for the dictator and saint-like icons of Stalin they display in homes, cars, and businesses. For several decades, Gori has consistently represented a site of public resistance to Georgian de-Sovietization policies, which were political initiatives promulgated primarily in the attempt to censure and erase the Soviet past and make a claim for the country's historical and cultural proximity to the West. Although many Soviet-era monuments were removed from public display across the country's major cities, particularly after the election of the Western-oriented Mikheil Saakashvili as president of Georgia in 2003, a statue of Stalin remained prominently and proudly displayed outside of the Town Hall in Gori for forty-eight years before its surreptitious removal in 2010 in the dead of night.[4] Even then, a vote by the municipal assembly only two years later, in 2012, to reinstate the statue—this time perhaps near the Joseph Stalin Museum of Gori, inaugurated in 1957 and which is still today a largely unaltered time capsule from the Soviet past—spoke loudly to Stalin's centrality to the town's identity.

Indeed, Stalin's looming image in Gori spans far beyond the allure of tourism. The mnemonic power of the dictator's omnipresence in relationship to the town's communal identity is best understood through the analysis of memory and trauma in the work of German scholar Aleida Assmann, who has explored the importance

2 This is a statement voiced by the curators at the Stalin Museum in Gori, and also among those who still favor the Stalinist past. It represents the largest extent of the curators' admission of Stalin's crimes.

3 As a testament to the undiminishing academic interest in Stalin's life and crimes, two new excellent and thorough biographies of Stalin have been published in the last few years by leading Russian and American historians of the Soviet period. First, see the two volumes (with the third forthcoming) by Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, Vol. I: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015) and *Stalin, Vol. II: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017); and then see Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); and Alfred Rieber, *Stalin and the Struggle for the Supremacy of Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

4 "Stalin Statue Taken Down in his Georgian Hometown," *BBC News*, June 15, 2010, https://www.bbc.com/news/10412097.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

of memorial sites and imagery in defining a collective past.[5] The obvious partiality and selectiveness of Gori's collective memory should not be understood as an approbation of Stalin's crimes. Rather, it points to the recognition that "memory is not geared toward the greatest possible comprehensiveness" but operates selectively, which means that forgetting unpleasant and inconvenient experiences is "a constitutive part of individual and collective memory."[6] New historical contexts and the advent of what are understood as less fortunate political constellations further serve to cast a rose-colored tint to former struggles and inspire a sense of nostalgia for the past.

Unsurprisingly, this affection towards Stalin and the legacy of the Soviet Union is not shared uniformly across the country. On the contrary, it is countered by the political desire to distance modern Georgia from its troubled past and shape a narrative of national self-determination and western character. The Georgian National Museum, located less than one hundred kilometers from Gori in the center of the Georgian capital Tbilisi, exemplifies this. It hosts a Museum of the Soviet Occupation on its top level where, in sharp contrast to the museum in Gori, memory of Stalin has been virtually expunged and remembrance of martyrs to the Soviet regime emerges paramount.[7] The display is an expression of the dominant political vision in the country, which seeks to distance modern Georgia from its Soviet past and Russian neighbor by arguing for a historically entrenched sense of "Europeanness" that predated the Soviet period and Stalin's rise to power. In Tbilisi, neither Stalin nor other ethnic Georgians who participated in, or benefited from, Soviet rule are profiled or interrogated. Rather, the period is cast as one of an extended suffocation of Georgian national identity, resuscitated following Georgia's independence in 1991.

In this article, we seek to analyze how the two diametrically opposed narratives of Georgian national history have become linked with politically curated public history campaigns to induce selective historic amnesia and recast the country's past

5 Aleida Assman, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 17.

6 Assman, *Shadows of Trauma*, 22.

7 Public memorialization of the Soviet political "yoke" and the quotidian lived experiences of people in the former republics of the Soviet Union became an important act of collective reflection of the whirlwind of the traumas of political repression in the twentieth century. The museums of "Soviet Occupation" and life under the Communist regime have sprung up in many European capitals like Warsaw, Kyiv, Prague, Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, and others. These museums often embody a nation-building rite that seeks to inspire national solidarity and political unity and remind the future generations of the need to safeguard national sovereignty and protect cultural identities. For a comparative perspective and analysis of the efforts to preserve memories of the Soviet experience through public history in the Baltic, see Aro Velmet, "Occupied Identities: National Narratives in Baltic Museums of Occupations," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 42, no. 2 (2011): 189–211; Eglė Rindzevičiutė, "Hegemony or Legitimacy? Assembling Soviet Deportations in Lithuanian Museums," in *Narratives of Exile and Identity: Soviet Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States*, ed. Violeta Davoliutė and Tomas Balkelis (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2018), 147–75; and Aro Velmet, "Breaking the Silence? Contradiction and Consistency in Representing Victimhood in Baltic Museums of Occupations," in *Narratives of Exile and Identity*, 175–205.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



The Stalin Museum of Gori, viewed from the outside. (Photo by author, July 2018)

to pave the way for divergent visions of the future. We first explore the case of Stalin's museum in Gori, which is particularly instructive of the power that public monuments can hold in preserving collective memory, in this case through the idolization of a highly divisive figure and the ideology he represents. Far from a straightforward appeal to a local hero, however, the museum's importance lies in the voice it gives to Gori's older demographic which, in the face of economic collapse and population decline, sees in the museum the remembrance of their families' former prosperity; attempts to change the museum displays are, therefore, often interpreted as attempts to rewrite personal histories. In the second section, we turn to the Georgian National Museum in the capital Tbilisi, where the inherent power in the manipulation of collective memory is no less pronounced. The much-needed emphasis on those who suffered and died during the Soviet period does

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

little more to offer a comprehensive view of the historical progression, implications, or range of Georgian experiences under Soviet rule than does the museum in Gori. Both museums illustrate the challenges of remembrance and commemoration that countries with a long history of political authoritarianism and violence must reconcile in honoring the nation's martyrs while remaining true to the historical facts.

Finally, the Stalin Museum in Gori and the Museum of Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi provoke reflection on the various configurations that sites, which claim to be "museums," may take in representing a contested past. Although the former has primarily local prominence while the latter claims national primacy, both envision themselves as voices and protectors of historically defined identities. Both rely upon a recognized connection between place and popular identity, and both infuse historic artifacts with grand political implications and overt ideological connotations. Such initiatives are far from innocuous and reveal how intricate the relationship between museum sites, collective memory, and public history can be. Indeed, a careful examination of the two museums demonstrates that "rather than educating about the past, memorial museums reveal the political priorities and goals of the regimes that built them," simultaneously "reminding us that memory remains very much in the domain of the nation-state, with the past being simply another arena for enacting present politics."[8] In Georgia, we may well say that the two museums are invested in ongoing "memory wars," in which Georgian identity is shaped by the embrace, disdain, or ambivalence toward the Stalinist era.[9] An exploration of these two sites can thus elucidate how custodianship of the past is intricately tied to divergent political visions for a collective future, which can operate on either a local or national scale.

Public Memory and the Edification of a Local Hero: The Stalin Museum of Gori

The Stalin Museum of Gori is an edificatory monument in which the very spirit of the dictator lives on in the artifacts lovingly preserved: far more than a "museum," it is a cult site that was never dismantled.[10] This is apparent from the moment a visitor approaches the Soviet-era palace construction and encounters the wooden cottage in which Stalin was born in 1878 and where he lived the first four years of

8 Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 11.

9 The idea of "memory wars" comes from Peter Kabachnik, Alexi Gugushvili, and David Jishkariani, "A Personality Cult's Rise and Fall: Three Cities after Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and the Stalin Monument that Never Was," *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 4, no. 2 (2015): 309–26.

10 Scholars debate the extent to which Stalin's glorification was dictated by Stalin himself or by the larger propaganda machinery that extended beyond him. For a study of these themes, and how historians have debated how and why Stalin's cult became so powerful in the past and present, see Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



The house in which Joseph Stalin was born in 1878, preserved under an awning outside of the Stalin Museum in Gori, Georgia. (Photo by author, July 2018)

his life. The humble structure, sheltered from the natural elements under an awning, is the sole remnant of the late nineteenth-century neighborhood, which was otherwise demolished to make space for the present museum. Then, upon entering the structure, a visitor climbs a red-carpeted staircase at the top of which a white statue of Stalin awaits, and enters a room that houses objects from the time when Stalin served as the People's Commissar of Nationalities and later as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The items were all transported from Moscow to Gori specifically for this display.

The majority of the exhibit unfolds in two large rectangular exhibition halls filled with photographs, quotations, newspaper clippings, school documents, as well as photographs and artistic renditions of Stalin standing alongside Vladimir Lenin or embracing children and industrial workers. The display is largely chronological, but detailed explorations of the historical context in which Stalin was raised and which left a mark on him are minimal or nonexistent. Furthermore, although the two central halls include notes from those who knew Stalin, such as his instructors, the exhibit is dominated by excerpts from Stalin's own works, forefronting his voice and achievements above all else. Notably, all of the text is presented almost exclusively in Russian, with only small bits in Georgian. Although this "authenticity" could perhaps hold charm for western tourists, it

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



Objects transported from Moscow for this exhibit. (Photo by author, July 2018)

further precludes any serious historical engagement from a wider audience and suggests that the display appeals predominantly to Georgians or, more likely, to tourists from the former Soviet bloc.

The exhibit then extends into a fourth, smaller space filled with photos with little or no text and characterized by a military theme, with emphasis on Soviet clashes with Nazi Germany. Finally, the fifth room best encapsulates the reverential function of the structure as a whole. It is a small space, circular, and in the center a death mask, one of several produced from Stalin's corpse, rests upon a small raised pedestal, surrounded by thin white pillars arranged delicately and stylistically in a semi-circle. The atmosphere here is notably different—silent and solemn, as if one were actually visiting a tomb or mausoleum. The black walls, largely bare, display only a painting of Stalin and several photographs alongside a small replica of the Lenin and Stalin mausoleum in Moscow located to one side. Above all else, then, the room is the final space for reflection, perhaps even prayer, for a man whose eminence is, by the end of the exhibit, unquestionable.

This fifth room is the capstone to what remains, as a whole, an epicenter of the Stalin personality cult.[11] Such self-idolization comprised a major strategy by which Stalin deified himself as early as 1929 but especially from 1933 to 1953. Across Soviet-era propaganda he and his supporters carefully crafted his image as the "Father of Nations" devoted to his Soviet children and promoted this image in newspapers, poetry, public letters, music, film, statue-work, and effigies that were paraded

11 Again, see Plamper, *The Stalin Cult.*

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



One of the two large exhibit rooms at the Stalin Museum in Gori. (Photo by author, July 2018)

before public assemblies.[12] Their emphasis on visual propaganda was paramount, particularly at a time when literacy rates remained low but rituals of public display could strike deep resonance.[13] Indeed, through these various media Stalin embodied a plurality of savior-like roles: he was at once "the Teacher, the Saviour, the Architect, the Helmsman and the Magician," which Anita Pisch has commented were "sometimes confusing, contradictory and irreconcilable" roles but which clearly represented symbols of hope to various segments of the disenfranchised population.[14] Stalin's reliance upon religious-like imagery and his appeal to "deep, unconscious associations from mythology and the Church" has also been recognized as a prominent mechanism by which he drew emotional and spiritual connections to the populace.[15] Not only are all of these representations vividly preserved in this exhibit, but it is worth noting that some of the employees at the Stalin Museum in Gori still believe the spiritual connection to be quite alive, and profess with esteem that Stalin's very essence is preserved in the objects it houses.[16]

The current imposing building was constructed in the 1950s and the Georgian Communist Party and Gori Party Committee dedicated it to Stalin in 1957.

12 Anita Pisch, *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications* (Acton: Australian National University, 2016).

13 Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, xv.

14 Pisch, *The Personality Cult*, 443.

15 Pisch, *The Personality Cult*, 443.

16 The museum employee is anonymous, but this sentiment was voiced during a visit to the museum in July of 2018.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



The final room in the exhibit, with the mold of Stalin placed centrally. (Photo by author, July 2018)

It therefore survived the de-Stalinization campaigns that began following Stalin's death in 1953 and intensified after 1956 through the mid-1960s, before they declined and then experienced a resurgence in the post-Soviet era. This was neither a straightforward or uncontested process, and although a detailed study of the museum's various incarnations from 1957 to the present day may not be possible from the current records, brief references suggest its content changed form across the decades to mirror shifting attitudes to Stalin. In the 1980s, for example, the exhibit voiced Vladimir Lenin's concerns about Stalin's character and referenced Leon Trostky, but both additions were later erased.[17] The museum

17 Shaun Walker, "Hero and Horror: Stalin Rebranded," *Independent*, June 6, 2012, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/hero-and-horror-stalin-rebranded-7817895.html.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

also closed in 1989, but local authorities reopened it when they understood the promise it held as a magnet for tourists interested in the cult of Stalin.[18] Now the museum reportedly holds 60,000 pieces of Stalin memorabilia from his youth and adulthood, including a corpus of largely unexplored letters that Stalin's subjects sent to him, a treasure trove for anyone interested in his rise to power.[19] This abundance notwithstanding, Georgians and foreign visitors alike have voiced their shock at the silences in the exhibit. Visitors are not informed of any tampering with images, of the deep despair even within Stalin's own family, or of the thousands of Georgians deported or executed under Stalin's regime.[20] There is, thus, much lacking in this version of events.

In truth, the Gori exhibit is a far cry from a "museum" envisioned as a space for the reconstruction of historical events in a way that does justice to all parties involved, embracing moments of discomfort in the collective legacy alongside moments of pride to reveal the complexity of the historical narrative. Public historians in the West have interrogated the very design of the museum, asking fundamental questions about how to represent history as the sources reveal it to have been, rather than as one would like it to be, and creating institutions and exhibitions willing to challenge audiences rather than confirm their expectations.[21] Indeed, in the West historians see the past as messy and full of unanswered questions that merit discussion and debate. But the curators of the Stalin Museum at Gori do no such thing. Their vision as custodians of Stalin's memory delivers a wistful interpretation of history that seeks neither penitence nor closure. It is unapologetic and crass. It takes pride in its disdain of facts. And, while much of this results from the museum's founding by "outsider history-makers," individuals who likely never imbued the current academic penchant for objectivity or fastidiousness, the curators of the Stalin Museum followed their own stylistic logic that likely made sense in the party-minded Soviet era that first gave birth to the exhibit.[22]

As Benjamin Filene has argued, however, we should not underestimate "outsider" history-makers' ability to connect to wide audiences. Both academics and museum curators seek to inspire an interest in history, but it is often the individuals who re-create historical events with attention to great men and great affairs, rather than a comprehensive reconstruction of contested episodes, who

18 "Gori Stalin Museum," *Comtourist*, http://www.comtourist.com/history/stalin-museum/.

19 Caitlin Hu, "Why Georgians Fight to Keep Statues of Stalin, as the Rest of the Former USSR Tears Them Down," *Quartz*, November 7, 2014, https://qz.com/292901/historical-statues-illegal-stalin-statues-keep-popping-up-in-gori-georgia/.

20 Patti McCracken, "At Georgia's Stalin Museum, Truth is Not on Display," *World Politics Review*, July 31, 2006, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/86/at-georgias-stalin-museum-truth-is-not-on-display.

21 James B. Gardner, "Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public," *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 11–21, especially 12.

22 Benjamin Filene, "Passionate Histories: 'Outsider' History-Makers and What They Teach Us," *The Public Historian* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 11–33.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

capture "the spark" that inspires a deep emotional connection to the past.[23] And while it may be tempting to debate whether outsider narratives constitute "good" or "bad" history-making, the question appears largely irrelevant at a site such as Gori where it is clear that past events not only took place but that the primary audience to which the museum speaks wishes only to know that they unfolded in this singular way.[24] When one guide at the Stalin Museum was questioned regarding the general silence on the Gulag and mass atrocities committed under his dictatorship, for example, she reportedly replied, "Why should we mention any of that? I don't want to hear fairy tales about Stalin."[25]

The reasons for the selectiveness of memory here must primarily be sought in the nostalgia felt by Gori's residents, who envision the museum as a site of resistance to the wider attack on, and erasure of, the Stalinist legacy across the former Soviet territories. When Joseph Stalin died in 1953, his successor Nikita Khrushchev quickly moved to dismantle Stalin's cult of personality alongside his major political and economic programs, which had driven the Soviet Union into a state of social disarray. What started as "silent" de-Stalinization became public following Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" in 1956, in which he denounced Stalin and disassociated him from the Communist Party.[26] Then, a public campaign to dismantle all traces of Stalinist influence ensued, which entailed the renaming of streets and buildings dedicated to Stalin and the removal of thousands of monuments erected in his honor across the Soviet Union.[27] The process spanned several decades, slowing during Leonid Brezhnev's rule (1964–82), and re-accelerating under Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–91). As we explore in the following section, de-Sovietization has been pronounced in Georgia since the country's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Such efforts have been particularly visible after the 2003 Rose Revolution, which installed Mikheil Saakashvili as president and after which point the "imaginaries of Georgia's rapid and profound development were firmly based on

23 Filene, "Passionate Histories," 12.

24 Filene, "Passionate Histories," 19–23.

25 "The Town where They Still Love Stalin," *Sputnik News*, October 5, 2012, https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201210051764243 56/: "Foreigners always ask me,'why is there no mention of the gulag?' said museum guide Olga Topchishvili, who has been showing visitors around the museum for the last thirty years.'But, you know, why should we mention any of that? I don't want to hear fairy tales about Stalin.'"

26 For a comparison with Lenin-era museums, see the work of Pia Koivunen. V. A. Kozlov, *Massovye besporiadki v SSSR pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve (1953–nachalo1980)* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 1999), in English as V. A. Kozlov, *Mass Uprisings in the USSR: Protest and Rebellion in the Post-Stalin Years* (Armonk and London: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 112–36; Timothy Blauvelt, "Resistance, Discourse and Nationalism in the March 1956 Events in Georgia," *Georgia after Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power*, ed. Timothy Blauvelt and Jeremy Smith (New York: Routledge, 2015); Timothy Blauvelt, "Status Shift and Ethnic Mobilisation in the March 1956 Events in Georgia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 4 (2009): 651–68.

27 Polly Jones, *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

an antithetical relation to the Soviet past and the political turmoil following independence."[28]

The rejection of the Stalinist past has been felt strongly in Gori not only because it was the birthplace of young Stalin but also because the decades since his death have brought economic stagnation and population decline to the central Georgian town. Young natives often depart for Tbilisi, leaving an older generation to recall the better times of their youth when the town was still a thriving industrial center. As interviews with aging locals reveal, Gori's residents now feel "dispossessed" and look to the Soviet past with longing, recalling it as a time of socioeconomic prosperity before they were deprived of their work and social status.[29] Indeed, Khrushchev himself acknowledged in his "Secret Speech" that Georgia had "developed economically and culturally under Soviet rule" and that industrial production in Georgia was "27 times greater than it was before the Revolution."[30] He even enumerated a list of industries that had grown in Georgia—"iron smelting, an oil industry, a machine-industry"—alongside the liquidation of what before Soviet rule had been a 78 percent rate of illiteracy. In all regards, then, Soviet rule had contributed significantly to Georgia's prosperity.

The town of Gori benefited strongly from these developments as it expanded into a light industrial center with factories to process cotton and food, produce textiles and leather products, and develop new technologies. The size of the town also increased: between 1914 and 1977 the population jumped from roughly 25,000 to 54,000, reaching nearly 70,000 in 1989. This certainly engendered a sense of local pride, yet esteem for the local industry and economic growth was not the only notable characteristic of the time. The residents today recall the Soviet period as one in which prices were lower, education was free, and those with degrees had a higher chance of finding employment.[31] Most importantly, all of these positive developments were correlated directly with the period of Soviet rule. The town's precipitous economic decline in the post-Soviet era must therefore have been particularly painful to those who remained in the city, and who still today comprise Gori's older population.

Locals interpret the erasure of Soviet-era political narratives by the central Georgian government as a mark of disregard for their individual and family histories as well. It is this sense of personal deprivation that inspires a sense of longing for the past and which underlies the "active attempt to make present

28 Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen, "Void Pasts and Marginal Presents: On Nostalgia and Obsolete Futures in the Republic of Georgia," *Slavic Review* 73, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 246–64, quotation 247. See also Stephen Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2013).

29 Gotfredsen conducted twenty-five interviews with residents of Gori between age fifty and seventy-five, and these are her findings from those interviews. Gotfredsen, "Void Pasts and Marginal Presents," 248.

30 Nikita Khurshchev, "Secret Speech," delivered February 24–25, 1956 (accessed through the Nikita Khrushchev Reference Archive at https://msuweb.montclair.edu/furrg/research/kl/khspcongrec56.html).

31 Gotfredsen, "Void Pasts and Marginal Presents," 253–54.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

personal pasts and futures that have publicly been rendered absent."[32] What Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen concluded from her interviews with residents of Gori was that "the nostalgic narratives . . . actually had more to do with their marginal position in present-day Georgia than an abstract adherence to communist ideology." And, she noted, the older generation directly correlated its current economic troubles with political changes in Georgia since independence.[33] In this context, the Stalin Museum can be understood as physical space that represents continuity with the more prosperous, seemingly stable past and that anchors the local narrative of communal destitution and longing. It is for this reason that it must remain untouched.

This nostalgic gaze towards the Stalinist legacy is not entirely unique to Gori. The town holds a special primacy as a Stalin cult site, but in recent years there has been a wider regional resurgence of interest and appeal to the leader across the former Soviet territories and in the Caucasus. Efforts to rehabilitate Stalin's political legacy, or simply to silence Stalin's detractors and dismiss the grievances of his victims, have been documented across Russia and numerous of its autonomous territories. Since 2012 at least ten statues to Stalin have been erected throughout Russia, while a new poll finds that public approval of Stalin in Russia is the highest it has been in sixteen years.[34] In 2015 a self-fashioned "Stalin-Center" opened in the Russian city of Penza at the initiative of a local communist party. And among the most recent tangible manifestations of Stalin's enduring cult in Russia is the erection of a two-and-a-half-meter bust of Stalin in the Pskov region bordering Estonia, Latvia, and Belarus in 2016.[35] The statue was symbolically positioned near the old defense lines that marked the border of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, and which was formerly dubbed "Stalin's Line." Notably, the government-financed nonprofit Russian Military-Historical Society sponsored the monument under the leadership of Vladimir Medinsky, who served as the Russian Minister of Culture between 2012 and 2020.

However, in no other place do locals seem to express more fondness for Stalin than in the Caucasus region (see the map, next page). Private Stalin museums exist in Makhachkala, in Dagestan, and Nal'chik, in Kabardino-Balkaria. The highest number of monuments dedicated to Stalin—twenty-four of them—are found in

32 Ibid., 249.

33 Ibid., 253–54.

34 Anna Arutunyan, "As Confederate Statues Fall in U.S., Russians are Erecting Statues for Dictator Stalin," *USA Today*, August 16, 2017, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/08/16/soviet-union-terror-josef-stalin-popularity/556625001/. Statues of Stalin that were destroyed after his rule are still being discovered, including one in Kusa, Russia. For this, see Mark Krutov and Robert Coalson, "Swamp Thing: Stalin Statue Emerges From The Deep, Forcing Town To Confront Its Past," *RadioFreeEuropeRadioLiberty*, August 24, 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/swamp-thing-russian-town-confronts-past-as-stalin-statue-emerges-from-the-deep/29450820.html.

35 "V voennom zapovednike pod Pskovom ustanovili biust Stalina," *Meduza*, February 23, 2016, https://meduza.io/news/2016/02/23/v-voennom-zapovednike-pod-pskovom-ustanovili-byust-stalina.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



The Northern Caucasus, between modern-day Georgia and Russia. (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Northern_Caucasus_regions_map.svg)

North Ossetia, with no fewer than fifteen streets named after Stalin in the same republic.[36] Dagestan, on the other hand, boasts only six streets named for him, although heated debate erupted as recently as 2018 in the city of Kaspiisk when local groups proposed renaming a central avenue from Peace Street to Stalin Street.[37] In a small town of 30,000 residents named Dagestankie Ogni, a major road was inaugurated as "Stalin Avenue" as early as 2002 at the initiative of the town's mayor.[38]

The trend of resuscitating Stalin's fabricated image as a glorious leader is both remarkable and disturbing at the same time; in fact, a respected Russian historian of the Soviet Union, Oleg Khlevniuk, described the public history initiatives to commemorate Stalin's rule in various regions of Russia today as nothing short of "the large-scale poisoning of minds with myths of an 'alternative' Stalin—one whose effective stewardship is held up as a model worthy of emulation."[39] Private and state-sponsored initiatives, however, appear to work. According to the 2018 study titled "The Perception of Stalin" and conducted by the Levada-Center, one of the

36 "Trepeshchite iadom pliuĭte. Kak Iosif Stalin vozvrashchaetsia v zhizn' sovremennoĭ Rossii," *Meduza*, February 25, 2015, https://meduza.io/feature/2016/02/25/trepeschite-yadom-plyuyte.

37 The main reason cited for rejecting the proposal to rename the street was the lack of sufficient funds needed to change the street signs. For more information on this, see "Ulitsu Mira v Kaspiĭske otkazalis' pereiminovyvat' v chest' Stalina. V gorode uzhe est' ulitsa odna Stalina," *Meduza*, December 18, 2018, https://meduza.io/news/2018/12/19/ulitsu-mira-v-kaspiyske-otkazalis-pereimenovyvat-v-chest-stalina-v-gorode-uzhe-est-odna-ulitsa-stalina.

38 "Statui Stalina gotoviat ko Dniu Pobedy," *Kommersant*, March 19, 2015, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2689347.

39 Khlevniuk, *Stalin*, ix.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

very few independent public opinion research centers in Russia, an alarmingly low 12 percent of the study participants expressed explicitly negative attitudes toward Stalin, whereas 40 percent of the respondents expressed positive sentiments of "respect," "admiration," and "sympathy."[40] Even more vexing statistics were published in a March 2019 survey. The Levada-Center reported that 70 percent of Russians regard Stalin's role in the life of the country as "positive"—the highest rate of approval ever recorded by the research center.[41] Clearly the glorification of the Stalinist past in Gori is not entirely unique.

Within Georgia itself, those favorable to Stalin remember him not only as a strong leader but as a "rebel" to be admired, someone "who came from a colonized nation, fought against the existing order, and broke the rules by rising to the top of a system led by Russians."[42] And a poll conducted between April and May 2015 by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in Georgia, with 1,864 respondents, nearly 50 percent of whom were between age 55 and 90, suggests that much of the older generation across the Caucasus shares the nostalgia for former economic prosperity and stability with the residents of Gori.[43] In this study, under 30 percent of respondents felt that their current economic situation was better than that of the Soviet period or that they led a better life than their parents. A staggering 90.5 percent of respondents reported that neither they nor their families had property taken from them during Stalin's rule, and 91 percent reported that their families were neither imprisoned or exiled during Stalin's rule. When asked whether "Stalin was a wise leader, who brought strength and well-being to the Soviet Union," 83.3 percent of respondents agreed and only 47.5 percent considered him a "brutal tyrant responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people." A significant number also reported that they were taught nothing about Stalin in school, and those who were noted that they were told primarily positive stories.[44] Further, a 2013 poll by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that nearly 70 percent of Georgians consider Stalin a "wise leader," though the majority did not wish to live in a country ruled by someone like him.[45]

40 The Levada Analytical Center (Levada-Center) is a Russian nongovernmental research organization. The Center regularly conducts sociological research and is one of the largest Russian centers in the field. To examine the study's methodology and review annual statistics with regard to the public attitudes toward Stalin in Russian society in English, see "The Perception of Stalin," Levada-Center, April 14, 2018, https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/04/17/the-perception-of-stalin/.

41 "Stalin's Perception," Levada-Center, March 19, 2019, https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/04/19/dynamic-of-stalin-s-perception/.

42 Hu, "Why Georgians Fight." This quote is from Lasha Bakradze, director of the Georgian State Museum of Literature.

43 Alexi Gugushvili, Giorgi Babunashvili, Peter Kabachnik, Ana Kirvalidze, and Nino Rcheulishvili, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Contemporary Georgian Perspectives on Stalin and the Soviet Past: Survey Data Results* (Tbilisi, 2015), http://www.academia.edu/14960090/Collective_Memory_National_Identity_and_Contemporary_Georgian_Perspectives_on_Stalin_and_the_Soviet_Past.

44 A study on the treatment of Stalin in textbooks distributed across Georgian public schools at the middle or high school level would, perhaps, prove remarkably insightful here.

45 Hu, "Why Georgians Fight."

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

Considering these statistics, it is hardly surprising that the Stalin Museum of Gori continues to enjoy such widespread support, particularly among the town's aging population. Since late 2012 a series of Stalin statues have been erected in public spaces across Georgia more broadly, particularly in the small villages of the eastern part of the country. A statue was placed in the central-eastern village of Zemo Alvani in November of 2012, Stalin's bust appeared briefly in the eastern village of Akura in December of the same year, and one was raised in nearby Telavi in September 2013. Stalin statues are also found in the eastern villages of Vanta, Zemo Alvani, and Tsinandali, as well as in the village of Kiketi to the southwest of Tbilisi.[46] All things considered, the veneration of Stalin or of the Soviet period appears to be a predominantly rural affection among an older generation in the central and eastern parts of the country, where locals maintain a positive view of the past and uncertain hope for the future. Yet the surveys conducted also serve as an important reminder that admiration for Stalin's strength and vision—terrifying as they were—is not seen as antithetical to a sense of modern Georgian independence in the eyes of many who live there.

The contradictions and omissions at the Stalin Museum in Gori thus reflect Georgians' struggle to reconcile their own pasts and appraise the socio-political conjectures of the present. As we explore in the following section, this pro-Stalinist portrayal is overtly in opposition to the dominant national narrative in Georgia, where the government has voiced its strongly anti-Stalinist and latently anti-Russian position since 2003. Amidst these competing narratives of the Georgian past, the museum in Gori reminds us that political battles at the highest levels of government in no way guarantee that the hearts of the nation's residents will be turned or that their memories will be rewritten. Far from a discussion about the political legacy of a dictator who killed millions, in Gori debates about Stalin's legacy are deeply personal and attempts to problematize the local narrative risk appearing as a campaign against an intimate relic of former grandeur among members of an older generation that live on to tell their tale.

Alternative Narratives: Stalin, the Soviet Legacy, and the Construction of Public Memory in Tbilisi

The veneration of Stalin in Gori, and his resurgence on the Russian side of the Caucasus mountains, is in no way representative of attitudes across the entire post-Soviet space. On the contrary, the majority of monuments to Stalin in the former Soviet republics were removed following the proceedings of the famous 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev delivered his "Secret Speech." The speech outlined a scathing denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality which, Khrushchev argued, was in complete violation

46 Davit Batashvili, "Stalin's Cult in Georgia," *Tabula*, November 18, 2013, http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/77123-stalins-cult-in-georgia.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

of Marxist-Leninist ideology.[47] The cult had resulted in the "grave abuse of power" by Stalin, whom Khrushchev described as "capricious and despotic." As a result, in the ensuing months and years, Soviet officials proceeded to dismantle statues and monuments, rename streets, and erase other Stalinist icons across much of the communist territory, culminating in the removal of Stalin's body from Lenin's mausoleum on Moscow's Red Square in 1961.[48] These systematic efforts to dispel the myths of Stalin's genius and disassemble the monuments that glorified his cult has led one scholar to comment that "Stalin died one real and several symbolic deaths," although his presence clearly lingers on to this day.[49]

In Tbilisi, the monuments and plaques dedicated to Lenin and other Bolsheviks began to disappear from the streets soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia's independence in 1991. However, the systematic drive to erase the trappings of the Soviet legacy from Tbilisi's buildings and, presumably, from people's minds, began in the wake of the Rose Revolution in 2003 and President Mikhail Saakashvili's rise to power (2003–13). Saakashvili fully embraced the narrative that portrayed the Russians as colonial occupiers who had suppressed Georgia's national self-determination for centuries. The president's interpretation of history was backed by institutional support and financial assistance from the state, which inspired a series of cultural projects. This included the failed attempt to recast the Stalin Museum in Gori "as a critical assessment of Stalin and the Soviet state," and the removal of Soviet-era monuments and symbols from public spaces.[50] The culmination of de-Sovietization efforts was the passage of the Freedom Charter in 2011, a lustration law that authorized the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs to create special commissions which would, among other things, identify objects and street names "which represent the communist totalitarian regime" and change or demolish them.[51]

In this context, the glorification of Stalin in Gori is best understood when contrasted with the "Museum of Soviet Occupation, 1921–1991," a permanent exhibit in the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi. Located on the top floor as a subsection of the National Museum, the museum exhibit immortalizes the martyrs who fought against the Bolshevik takeover of the country in 1921 and documents the history of oppression and violence under the Soviet regime until Georgia's independence in 1991. The exhibit seeks to elicit visceral reactions to the violence and injustices of the past with a goal to impart what sociologist Amy Sodaro describes in her study of memorial museums as "moral education" for its visitors.[52] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conceptualization and eventual incarnation

47 "Speech to the 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U.," delivered February 24–25, 1956. From the Nikita Khrushchev Reference Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm.

48 Hu, "Why Georgians Fight."

49 Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, 221.

50 Gotfredsen, "Void Pasts and Marginal Presents," 251.

51 Law of Georgia No 1867, December 25, 2013, https://matsne.gov.ge/ru/document/download/1381526/8/en/pdf.

52 Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 8.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

of the museum followed Saakashvili's ascendance to power; an ambitious and ardently pro-European politician, he also became its chief political inspirer and financial sponsor. Indeed, the Rose Revolution ushered in an era of reforms that sought to put the small country in the Caucasus on the path to European integration through dissociation from Soviet and (by extension) Russian influence. The museum's inauguration in 2006 was an unmistakable step towards achieving these goals.

The museum is contained within 700 square meters of walking space and displays "personal files of subversive [to the Soviet regime] Georgian public figures, orders to shoot or exile, and other artifacts representing Soviet-era cultural and political repression in Georgia" that had previously been preserved in classified archives away from the public gaze.[53] The museum's dark walls and immediately palpable somber atmosphere is a far cry from the chandelier-adorned shrine to Stalin's life in the dictator's birth town. The entrance greets its visitors with a chilling panoramic photo of corpses, accompanied by a lengthy list of names of those martyred to Bolshevik aggression. One of the walls facing the photo carries a heavy fragment of a train carriage riddled with bullet holes from the gunfire of the Bolshevik secret police that targeted participants of the anti-Bolshevik uprising of August 30, 1924. Across from the poignant photo, visitors are also able to watch a screen broadcasting a video loop of distressing images from the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, launched for control over the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The video depicts, among other things, the lethal consequences of the Russian bombings of Gori and roaring columns of Russian armed personnel carriers. The not-so-subtle link between the violence of the 1920s and 2008 is, therefore, visually and conceptually easy to grasp.

The remainder of the exhibit maintains an equally morose tone. The walls are adorned with images of those arrested, statistics of those murdered, and homages to heroes of the national resistance. Notably, the exhibition also claims that Georgia's long-standing desire to profess a "European" identity lies at the heart of national opposition to Bolshevik Russia. "Soviet Russia offered us military alliance, which we rejected," reads one panel, citing a 1921 speech made by Noe Zhordania, then chair of the government of the Democratic Party of Georgia. "We have taken different paths. They are headed for the East and we, for the West. We would like to yell at Russian Bolsheviks: Turn to the West to make a contemporary European nation." This speech was delivered just weeks before the Red Army invaded Georgia. As anthropologist Nutsa Batiashvili aptly noted, "the implicit message" behind the selective and purposeful inclusion of such quotes in the museum in Tbilisi "is that Georgia rightfully deserves to detach itself from Russia's imperial margins."[54]

53 Georgian National Museum. Soviet Occupation Exhibition Hall, http://museum.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=69&info_id=11868.

54 Nutsa Batiashvili, "Sites Of Memory, Sites Of Contestation: The Tbilisi Museum Of Soviet Occupation and Visions Of the Past in Georgia," *Cultures of History Forum*, June 1, 2017, http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/exhibitions/georgia/sites-of-memory-sites-of-contestation-the-tbilisi-museum-of-soviet-occupation-and-visions-of-the-past-in-georgia/.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



The exhibit in Tbilisi. (Photo by author, July 2018)



The panorama that greets visitors at the Museum of Soviet Occupation. (Photo by author, July 2018)

Just as with the museum in Gori, the exhibit of the Soviet occupation in Tbilisi conceals much of the historical narrative regarding Georgia under Soviet rule, but it also expunges its main actor: Stalin himself. The museum is designed to reinforce

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



Names of clerics executed under the Soviet regime. (Photo by author, July 2018)

a "metanarrative of Russian occupation,"[55] yet a visitor can grasp the significance of these deliberate omissions only with prior knowledge of the historical events. When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, Georgia became an independent state, and from 1918 to 1921 the country was headed by a moderate socialist government. However, this was a brief period of independence. The Red Army's illegal and violent invasion of the country in 1921 put an abrupt end to Georgia's sovereignty as the Bolsheviks usurped power and created the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic on February 25, 1921.[56] Among the chief strategists of the Bolshevik coup were two ethnic Georgians, Joseph Stalin and Sergo Ordzhonikidze, who became influential

55 Batiashvili, "Sites of Memory, Sites of Contestation."

56 Donald Reyfield, *Edge of Empire: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 339.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020



Continuation of the exhibit with statistics of those murdered. (Photo by author, July 2018)

political leaders in the Soviet Union's nascent political system. Nevertheless, despite Stalin's pivotal role in making Georgia Soviet, he is conspicuously absent from the exhibition aside from a single poster depicting his image and a banner inscribed with his famous quote (written in Russian) from a speech that he delivered on November 17, 1935 during the First All-Union Meeting of the Stakhanovites and in the midst of a new wave of political repressions: "Life has improved, comrades. Life has become more joyous."[57]

Equally absent are the expected references to the so-called 1922 Georgian Affair that witnessed an acrimonious dispute between the Stalin-Ordzhonikidze duo and the Georgian Communist government in Tbilisi over the degree of the country's autonomy as a Soviet republic. The incident had famously soured relationships between Stalin and Lenin when Stalin insisted on diminishing Georgia's autonomy further by binding the country, along with Armenia and Azerbaijan, into the poorly conceived Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, which was eventually dissolved in 1936.[58] Yet, browsing through the exhibition, one would never learn about Stalin's or any other prominent Georgian Bolsheviks' role in Georgia's Sovietization and occupation.

Unsurprisingly, Stalin is not the only noteworthy Georgian Bolshevik who is conspicuously absent from the museum's exhibition halls. Sergo Ordzhonikidze, who personally led the military invasion into the Democratic Republic of Georgia

57 Joseph Stalin, "Speech at the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites," November 17, 1935, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1935/11/17.htm.

58 Khlevniuk, *Stalin*, 72.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

in 1921, and Stalin's infamous henchman, Lavrentiy Beria, who became the head of the Bolshevik secret police in Georgia and who was responsible for the violent suppression of the nationalist uprising against the Soviet government in 1924, have not received even a cursory evaluation in the exhibition's chronological account of the Soviet occupation. The Bolsheviks' violent seizure of Georgian territory appears depersonified; it, too, has been stripped of all the inconvenient complexities that might obfuscate the coherence of the curators' historical narrative. In giving voice to the many Georgians who fell victim to the Soviet regime, Joseph Stalin's role in conjuring the policies that shaped the Soviet system of political violence until 1950s is not critically addressed anywhere, nor is space given to the Georgians who assisted his efforts or who benefited from Soviet rule. Certainly, the museum delivers much-needed transparency with regard to the illegitimacy of the Bolshevik, and later Soviet, schemes that undermined Georgia's sovereignty. It also exposes the criminality and tragic consequences of Stalin's reign of terror for the country's political dissidents, artists, and intellectuals. Yet, the museum misses an important opportunity to offer a public site of historical reckoning with the nation's own complicated past.

Still further, the museum neglects to examine the important milestone in Georgia's resistance to the Soviet system that occurred in March 1956 after the "Secret Speech." Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality and announcement of the intent to dismantle the dictator's legacy erupted into unprecedented public disturbances in Tbilisi; public backlash transformed into violent riots that caught the communist government in Tbilisi by complete surprise. The disturbances necessitated military intervention and the clashes resulted in twenty-one civilian deaths. Historians continue to debate the significance of the March 1956 events. Nevertheless, the generally accepted interpretation regards the violent demonstrations as "an essentially nationalist protest," which was provoked by the decision of the Soviet leadership in Moscow to challenge Stalin's perceived omnipotence and discard decades of his reign into the dustbin of history.[59]

The violence and surge of public indignation stemmed from the fear that dismantling Stalin's legacy would upend what historian Timothy Blauvelt described as the "special status" of the Georgian republic "within the Soviet hierarchy of nations."[60] Of course, Georgia's subjective privileged status in the Soviet Union was directly linked to Stalin's autocratic profile within the Soviet political system. As Blauvelt noted, "in its own analysis of the March events the Georgian Central Committee reported that 'The Cult of personality of Stalin in Georgia was combined with national feeling' and that 'the opinion formed that the Georgian people had made particular contributions to humanity and all this was linked with the

59 Ronald Suny, *Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), 122. See also Ronald Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 303–05.

60 Blauvelt, "Resistance, Discourse and Nationalism," 121.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

name of Stalin."[61] Hence, in a paradoxical turn of events, the violent public protests in Tbilisi that audaciously challenged the policy of the Soviet leadership in Moscow and resulted in a virulent upsurge of nationalist sentiment was provoked by the death and posthumous demonization of Stalin, the man who had played an unambiguous role in forcefully dragging Georgia into the family of the Soviet states. The museum's silence on the March 1956 demonstrations further highlights the difficulties inherent in the curation of Georgian history under Soviet rule that dissociates Stalin from the subjectivities of popular perceptions of Georgian national identity.

The selective representation and deliberate omissions in Tbilisi's Museum of Soviet Occupation are accentuated by the exhibition's latent vector of culpability for Georgia's adversities, which unfailingly points north toward Russia. The period of Soviet occupation is blended with Russian imperial pretensions into a single category of oppression and defiant victimhood. As the subtleties of history disappear, the experiences of the Soviet chapter of Georgia's history are reduced to an abridged narrative that frames Georgia's oppressors as foreigners who spoke the Russian language. The result is intimated historical continuity between the attempts of Georgia's northern neighbor to undermine its sovereignty in the past and those still unfolding in the present. This is visible in a number of instances, not least in one exhibition stand which informs the museum's visitors that "Russia began preparation for the occupation of Georgia at the end of 1920." The decision to term what from 1917 to the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922 was the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) as simply "Russia" is a misleading historic simplification, but it also signals an amalgamation of past and present grievances. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the exhibition places the onus of responsibility for the country's loss of sovereignty on Russia, even when Russia had been transformed into a socialist utopian experiment under the auspices of a Georgian man who spoke Russian with a strong accent.

The exclusion from the museum of the prominent Georgian Bolsheviks who played an instrumental role in the country's annexation into the Soviet Union was certainly dictated by the political nomenclatures of its chief ideological sponsors. Indeed, memorial museums, such as the Museum of Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi, often become "political tools, created and utilized with specific political agendas," and it is also the case that "the concerns of the present loom much larger in these museums than the difficult memories of the painful past."[62] The museum in Tbilisi opened its doors to visitors just three years after the 2003 Rose Revolution bringing to power President Saakashvili, who exerted notable efforts to diminish Russian influence in Georgia during his tenure. In this context, the glaring absences of Stalin and his collaborators is an explicit attempt to silence inconvenient historical chapters and to highlight the politically expedient historical details that reinforce

61 Blauvelt, "Resistance, Discourse and Nationalism," 123.
62 Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 5.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

the political legitimacy of the government. That is, of course, not to suggest a lack of ongoing Russian imperial pretensions in the Caucasus, especially in the first decade of the twenty-first century, or Russia's culpability in denying Georgia the right to an independent domestic and foreign policy. Indeed, Russian-Georgian tensions continue to center on the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are internationally recognized as part of Georgian sovereign territory but which the Russian government recognized as independent in the wake of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. The significance of the territorial dispute as the conceptual bridge that links the occupations of the past and present is highlighted in the final exhibit stand that features a large map of Georgia on which the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are highlighted in bright red color, as if separated from the rest of the country, with the title of the map declaring in all capital letters: "THE OCCUPATION CONTINUES."

As much as the Stalin Museum in Gori, then, the Museum of Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi raises a number of questions about the very meaning of "museum" and highlights the complex ideological decisions that underlie the creation of any public history display. The political stakes of the Tbilisi museum are significantly higher, for its inclusion in the National Museum in the heart of the capital makes it representative of the dominant national narrative as envisioned by the central government. This is particularly important because tourism remains a vital industry for Georgia's economy. In 2018 alone the small country of 3.7 million people was visited by 8.7 million foreign tourists and the country's budget earned more than 3 billion US dollars from tourism in the same year.[63] That this museum seeks to speak to foreign visitors is signaled by the English-language translations of all of the texts, unlike at the Stalin Museum in Gori where only a Russian-speaking audience would be able to fully appreciate the spirit of the citations that line the walls.

If anything, this observation simply underlines both museums' function as what French historian Pierre Nora conceived of as *lieux de mémoire*—sites of memory—of Georgia's long struggle for national independence in the twentieth century. To Nora, such sites emerge at a historical turning point, a break in the flow of time, which is "bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists."[64] These sites of memory exist as isolated remnants of the atmosphere that gave rise to them and which is no longer present. And they are fed by often-unspoken desires for the revival and repair of the historical moments that have been painfully subjugated to revisionist political narratives.

There are clear reasons for the differences in the narratives of Soviet rule under Stalin. As Gori has experienced economic stagnation and a rise in poverty over the past decades, members of its population remember Stalin as a "genius" under

63 "Dohody Gruzii ot turizma v 2018 godu prevysili 3 milliarda dollarov," *Kavkazskiĭ Uzel*, January 6, 2019, https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/329996/?fbclid=IwAR3l1a-huSQ8c-T9wvalrOovcZvQI_mTPfmaNi96gdvCbWz6Zcc6zSc8LAo.

64 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 7.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

whom their families suffered but who they, nevertheless, do not hold personally responsible for the suffering which was, rather, simply a mark of the times. In Gori, then, remembrance of Stalin is a local source of pride for an older generation nostalgic for what memory perhaps distorts as the "better times" of the past. In the dynamic and youthful capital city of Tbilisi, on the other hand, the narrative seeks to represent the entire nation and sets a wider political agenda. For this reason, the state officials in Tbilisi have employed institutions of public history to offer a highly selective range of archival evidence that vindicates the choice to embrace a European model of political and social development.

The final point to consider, then, concerns the more recent progression of political discourse in Georgia and its engagement with the national remembrance of Stalin and the Soviet period. As we have argued, the issue is indeed very much alive in the national consciousness and remains central to Georgia's domestic and foreign policy. Despite Saakashvili's less than graceful departure from Georgian politics in 2013, amidst allegations of corruption and autocratic proclivities, his political successors have not deviated from the pro-European course.[65] Giorgi Margvelashvili, president from 2013 to 2018, continued many of Saakashvili's policies while promoting the European character of Georgia. Significantly, when questioned about the cult of Stalin and the nostalgia in Gori, Margvelashvili was unflinching in his simultaneous denunciation of the dictator and adherence to democratic values: "when Stalin was alive, there were no good old days in Georgia . . . I mean, those are tragic days for Georgia . . . But it's a free society. It's a free society where you can express yourself." Georgia's current President, Salomé Zourabichvili, was born in France to Georgian refugees that fled after the Soviet occupation of Georgia in 1921. In her own words, she dedicated her career in the UN, the OSCE, and NATO "with one goal in mind: defend the West in a struggle between right and wrong, freedom and oppression, democracy and totalitarianism," stating, "during those years, Georgia was always on my mind."[66] Today, Zourabichvili is convinced that "Georgians are overwhelmingly pro-Western" and her vision for Georgia is that of "a European, liberal, and democratic" country.[67]

This pro-European disposition of Georgia's current political leadership notwithstanding, Georgia is a country that is undeniably caught in the throes of a memory war. The selectively curated exhibition of Soviet occupation in Tbilisi is a sign of

65 Saakashvili now lives in exile stripped of his Georgian citizenship and risks arrest if he returns to Georgia. For a study of Georgia's desire to prove itself to be "European," see Kornely Kakachia and Salome Minesashvili, "Identity Politics: Exploring Georgian Foreign Policy Behavior," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 2015): 171–80.

66 Zourabichvili served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in Georgia under Saakashvili before he ousted her, and it was the possibility that Saakashvili would re-enter the political scene in 2018 that drove her victory. "Salomé Zourabichvili: Georgia's Crucial Choice—Europe, Democracy and Stability are on the Ballot," *The Daily Caller*, November 26, 2018, https://dailycaller.com/2018/11/26/georgia-crucial-choice-opinion/; "French-Born Woman Elected President of Georgia," *Baltic Worlds*, December 17, 2018, http://balticworlds.com/french-born-woman-elected-president-of-georgia/.

67 "Salomé Zourabichvili: Georgia's Crucial Choice."

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

a major political shift, the consequences of which continue to unfold in contemporary society. Nevertheless, the clearly palpable political commission of the museum's exhibition has created a site of national memory that is unlikely to heal the country's socio-political fissures. The intentional exclusion of less than flattering examples of collaboration with and accommodation of the Soviet political order in Georgia glosses over the intricate complexities of the occupation period and indefinitely delays any hope for national reconciliation or the building of cross-generational civil solidarity. Memorial sites such as the museum in Tbilisi have the potential to "harness the perceived power of memory to heal communities," but the difficulties of assessing and settling the memories of the past in the post-Soviet political landscape of independent Georgia remind public historians that "memorial museums are deeply political institutions and their utopian goals are often challenged by their political genealogies."[68] Hence, at the present, the Museum of Soviet Occupation alienates many Georgian citizens because it denies them the opportunity to see and reflect meaningfully upon their own individual histories, or to understand Georgia's Soviet experience as contradictory, mundane, sometimes triumphant, but ultimately marked by great sacrifices and human tragedies.

Conclusion

George Orwell entertained a timeless axiom that best captures the significance of controlling public history narratives as a mechanism for shaping and manipulating collective memory: "Who controls the past controls the future [and] who controls the present controls the past."[69] The struggle for control over the official historical narrative—in order to shape both the present and future—is very much alive across the Caucasus. In Georgia, in particular, discussions regarding the memorialization and preservation of Soviet and communist symbols in public spaces remain a sensitive topic and, indeed, these debates are complex because they touch on a number of highly charged points. These include the politically motivated demolition of local "memory sites" that, over time, have come to signify local histories, and the erasure of narratives that traced the lives of an entire generation of people. Some perceive such changes less as the restoration of historical justice and more as personal attacks that discard the peoples' ordinary and apolitical lives as ideologically tainted and, therefore, unworthy of remembrance. Personal thus becomes political, and political becomes personal. Lastly, these debates reveal the extent to which cultural artifacts and historic sites are percolated with ideological significance and may either be forgotten or revived with the changing directions of the political winds in Georgia.

68 Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 3–4.
69 George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), 34.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

At an even more fundamental level, however, the Stalin Museum in Gori and the Museum of Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi raise questions about the assumptions that underlie the function of museums as embodiments of collective memory and promoters of a public history. In neither of these cases is the "objective" or well-rounded reconstruction of the past attempted or approximated; indeed, both museums reveal that offering a single and simplified narrative—whether of Stalin's glorious deeds or of the violence of the Soviet period—renders history more digestible than does a presentation of multiple and competing versions of the historical events. As a result, the highly selective and fragmented curation of the events of the twentieth-century in both museums make it impossible to address a convoluted history of the now defunct regime. It is a history that can never be erased from the narrative of Georgian statehood but that museums are in a unique position to acknowledge, confront, and showcase to the succeeding generations. Counter to popular opinion, a sincere deconstruction of the past would not imply the inevitable derailment of present successes, but solely signal the present moment's completeness.

In this regard, it is worth noting that in recent years Georgian authorities have proposed several visions to reshape the Stalin Museum of Gori which, as we have argued, is among the more complex sites of local memory both because Stalin was born there and because those still living in the town recall the period of his rule with great fondness. In 2008 plans were announced to transform the structure into a "Museum of Russian Aggression," though this was clearly too much of a revisionist approach and was quickly dropped.[70] More recently, in 2012, the Ministry of Culture of Georgia announced a project to transform the Gori museum into a museum of Stalinism. The idea was to renovate the building and retain the existing exhibits while adding "information about the consequences of his regime, including the victims of collectivization, famine in Ukraine, the purges, and the Gulag."[71] In this way, rather than glorifying the dictator, the museum would have been transformed into a space "dedicated to Stalinism as a phenomenon and the repressions carried out as a result of that phenomenon."[72] In 2020, this project no longer seems to be alive. Additionally, those who curate the museum insist that the current exhibit is not ideological. "A museum isn't for politics," the director once commented, "A museum is a museum."[73]

What a "museum" should be is clearly no simple concept, but debates over what constitutes a museum are less important to many of Gori's residents than the personal sense of historical deprivation. The indiscriminate anti-Soviet campaigns in the recent past have resulted in the "symbolic and practical construction of the Soviet era as external and hostile to Georgian politics and nationality rather than as

70 "Gori Stalin Museum," *Comtourist.*

71 Walker, "Hero and Horror."

72 Batashvili, "Stalin's Cult in Georgia."

73 Will Lasky, "Selling Stalin," *AmCham News* 4 (August 2007), https://web.archive.org/web/20070920154143/http://www.magazine.amcham.ge/issues/2007_4/04_2007_05.htm.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020

a formative past in which Georgians actively took part."[74] And interviews with Gori's residents make clear that their "personal pasts—social statuses, memories, and dreams—have also been increasingly neglected" as they have been "redefined and renounced in post-Rose Revolution political discourse." The resultant sense of nostalgia is thus deeply rooted in the sense of incongruity with past successes, present experiences, and future dreams, some of which are tied to the figure of Stalin. At moments, this sentiment of dispossession can be quite dramatic. In Gori, some of the Stalin Museum employees have even gone so far as to comment that the current climate is as repressive as that during Soviet times: "Back then, they wouldn't let us say anything bad about Stalin. Now, we're not allowed to say anything good about him."[75]

The Soviet Union vanished nearly three decades ago, yet its ghosts continue to linger. Stalin remains ever-present in unfolding discussions of Georgian identity and national self-determination, and any attempt to reflect critically on Georgia's Soviet past remains a delicate matter. The museums in Gori and Tbilisi are very much invested in these partisan debates and both silence inconvenient aspects of the past, despite their different ideological stances. In this way, they reveal not only the socio-political cleavages in Georgian society but also competing understandings of how history should be preserved and presented to the public. Yet, the glaring contradictions in the public history tales of the two cities are unlikely to be reconciled soon and will require a new generation of public historians to assume a critical stewardship of the past. Until a compromise on the narrative of Georgia's twentieth-century history is reached, however, the Museum of Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi and the Stalin Museum in Gori will continue to serve as public reminders of the challenges underlying collective atonement and the public reckoning with the nation's authoritarian past. More hauntingly, they will also serve as indicators of the degree to which sites of public history remain susceptible to political manipulation.

• • • • •

Sergey Salushchev is a historian of the Caucasus region. His dissertation investigates the history of slavery, the slave trade, and abolition in the nineteenth century Caucasus under the imperial auspices of the Russian Empire. His scholarship conceptualizes the Caucasus as a permanent borderland, a site of cultural exchanges, commercial networks, and imperial contestations.

Kalina Yamboliev received her PhD in medieval history from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2019. Her research centers on the Mediterranean region, broadly construed, and explores themes of narrative identity, collective memory, and how notions of belonging are transmitted across generations.

74 Gotfredsen, "Void Pasts and Marginal Presents," 251.
75 Walker, "Hero and Horror."

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/tph/article-pdf/42/3/33/408116/tph.2020.42.3.33.pdf by University of California Santa Barbara user on 11 August 2020