Georgian Opposition to Soviet Rule (1956-1989) and the Causes of Resentment between Georgia and Russia

Master’s Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Lisa Anne Goddard

Graduate Program in Slavic and East European Studies

The Ohio State University

2011

Master’s Thesis Committee:

Nicholas Breyfogle, Advisor

Theodora Dragostinova

Irma Murvanishvili
Abstract

This Master’s thesis seeks to examine the question of strained relations between Georgia and the Russian Federation, paying particular attention to the Georgian revolts of 1956, 1978 and 1989 during the Soviet era. By examining the results of these historical conflicts, one can discern a pattern of three major causes of the tensions between these neighboring peoples: disagreement with Russia over national identity characteristics such as language, disputes over territory, and degradation of symbols of national legacy. It is through conflicts and revolts on the basis of these three factors that Georgian anti-Russian sentiment and Russian anti-Georgian sentiment developed.

This thesis is divided into four chapters that will explore the origins and results of each uprising, as well as the evolving conceptions of national identity that served as a backdrop to the conflicts. Following an introduction that lays out the primary questions and findings of the thesis, the second chapter gives a brief history of Georgia and its relationship with Russia, as well as outlines the history and dynamic nature of Georgian national identity. Chapter three, the core chapter, presents the Georgian rebellions during the Soviet era, their causes, and their relevance to this thesis. It then concludes with an analysis of the events and how they are linked to the main argument. Each rebellion was sparked by one of three major causes: the 1956 rebellion was caused by the Khrushchev administration’s invalidation of Georgia’s symbolic national legacy by denigrating Stalin and barring any celebration of this (then) Georgian national hero. In 1978, attempts by
the Georgian leadership to impose the Russian language on the Georgian SSR represented an attack on Georgian identity that sparked strong opposition. Finally, the landmark events of 1989 began as a territorial dispute over Abkhazian separatist demands for secession from the Georgian SSR but then exploded into a broad demand for Georgian independence from the Soviet Union. 1989’s uprising is especially important for this chapter in that 1989 is the first uprising in which an independence movement was extremely vocal and led to permanent changes within Georgia.

Chapter four then examines the results of these rebellions and concludes that Georgian anti-Russian sentiment was established during Imperial Georgian occupation and was subsequently bolstered by events and policies within Georgia’s time as a republic of the Soviet Union. Finally, an epilogue is also included in order to examine how the defining 2008 conflict between Georgia and the Russian Federation was connected to the rebellions of the post-1956 period, particularly 1989. The epilogue concludes with the direction in which Georgian and Russian relations may continue in the future, based in the findings of this thesis.

Thus, I assert that the animosity that we see today between Russia and Georgia is not only a result of Georgian independence in 1991, but rather came from a much longer term of erosion, beginning particularly in 1956 and subsequently expanding with each major uprising in Soviet Georgia.
Dedication

To my Mother, you have been my inspiration for all of this.

To my Father, for always listening about this thesis, even if you never understood.

To Dan, for countless hours of proofreading without complaint and for your belief.
Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the guidance and inspiration of Nicholas Breyfogle; my thesis committee; The Slavic Center at The Ohio State University; and my many colleagues who have supported me throughout this process.
Vita

May 2005 .............................A.S Richard Bland College of the College of
William and Mary

December 2007 ..........................B.A. International Studies, B.S. Psychology,
Virginia Commonwealth University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Slavic and East European Studies
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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

This thesis seeks to examine three of the most important, yet least well known Georgian uprisings against the Soviet regime—of 1956, 1978, and 1989—and to explore what effect they have had on the identity politics of contemporary Georgia and its international relations with Russia.

I posit that these rebellions, when combined with the history that preceded them, created not just new levels of stark anti-Russian sentiment within modern Georgia but also an ever increasing demand for political and cultural independence and a severing of relations with Russia. As such, the 1956 revolts and the uprisings that followed represent a notable turning point in the modern history of Georgian-Russian relations.

These rebellions also exemplify what seem to be three main catalysts of Georgian and Russian conflict (and three primary sources of modern Georgian national pride and identity): disagreements over territory, identity and language politics, and the importance of national symbols and national legacy. This thesis also strives to answer the question: why have the relations between Georgia and Russia been so poor over the past few years and why is such antagonism important to issues of regional security and politics both now and in the future? The roots of modern resentment are found in the lasting tensions brought on by the results of the post-1956 period, set in motion through a pattern of conflict between the countries. Therefore, beginning with the events of 1956 and with each
rebellion that took place in the Soviet period, the relationship between the two peoples eroded further; in effect causing what one may refer to as a ‘snowball effect,’ leading to ever greater Georgian demands for separation from contact with Russia and Russians.

This thesis will explore these issues in four chapters and an epilogue. Following this introduction, which explains the primary questions and findings of this thesis, chapter two will present a brief history of Georgia and its interaction with Russia since its annexation into the Imperial Russian Empire until the post World War II era. In order to better understand the results of these post-WWII rebellions, we will also examine the history of Georgian national identity to gain insight into the way that Georgians reacted in these revolts. Their varied reactions (dissidence, violence) illustrate the inadequacies of the Soviet Union’s administration in Georgia. Thus the foundation for mutual antipathy was laid during Russian occupation.

In chapter three, the core chapter of this thesis, I will present the three rebellions of 1956, 1978 and 1989, with particular attention on the events of 1956. 1956 saw an uprising sparked in part by Nikita Khrushchev’s famous “Secret Speech”—which unveiled the extent of Stalin’s terror upon the Soviet people and condemned Stalinism—and in part by a Soviet refusal to allow the Georgians to celebrate a national holiday in honor of Stalin. Whereas each rebellion was different in circumstance and cause, 1956 was the watershed event that set the precedent for the future rebellions that would later take place. 1956 is a key element in my argument as it marks the beginning of a shift toward a demand among
ome Georgians to organize new relations with Russia: particularly the severing of relations and independence for Georgia.

The revolt of 1978 began as a movement against a Soviet plan to change the official state language of Georgia to Russian and is important in that it was an assault on the Georgian language and therefore on the entire Georgian ethnicity. Such a policy of language dominance was not unique in the Soviet Union’s republics. However, the outcome of this uprising was particularly distinctive in that the policy was repealed due to the demands of Georgian citizens. Such a concession was damaging to Soviet influence in Georgia and served to heighten anti-Soviet feeling in the late seventies.

Finally, the revolt of 1989 began as a Georgian reaction to the secessionist movement in Abkhazia and then evolved, in a culmination of anger, into an independence movement for the entire country. 1989 parallels the events of 1956 in its importance; however, it was distinct in that it was the first time that a rebellion happened within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in which the participants would move fully toward an independent Georgia, instead of reform within the Soviet system.

Chapter four concludes this thesis with my findings that anti-Russian sentiment was established in the Imperial period by means of territorial and political control, and was then subsequently bolstered by the uprisings and Soviet policies of the Georgian Republic that occurred in the post WWII period. I also assert in the conclusion that each rebellion contains a distinguishing catalyzing element: 1956 began with the invalidation of a national symbol (Stalin), 1978 occurred due to an attack on national identity (Georgian language).
and 1989 began as an anti-secessionist (territory) and moved on into an independence movement (national identity). It is through these rebellions that we can make sense of how relations became strained between Georgia and Russia.

How taut are the strings tied between the Soviet-era rebellions and the resentments of today between both countries? In the epilogue, I explore how these incidents are connected, how these outcries against Soviet authority led, if at times indirectly, to the Russian-Georgian relationship today. The contemporary position of modern Georgia is a precarious one, as it still clashes with the much larger Russian Federation culturally, politically, and militarily. Georgia, for instance, is interested in joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (something the Russian Federation neither wishes Georgia to do nor wishes to do itself) and went as far as signing up its troops for NATO missions in the Balkans and in Iraq. NATO, as well as the United States, would like to see Georgia one day join the organization, however in 2005–2008, such “aspirations to ‘go West’ put Georgia on a collision course with Moscow.” (Asmus, p. 67)

Russia and Georgia most notably disagreed in the territorial conflict, or the “South Ossetian War” of 2008. This has put a significant strain on the already tense relationship between the two countries since Georgia’s independence. However this conflict has historical roots in the post-1956 period. The Ossetian conflict was in part waged over the longstanding tensions that had developed in the two countries, and also due to territorial strains regarding Ossetian and to a lesser degree Abkhazian lands situated in the northwest territory of Georgia. Finally, through the analysis of the uprisings during Georgia’s time as
a Soviet republic and the summer war of 2008, I assert that these events are connected to the anti-Russian sentiment that developed during the post-1956 period. Through this connection, we can perhaps make better sense of what might define future Georgian and Russian relations.
CHAPTER 2: Introducing Georgia

Before examining the significance of Georgia’s rebellions—and Georgia’s political standing in past and future political contexts—it is necessary to clarify who the Georgians are and how their complex history has shaped them as a people. This section will cover basic Georgian history and how the Georgian identity has changed over time.

The multiethnic country of Georgia is located on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, nestled on the Transcaucasian ridge. The country is bordered by the Greater Caucasus Mountains to the north, and the Lesser Caucasus Mountains to the south. The people who inhabit this mountainous terrain are as hardy as the land; a culture known for its rich customs, Orthodox Christianity, hospitality, and delicious cuisine; or more superficially, for its wine.
Speakers of the Kartvelian tongue, the Georgian majority identify themselves (even today) regionally by the dialect spoken. There are three major dialects recognized in Georgia: Western Caucasian, which identifies the modern Abkhazians, East Caucasian, spoken by the Ingush, and Southern Caucasian used by the Kartvelians or the majority of the Georgian population. The Republic of Georgia today stands as a nation of three major ethnic and linguistic groups; the largest (84% according to public survey by the United States State Department in 2009) being the Georgian ethnicity and native language. The smaller percentage of the population is made up of Abkhaz, Ossetian, and various other ethnic groups such as Russian, Azeri, etc. Thus being in the majority, one of the largest identifying factors of the Georgian people is their native language, which remains a key identifier and a root of Georgian identity (along with Georgian Orthodox Christianity).

A small country easily susceptible to invasion, Georgia has long been influenced by the needs of its more powerful neighbors and by what Georgia could get in return from them. For example, in the first century of the Common Era, parts of what are now Georgian lands were culturally and economically influenced by the Roman and Persian empires (Suny, 1994, pp. 54-64). More recently, Russia and Turkey have been a source of demand for Georgian wine and other Georgian agricultural products, providing trade routes and income.

The people of the Transcaucasian region are so heterogeneous (ethnically, religiously, and culturally) that various historians have noted that they are tumultuous by nature and thus considered notorious “trouble makers” for the many major powers who attempted to
retain control over these lands. (Cornell, pp. 142-150) Neighbors, invading empires, or even Georgia’s own government has had exceptional difficulty in maintaining political order in the region. Indeed, it has generally been difficult for any occupying power to keep their hands carefully wrapped around the territory. Following this trend, for instance, Imperial Russia certainly had a challenge when it annexed Georgia at the beginning of the 19th century and kept until the advent of the October Revolution. Thus these lands have seen many changes in political policy and leadership throughout the years of its existence.

Georgia did manage to enjoy a brief period of autonomy as a consequence of the revolutions of 1917, taking advantage of the situation in Russia and even forming a bond with Germany in order to prevent another Russian move for dominance. Georgia quickly created in the years 1918-1921 a Menshevik-based, Democratic Republic and even gave local autonomy to outer regions such as Abkhazia. The 1920s began as a period of stabilization. However, due to Germany’s loss in World War I, the influence of local Bolsheviks within the country, and Georgia’s weak economic and military power, the country was annexed back into the Russian sphere in 1921.

As Suny explains, “The Sovietization of Transcaucasia …was the product of conflict between ideological considerations and realistic assessments between the strategic requirements of Soviet Russia and the aims of local communists.” (Suny, 1994, p. 209) Such a pragmatic policy of integration was an important factor in the Soviet Union’s formation of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) in 1922. A
geostrategically important region, Georgia was a key component in the Caucasus and was to remain in the haphazard yet vital union of the TSFSR until its dissolution in 1936. Subsequently Georgia became its own Socialist republic, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Georgia was not to find independence again until December of 1991, as one of the first heralds of imminent Soviet collapse.

*Georgian National Identity*

This section briefly explores modern “Georgianness”—or the national identity that unifies the people of the Georgian lands—and its dynamic changes over the years of occupation from 1800.

Precisely identifying the origin of Georgian culture and ethnicity is fairly difficult, as a result of limited reliable sources. However, Georgian national identity was undoubtedly shaped through Russian and Soviet occupation. Georgian national consciousness developed under Imperial and later Soviet rules, as the result of the opportunities for national self-development that were offered due to the administration of these regimes. During peacetimes, Georgia was afforded the ability to develop this sense of identity while unmolested by foreign influence (other than Russian)—and often with the direct assistance of Russian/Soviet policies (most notably the Soviet policy of nativization in the 1920s and early 1930s) and as a result of social and economic opportunities that the Tsarist and Soviet states offered. Due to the advantages that the
Russians offered, it was not always the case that a majority of the Georgian population wanted independence from Russian/Soviet rule. For instance, in the Tsarist period many Georgian elites strove for greater autonomy within the Tsarist state rather than independence (an internal rearrangement of relations rather than a separation of the peoples).

Thus, the period of independence from Russia that Georgia experienced from 1918-1921 was not necessarily a goal for some Georgians. However, these three crucial years became extremely important in the formation of modern Georgian identity and Russo-Georgian relations. They resulted in the development of a model of nationhood, as well as the solidification of the territorial boundaries that has come to mean Georgia on the world map.

Conversely, modern “Georgianness” also developed from periods of Russian imposition that occurred during occupation. Russian domination presented an “other” to rally the Georgian people against, culturally and politically. This “other” who was in power and had the ability to control the population then gave the Georgian people the opportunity to unify ethnically and culturally. Thus unification created a space to consolidate “Georgianness” through giving the people someone to rally against outside of their own ethnicities.

Before Russian rule in the 18th century, Georgia had been a historically complex and fragmented kingdom in terms of political and territorial factors, held together only by its communal and cultural ties, Orthodox Christianity, and monarchy. Yet, there had been
no power in Georgia who had been able to successfully consolidate the country into a single political unit or create a recognizable national consciousness since the 12th century, when Georgia disintegrated into a land of multiple feudal regions. Unification was ultimately accomplished by the larger Russian Empire who “through its superior military power… was able in the first decades of the nineteenth century to ‘gather’ the Georgian lands and establish over them a single political authority.” (Suny, 1994, p. 64) This “gathering” of Georgian lands resulted in great part from the need for Georgia’s lands to be protected from threat of a Turkish or Iranian invasion. Georgia signed the treaty of Georgievsk with Imperial Russia on July 24th, 1783 in order to become a protectorate, yet remain a sovereign entity through its ruling monarchy. However, in 1800, Giorgi XII, the last king of Georgia, faced with the threat of outside invasion as well as divergence among the nobility, made a controversial plea to Russia to annex and thereby fully protect Georgian lands. (Suny, 1994, p. 59) Thus Tsar Paul I of Russia violated the Georgievsk treaty and set forth a proclamation in which he declared “that the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti had been abolished.”(Suny, 1994, p. 59) Georgia, who had been a divided yet culturally similar people, had become annexed to Russia and the trajectory of Georgian history was forever changed. This change set Georgia on a path that intertwined its fate with that of Russia over the next two centuries.

Georgia displayed some resistance to such outright violation of the treaty. In the following years, unhappy groups contrived small uprisings and conspiracies. For instance, in 1812, the peasants revolted against the Russians as a result of poor economic
planning. In 1832, a murder plot against Russian officials by young nobles was foiled. Whereas the peasant revolt was due to food requisitioning that had taken place, the nobles’ conspiracy was against the bureaucracy that came with Russian occupation. (Suny, 1994, pp. 84-95)

There were, however, some advantages to Russian rule: protection from invasion, new economic opportunities, and a particular advantage for the Georgian nobility, who were persuaded to Tsarist loyalty through participation in the new regime. Despite the fact that the Georgian monarchy remained intact, even if figuratively, “by the end of the first fifty years of Russia rule, the once rebellious, semi-independent dynasts of Georgia had been transformed into service gentry loyal to their new monarch.” (Suny, 1994, 63)

Merchants were able to trade freely and flourish within Georgia, expanding the economy and bringing new goods into the country as well as out. Since Georgia was also an Orthodox Christian nation, like Russia, Georgian Orthodoxy was given a seat on the Russian Synod; a sign of importance, unity, and participation. The Georgian nobility were also given the same rights as those of the Russian gentry, and as a result Georgian estates were consolidated and organized much like those in the Russian Empire. Thus the regime had “by law and by example…drawn significant segments of Georgian nobility into identifying their security, economic well-being, prestige and political status with the Russian connection.” (Suny, 1994, p. 95)

Most importantly, it was under Tsarist rule that Georgia developed a sense of territorial boundedness and urban development from which national identity could then
begin to become fused to specific territories. Due to Russian consolidation of territory, protection of their lands, and the economic integration that followed, Georgia was saved from possible extinction at the hands of its own fragmentation and probable invasion by Turkey or Iran. Defeated but newly unified, the Georgians could then become more clearly aware of their own “Georgianness” that separated them from Russia itself and other peoples in Transcaucasia.

In the next hundred years after Russian annexation, intellectuals rose to promote Georgian literature, poetry, and study of the Georgian language. Such efforts to popularize national art forms and language helped to create a space in which “Georgianness” could be celebrated. (Suny, 1994) One might call this process positive nation building, where Russian occupation gave Georgians the ability to build up their own identity, separate from the occupying power, yet fostered by it.

However, after 1860 the generally beneficial relationship with the Russian Empire began to erode due to several factors that had changed within the country after the first century of Russian rule. These factors were primarily economic and national.

After the serf emancipation by the Russian Empire in 1861, economic changes and the emergence of a middle class began to threaten the economic security that had been developed by the nobility, creating a downturn in stability. More importantly however, there was a revival of Russian chauvinism that affected Georgia. The 1860s – 1890s saw a tightening of Tsarist rule on the small country as a consequence. New Russian-centric laws were imposed by the Georgian administration, the office of the Georgian viceroy in
St. Petersburg was abolished, study of the Georgian language was highly discouraged, and ethnicity became a factor in state administration positions. Such changes in policy were stifling to the political tranquility that had been previously experienced. Subsequently, the Tsarist administrators, suspicious of Georgian chauvinism, began to categorize the population within Georgia in an attempt to “divide the Georgians into sub-ethnic groups, with the aim of preventing unified nationalism and rebellion.”(Cornell, 146)

It was in this division of ethnicities that language became important: the Russians offered education in minority languages to promote their distinctiveness from the majority. (This is quite similar to policies undertaken in the Soviet period.) A special case was that of the Abkhaz minority in Georgia, whose language was completely unrelated to Georgian; “Georgians generally believe this was a plan by the Russians and later the Soviets, to depict the Georgians as… ‘the other’ to the Abkhaz resulting in anti-Georgian sentiments developing among the Abkhaz.”(Cornell, 146-7)

Such dialectical difference also lent itself to a very convenient way for the Tsarist administration to categorize social strata in Imperial (and Soviet) eras. Thus in the latter half of the nineteenth century, linguistics came to categorize the Caucasus’ people even more than before. The Russian language had become centrally important under the Tsarist Empire, yet “language also came to be a central classifying criterion with important consequences in a context of numerous vernacular speech communities with minimal or only ritualistic knowledge of Georgian. Populations speaking Abkhaz, Ossetian or the Georgian-related vernaculars were now deemed to be separate ethno-linguistic entities...”
Russian imperial policies to categorize the Georgian people (and other peoples in the Georgian lands, such as Ossetians and Abkhaz) by language may also help us to understand why tensions between Georgians and Abkhaz, and South Ossetians would escalate markedly after 1917.

As a consequence of this tightening of Tsarist control and awakened Georgian national consciousness that had resulted from the positive nation building of the past century, an anti-Tsarist liberation movement began in the 1890s, “complete with a national leadership and an incipient mass movement toward liberation.” (Suny, 1994, 114) The beginnings of a Social-Democratic movement, one that would later come to be identified (within Georgia) as Georgian in itself, “The Social Democratic movement in Georgia did become so closely identified with one ethnic group, the Georgians…” (Suny, 1994, 194) and would later find itself as the political doctrine in power and “an almost exclusively Menshevik movement.” (Suny, 1994, p. 164).

From the 1890s until the Russian Revolution of 1917, Georgian intellectuals struggled intensely with Tsarist control and limits on the expression of national identity. Peasant revolts occurred due to the failing economy, workers’ strikes accelerated, and intellectuals turned toward anti-Imperial oppositional parties. (Suny, 1994) The Tsarist regime eliminated these expressions of dissent, violently at times.

Finally on May 26th, 1918, Georgia declared independence from Russia amidst the Russian civil war, creating the Democratic Republic of Georgia, led by the Social-Democratic Party. Whereas this period of statehood was short-lived, the Democratic
Republic’s existence serves to illustrate a culmination of Georgian territorial thinking during this time and opposition to Tsarist rule. Indeed, the existence of the independent state speaks to the Georgian national and territorial consciousness that had emerged as a result of Russian rule. Furthermore, at the end of the 20th century, the short-lived Democratic Republic would serve as both model and inspiration for post-Soviet Georgian leaders.

The Democratic Republic of Georgia disappeared after the Red army crushed the social democratic government’s independence and expelled independence leaders in 1921. Georgian autonomy was defeated: they had finally become independent only to become annexed once more. Subsequently Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were thrown haphazardly into the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) despite their ethnic differences and previous experiences of autonomy. The Georgian city of Tbilisi became the capital of the TSFSR and was the political and cultural center of the republic, which gave the Georgians nationalistic advantage over the vying separatist regions such as Abkhazia or Ossetia. Minority groups such as the Abkhazians appealed for education in their native language with varying levels of success; however, their appeals for more autonomy displaced from Tbilisi were not as successful.

The Soviets politicized identity and ethnicity in the 1920s and 1930s as a means to categorize the Caucasian peoples and designate where one belonged politically – separated by low or high culture statutes. Thus minorities, such as the Abkhaz, felt pushed to assimilate with the “titular national” Georgian identity. (Cornell, p. 155-156) Soviet
identity policies of the 1920s until the 1930s further exacerbated this assimilation and solidification of identity in the region (as well as in other republics within the USSR). Korenizatsiia or “Nativization” as it is often referred to in English language texts, was a policy initiated in the 1920s to prevent “Great Russian chauvinism” and promote solidarity in Georgia as a union of many republics. (Cornell, pp. 40-49) The policy promoted the titular native languages and cultures, yet kept an emphasis on Russia as the supreme leader—“nationalist in form, socialist in content” was Stalin’s famous mantra. Georgia did well during this policy, fostering the study of titular national Georgian language as well as placing ethnic Georgians in leadership positions. (Suny, 1994, pp.257-258) It has been pointed out by authors such as Timothy Blauvelt that the national identities of Soviet republics developed more fully due to the policies of Korenizatsiia, creating “symbolic, national forms.” (Blauvelt, p. 653) It is these symbolic forms that would later cause a much larger rift between the Soviet powers and the Georgian people. Thus not only was nationalism in the country accepted and deemed more harmless (at first) than the possibility of Russian chauvinism, but Georgia also sat in a favorable position with the leader as his homeland. (Cornell, p. 152-153)

Paradoxically, whereas the Soviet policy of Korenizatsiia did emphasize the importance of the titular nationality as well as those of other minorities within each Republic with this policy, such recognition did not mean that the Soviet Union delegated to smaller states economically or politically. Whereas the Soviet Party attempted to depoliticize nationality through emphasizing the importance of ethnicity, they were not
successful. The nationalities policy resulted in creating an advantage for certain members within the Party. Stalin would do so by placing ethnic Georgians in positions of power, such as with the rise of Lavrenty Beria within the Soviet party.

Unfortunately for the newfound sense of Georgian national identity in the 1920s, negative nation building began a decade later. Negative nation building inverted the effects of nationalism and the fostering of cultural and titular national edification that had effectively grown under the positive nation building policies that had previously occurred during the early Soviet period. Hence Soviet administrators inverted Korenizatsiia in the 1930s under Stalin, amidst mass purges, in a greater move toward Russification of all Soviet Republics. Many Soviet historians, such as Ronald Suny, Svante Cornell, and Martin Malia argue that Stalin was indeed himself a Russian chauvinist. Such a move toward Russification in Stalin’s native homeland of Georgia further points to the validity of such an argument. However, Georgia did not fare as badly as some during this reversal; unlike nearly all other republics, for example, the Georgian alphabet was never Cyrillicized, unlike the Abkhazians whose alphabet was changed not once, but three times. (Jones, p. 537) Whereas Georgians did suffer during the Stalinist purges, the purges that took place were not as tightly controlled as other republics had been within the Soviet Union. As Robert Conquest points out, Georgia fared better than other republics in terms of carrying out their own purges. “…Georgia’s intra-party purge was violent but routine. No emissary of the Central Committee was required to enforce it.”(Conquest, p. 340) Perhaps this relative peacefulness even during the purges points to a sense of trust in Georgian
administration on the part of the Central Committee in Moscow, even if small, in the carrying out of Stalin’s will.

As we will see further in chapter three, Georgia had gained in the course of the Soviet regime a status in the Union as a “favored child”: meaning that Georgia had definite advantages when compared with other republics within the Soviet Union. Some of these advantages were Tbilisi’s capital status within the former TSFSR and enduring importance in the Caucasus, as well as less suffering in terms of ethnic persecution. (Suny, 1994) Some might argue however, that the biggest advantage that the Georgians had was that these lands gave birth to the “Great Leader,” Josef Stalin. What is more, as diplomatic historian A. O. Sarkissian has argued, “The Georgians should have no complaint against the Soviet regime, since they have gained greatly through the nationalization of a vast amount of movable and immovable wealth, formerly held by Armenians, and since in general they are given preferential treatment within the Soviet Union. (Incidentally, Stalin is a Georgian by birth.) Yet they seem to cherish the idea of national independence more fervently than either of their neighbors.”(Sarkissian, p. 529)

That Georgia received any partiality from Soviet administrators supported the growth of “Georgianness” through positive nation building and ethnic preference in leadership, as well as other positions of power, despite the Stalinist purges to rid the Georgian Soviet Party of chauvinism. As the evidence suggests, such a situation was unique in the Soviet Union at the time, as no other minority republic was shown such signs of leniency, even if slight.
Thus these positive and negative nation building events over the course of Imperial and Soviet history have seen the people of Georgia favored and discriminated against, therefore causing tensions that were ethno-political, nationally symbolic, and territorial—tensions between Georgia and her own regions, and between Georgia and Russia proper. These tensions were effectively created and planted in the minds of the people over the succession of ruling powers beginning in the 19th century, thus foreshadowing the nationalistic events that were to unfold in the following decades.
CHAPTER 3: Rebellions

After the annexation of Georgian territories into the Russian empire in 1800 and their subsequent independence of 1918 and re-annexation in 1921, the relationship between Russia and Georgia had been one in which Georgia could not oppose Russian rule (through force) nor did it entirely wish to oppose such rule. This sort of modus Vivendi was possible in part due to the advantages and opportunities that were brought by the Russians. When there was opposition to occupation, it often reflected the attempts of intelligentsia to make changes within the regime, such as a push by Georgian liberals for political reform that took place in the late 1870s (Suny, 1994, p.134).

Whereas parts of the intelligentsia in Georgia were clearly opposed to Soviet rule after 1921, their voices would not fully be heard until after World War II. The developments of the postwar period, and especially the three uprisings of 1956, 1978, and 1989, shaped the breakdown of Russian and Georgian relations, and change Georgian aspirations from being part of a Russian union to that of an independent state.

This chapter demonstrates the most pivotal argument of this thesis: The breakdown of Georgians’ relations with Russia began in earnest with the events of March 1956, and continued in a downward spiral through the resulting uprisings and their consequences. The roots of this divergence are exemplified by three principal catalysts of Russian and
Georgian disagreement: Territory, identity and symbols of national legacy. Although each uprising is complex in nature, each began due to one of these focal catalysts.

1956

The foundation of the 1956 uprising can be found in February of that year when the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took place between the 14th and the 26th. On 25 February, 1956, Nikita Khrushchev, then Soviet Leader and Josef Stalin’s successor, gave his “Secret Speech,” which criticized the reign of Stalin. Once knowledge of Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” and its contents trickled down into Georgia, it was met with outrage that erupted on March 9th, 1956 in a major civil disturbance in Tbilisi, ending ultimately in massive violence and bolstering Georgian nationalism.

Khrushchev openly spoke about the travesty of the Stalinist cult of personality and the issues involving Stalin’s mass suppressions and purges. The speech was extremely controversial because it was the first time that the Party officially criticized the “Great Leader.” Most importantly, this speech vilified Stalinism—which refers to the style of governing practices during the Soviet regime, characterized by Stalin’s oppressive leadership and national policies through the years of 1928-1953 in the former Soviet Union. Whereas this style of rule was dynamic and changed in severity through Stalin’s years in office, as an ideology, Stalinism is perhaps best known for its followers’ fanaticism and adoration for Stalin himself. Thus after his succession, eliminating what remained of this ideology and cult of personality became objective for Khrushchev. (Malia, p. 319)
On the days leading up to March 9th, Tbiliselebi (people of Tbilisi) gathered in their capital at the Stalin monument near the bank of the Kura (better known as the Mtkvari) river expecting to participate in an annual memorial service held in Stalin’s honor. (Kozlov, pp. 125-135)

However, despite popular expectations for a celebration, Soviet government leaders decided that no memorial was to be officially held. First Party Secretary, Nikita Khrushchev’s liberalizing reforms and the results of his “Secret Speech” created no need to celebrate Joseph Stalin or his crimes. In the days before the 9th, the crowds surrounding the monument in Tbilisi began to swell into the thousands, seething with anger and disbelief over the lack of official recognition and respect for Stalin’s death, as well as rumors of the “Secret Speech,” which had a “peculiar resonance in Georgia.”(Suny, 1994, p. 302) This ‘peculiar resonance’ sparked intense emotion within some of the Georgian population, and leading to an uprising.

One can say that the steam for the demonstration began in Gori, the birthplace of Stalin. On March 5th a crowd of 50,000 gathered at Stalin Square, where the “great leader”
had been born. As a poignant choice, protestors gathered at this site in order to further drive home their support and veneration for Stalin and his *Khalkhi* (people). The protestors remained at the site night and day until March 9th, when citizens from other cities joined forces. The epicenter of the demonstration then shifted to Tbilisi, where the uprising reached its peak.

Although little is known about the exact organization of the protests, scholarship seems to point to an informal group of students leading the protests. (Blauvelt, p. 652) One could make such an assumption as it was the youth of the Georgian nation whose national pride was wounded from the “Secret Speech” and Khrushchev’s policy of de-Stalinization. Defense of oppressive Stalinism and fear of what changes in politics Khrushchev would bring may seem odd to anyone familiar with Stalin’s crimes, but growing up the younger Georgians received their education in Stalinist doctrine and enjoyed the pride that came with being part of the nation that birthed the most pivotal leader of the Soviet Union. As Blauvelt explains, “Georgians’ perceptions of a ‘shift’ in the status of their republic played a role in motivating the demonstrations.” (Blauvelt, p. 652) These perceptions were in turn the driving points of the protests – the USSR’s leader was attempting to invalidate a symbol of their national pride.

To top it off, Georgian pride was also wounded further from Khrushchev’s cynical remarks about the Stalin during the Secret Speech: “All of this [Stalin’s crimes] happened under the ‘genius’ leadership of Stalin, ‘the great son of the Georgian nation,’ as Georgians like to refer to him.” Georgians rebelled against such a statement by the new First Party
Secretary, and instead, inspired by Stalin’s cult of personality and the importance of Stalin as a symbol of Georgian national strength, sang odes in Stalin’s honor and recited speeches and poems, thereby wildly exacerbating the fervor amid the rising nationalistic crowds.

Citizens speaking up for the crowd gave their demands loudly to the government as participants became increasingly heated; car horns blasted in the streets, people sang the long suppressed Georgian democratic anthem, “Dideba,” and classes were closed in Tbilisi schools and Universities. More students enthusiastically joined the demonstration, and the national zeal spread to other cities in Georgia, such as Batumi, Kutaisi and Sukhumi. This spreading of the insurrection was evidence of popular contempt against the speech. As Blauvelt argues: “...this sense of indignation was more than just elemental: the status of Stalin reflected directly on the status of Georgians and the Georgian republic,” (Blauvelt, p. 652) In this case, Khrushchev and the new USSR leadership were invalidating both Stalin’s legacy and the favorable position that Georgian citizens had grown used to occupying within the Soviet sphere.

There were other factors that led up to the events of March 1956 and Georgian anger over the tone and trajectory of Soviet policies. In addition to the catalyzing “Secret Speech,” the political environment in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in the early 1950s was undergoing foundational changes: After the death of Stalin in 1953, decentralization of power from Moscow gave Georgian leadership more autonomy and thus radically reshaped and liberalized government leadership (which in turn also affected economic decision making to a degree) in Georgia.
This radical change in ethnic Georgian political power also included the short-lived rise to power of a Georgian and one of Stalin’s closest followers, Lavrentiy Beria, to the post First Deputy Premier of the Soviet Union in 1953. Arrested not long after his assignment for treason and subsequently executed, such a display was another blow to Georgian pride and to the Stalinist cult of personality. By eliminating Beria, an opportunity for the Khrushchev administration to purge Beria’s followers also presented itself. The purge was then followed by the decision of the Party to appoint loyal party member Vasili Mzhavanadze to the post of First Party Secretary of the Georgian SSR in 1953. Mzhavanadze was to maintain and reassert Moscow’s sovereignty in the region—in particular, the new republican leader offered Khrushchev a direct line of contact and control with Tbilisi. Mzhavanadze was a veteran of the Soviet army and had been a political commissar under Khrushchev, thus his installment in Tbilisi paradoxically demonstrated Soviet power in the Georgian SSR, in spite of the policy of decentralization initiated by the Khrushchev administration in order to form a “collective leadership” of the Union. (Hosking, p.337)

Despite this affirmation of Soviet (and Khrushchev’s) power, Russian interference in local affairs of state in Georgia diminished significantly, as did Georgia’s “favored” status over the following years due to Khrushchev’s policy of decentralization. These diminishing factors both had their drawbacks as well as advantages. Such a change in political dynamic could have quite possibly created a stronger base for Georgian nationalism to prosper, yet left nationalists with the disadvantage of no longer being
somewhat shielded from brutal policies or gaining specific advantages over other
Republics.

At the heart of the 1956 Georgian uprising was concern over a loss of status in the
Soviet Union. Both then and now, scholars and observers have debated the question of
the advantageous position of Georgia in the Soviet Union and its supposed “favored
child” status. First and most importantly, Georgia was the birthplace of Stalin, and such a
fact gave the small country status as mother country of the “great leader” of the Soviet
Union. One may notice symptoms of such favoritism when examining the ethnic
backgrounds of the Soviet elite of the Stalin era and notice ethnic Georgian presence
within leadership roles; such as Lavrentiy Beria, who rose to the higher echelons of the
Soviet Party, and Sergo Orjonikidze, commissar of the Soviet Heavy Industry in 1932
and member of the Politburo. The illustration to the left of this page is an anonymous
photograph from the 1930s of Beria holding
Stalin’s daughter Svetlana (Stalin can be seen
working in the background), underscoring his
closeness to the leadership and to Stalin
personally.

Furthermore, Georgia also had become
a vacation destination for Stalin and other
cadres, lending credit to the desirability of

Figure 3 Unknown photographer, 1930s
Lavrentiy Beria and Svetlana Alliluyeva. Web.
May 2011
Georgian lands and culture, affording Georgian officials geospatial importance within the party as well as direct access to leaders within the party. Stalin had two dachas in or near Georgia, one just outside of Gagra in Abkhazia and in Sochi, a city very close to Georgia. This attracted many visitors to the region, where even “Sochi, bordering Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region, was once the resort of choice, attracting four million visitors a year in its Soviet heyday.” (Piper, p. 7) Such Party activities in the Caucasus region gave Georgian elites direct access to the “Great Leader” and those cadres who followed suit on holiday – an advantage that other states such as Uzbekistan or Tajikistan (say) certainly did not enjoy.

Clearly, this small country gave birth to the most famous ruler of the Soviet Union and was geostrategically important; this fact gave Georgia an advantageous position compared to other Republics. However, after the death of Stalin, Georgian leadership then came to “reject this view, and argue that Georgia was not privileged at all, rather claiming such statements to be fairytales used by Russians against Georgia.”(Cornell, p. 152) Nevertheless each side seems caught in a crossfire of accusations. For example, as Svante Cornell points out, “As Georgia lost 30,000 men in the Second World War, almost a tenth of the population, how can one claim that Georgia was privileged?” (p. 152) Yet other historians argue that this loss of life for Georgia was negligible compared to the deaths suffered by Russia, who suffered over 7.5 million military fatalities alone. (Malia, p. 296)

Despite Stalin being a Russian chauvinist, the fact of Stalin’s heritage did come into play in regards to his policies on Georgia. Blauvelt posits that symbolic aspects and
politicized ethnic standing, “such as ethnic backgrounds [of officials]” (p. 653) played a role in the political standing in the Georgian political hierarchy. Due to the institutional nature of the Soviet state in regards to its various republics, one can say that Georgians suffered in the same way as other republics within the Soviet Union during the purges of Stalin’s rule. However, Stalin’s heritage seems to have certainly influenced the rise and fall of ethnic Georgians within party leadership roles.

The death of Stalin in 1953 stymied any type of favorable position that Georgia or minorities of the Caucasus thought they may have had. Once Nikita Khrushchev ascended to the post of First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, things changed dramatically for Georgia, privileged or not. An example of policy change within the country (as well as other broader policies) was the reversal of the position of the police force; the most powerful tool Stalin used to directly control the SSRs. Instead, Khrushchev’s administration increased the power of local authorities in an effort to build a more stable government on the periphery.

However, the Georgian people were not to stay quiet in response to the political events and growing corruption in Georgia after Stalin’s death. Thus the protests sparked by Khrushchev’s anti-Stalin speech began somewhat quietly and would quickly transform into the major uprising that would explode in Tbilisi. (Kozlov, pp. 125-135)

Georgian Communist Party First Secretary, Vasily Mzhavanadze addressed the protestors on March 9th, 1956. In an article published in 2006 in the Russian-language American newspaper “Reporter,” journalist Marc Perlman notes that “He [Mzhavanadze]
decided that he could personally dissuade the hundreds of students in the crowd, and these
[demonstrations] would eventually dissolve in due time.” (p.1) However, the students and
other demonstrators were not persuaded to give up and go home. Largely ignorant of
Stalin’s terror, participants in the uprising were outraged at a Russian attempt to suppress
the Georgian protestors and remove them from their vigil at the birthplace of Stalin.
Understood definitively as a reaction and answer to Khrushchev’s defamation of the (at the
time considered) greatest Georgian hero ever produced, such a denouncement from
Moscow “… meant an unambiguous end to Georgia’s special status.” (Blauvelt, p. 654)
Thus after surrendering his efforts, Mzhavanadze finally listened to and began to agree
to the demands of the protestors (Suny, 1994, pp.301-305): making March 9th a holiday, film
screenings of Soviet movies such as “The Fall of Berlin” which glorified Stalin, and the
publishing of articles devoted to Stalin in the newspapers henceforth on this new holiday.
Clearly, by the time the Georgian First Secretary spoke with the crowd, the Georgian SSR
had essentially lost control of the situation, and was left to appealing to Moscow for aid.

In a concession by the Georgian SSR, the demonstrators were allowed to officially
celebrate the anniversary of Stalin’s death – something they did with much zeal. However,
during the celebrations cum protest, the demonstrations were abruptly ended on March 9th
when Soviet Defense authorities approved Mzhavanadze’s request for military action
against the protest. Troops composed of non-Georgians and Soviet tanks opened fire on a
group of celebrating students who were moving through the capital. The bloody result was
hundreds of people injured and dozens of students killed. Through this violence the protest was quickly dissolved.

Such swift action by the central government makes it evident that the Khrushchev regime did not quite know yet how to deal with lingering Stalinism and quite how much change would have to be put into effect in Georgia in order to keep nationalism from rising to a threatening level. Perhaps if the Khrushchev administration in Georgia had acknowledged that the Georgian youth had grown up in the Cult of Stalin, and that his evil deeds were not fully recognized, the protests could have been avoided. Yet this fact was not taken into consideration by Soviet leadership, and their actions seemed to ignore the pro-Stalin feelings of the general Georgian population.

To insult their sacred “Father of Nations” and then put down such a revolt that was held in his honor strengthened the resentment of the Georgian people of the central government. The events of March 1956 served as a critical juncture because support of the Soviet Union by certain segments of the Georgian people was gravely compromised. It was also after the uprising that nationalistic organizations began to emerge. Future leaders of post-Soviet Georgia such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia participated in the event, which perhaps came to be a cause of their anti-Russian stances.

These beginnings of nationalistic activity foreshadowed the future protests left in 1956’s wake, although many questions as to how this watershed affected the Georgians remain unanswered; for example, historical records do not have a reliable number of those wounded or killed when the demonstrations were put down; just who organized the
demonstrations and how; and how Soviet leadership dealt with the revolt in detail remains a mystery.

Unsurprisingly, the rebellion did not go heavily reported in other parts of the Union. When they are mentioned, the revolts are noted with an unworried stance or merely not mentioned at all. For example, on the fourth page of the March 10 1956 issue of Pravda, one of the largest newspapers in Russia, the protests are not reported but instead is reported the arrival of Chinese Marshall Chu De’s arrival in Tbilisi on March 9th. Such underreporting is very likely due to the fact that First Secretary Mzhavanadze succeeded in downplaying the protest and its victims in interviews and reports, and the Soviet government’s reluctance to admit any wrongdoing or responsibility.

It is difficult to analyze with utmost surety the results and roots of the uprising on March 9th, 1956 due to the fact (as before mentioned) that reliable original sources are rarely available to western scholars due to limited reporting and language barriers. Despite this, one can safely assume and draw conclusions from this rebellion as one that further rooted Georgian anti-Russian sentiment and created an opportunity in which Georgians could begin to rethink their position in the Soviet Union. (Suny, 1993 pp.141-146) We might base this assumption upon three major facts: the Khrushchev administration slandered Stalin’s legacy, which had popular reverence in Georgia; the people were afraid of the reforms in policy that Khrushchev brought (Suny, 1994 p.302), and finally the people were essentially lied to. They were told that they may celebrate the legacy of Stalin, and were then fired upon by the Soviet Army, killing hundreds.
Despite the consequence of a rebellion, another outcome of Khrushchev’s policies of liberalization was the creation of a semi-autonomous Soviet leadership which became prejudiced to those outside of the titular ethnicity and to the Soviet system itself. For example, minority districts in Georgia, such as Bolnisi (people of German origin) were underfunded and did not receive the amount of educational support that would be expected from Tbilisi, whereas 82.6 percent of students in higher education were of the Georgian ethnicity. (Suny, 1994, p. 305) Unfortunately, such obvious prejudice was not to change for some time. The years that followed the revolt were wrought with rising corruption under the Mzhavanadze leadership until the anti-corruption campaigns of his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze.

After the uprisings of 1956 during the Mzhavanadze administration, corruption became out of control, industrialization percentages were low and there was failure to meet the economic standards set by Moscow. It could be pointed out that this was in part a reaction to the “thawing” and decentralization of post Stalin republic policies. “Local political control and ethnic favoritism led to the growth of a vast network of illegal economic operations and exchanges, which produced great private wealth for some Georgians while their republic grew insignificantly according to official statistics,” (Suny, 1994, p. 304) thus leading to greater public discontent with the political system. It was also during the late 1950s that dissident nationalism became apparent within the social underground, and participation in these organizations was made illegal. It is interesting to note here that another result of the 1956 movement was that the uprising
inspired future leader and democratically elected President of post-Soviet Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his associates, as after the rebellion they became active dissidents and would later publicize their beliefs and be arrested for their distribution of anti-Soviet literature and for their outcries of human rights violations against the Soviets to the West. Though little is known about the activities of these anti-Soviet organizations at the time of their formation, Gamsakhurdia’s group Gorgansliani, named for the founder of Tbilisi, became well known after the fact due to the future notoriety of its members. (Kozlov, pp.132-134)

Thus the lasting results of the 1956 uprising and the inadequate handling by the Soviet government, combined with the loosening of direct political control, was creation of a space for Georgians to further consolidate the Georgian ethnicity and political structure, which produced a turning point in the relations between Russia and Georgia. After this event, an ongoing breakdown of relations would continue. However, the events of 1956, which were ended by force, were of little consequence to Moscow. Yet, where the Georgian people may have been silenced in 1956, the anti-Soviet sentiment remained at large in the people themselves.

1978

Nepotism, bribery, and weak leadership led to Mzhavanadze’s dismissal in 1972. (Suny, 1994, p. 313) Once Eduard Shevardnadze, who had campaigned for the
position, was appointed to the post of First Party Secretary in Georgia, central authorities in Moscow assigned him with the task of cleaning up corruption and suppressing the black market that had grown rapidly under Mzhavanadze. Shevardnadze was known for his emphatically anti-corruption stance and his hardnosed Soviet political loyalty and ideals. (Suny, 1993, pp. 306-310) One may also say that Shevardnadze was a Russian chauvinist, valuing the Russian language and culture higher than that of Georgia through his pro-Russian activities.

After the new Soviet Constitution, often referred to as the “Brezhnev Constitution,” was adopted in October of 1977, Georgia’s Supreme Soviet approved a draft in which Georgian was no longer the state language, unlike in the constitution adopted in 1936. This radical move was in part an attempt by the Soviet Party to further absorb and attack the existence of “ethnic chauvinism” in the anomaly that was the three major Transcaucasian republics; the Georgian SSR, the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijani SSR. The Soviet administration revoked each of these republics’ titular national state languages in a similar manner, but none so protested as in Georgia. Furthermore, these protests came after First Party Secretary of the Georgian SSR, Eduard Shevardnadze, tried twice before to install Russian as the official state language. He attempted to accomplish this by the use of educational means, the first attempt in 1973 when the Russian language was made a compulsory class in children’s schools and again in 1975 Universities were mandated to use Russian language only textbooks. (Suny, 1993, pp. 306-310) But why did this happen? Caught betwixt the demands for economic improvement and political control placed on
him by central authorities, Shevardnadze developed a unique, if not controversial strategy. Shevardnadze attempted to foster cohesion between Georgia and larger Russia, while improving his own career—a strategy that ultimately did just the opposite. (Suny, 1994, pp. 307-309)

The Current Digest of the Soviet Press published a transcript of the speech that Shevardnadze gave to the Extraordinary Eight Session of the Ninth Georgian Republic Supreme Soviet on March 24th, 1978, in which the First Secretary clearly expresses his views on the draft change to the state language: “Once again we must tell our own people and our young people that along with the study of our native language and along with respect for our native language, if we wish always to strive toward the world at large, if we want to master the achievements of science and maintain our ties with contemporary world civilization, it is essential to respect and study the remarkable and rich language of the great Russian people, the Russian language… .”(p. 12) Such a statement by the leader of the Georgian SSR clearly points to his admiration for Russian culture more so than his own, although such championing of things Russian may also have reflected his own efforts to advance within the Soviet system. Through a pro-Georgian lens, one might also accuse Shevardnadze of being a Russian chauvinist.

Thus on April 14th, 1978 the next major demonstration of the Georgian people against the Soviet regime came in response to Soviet Party approval of Shevardnadze revoking the status of the indigenous Georgian language as the constitutional state language, thus making the Russian language official instead.
This unabashed amendment in policy caused ethnic conflict and an uproar among the public, who formed a crowd and marched down the main thoroughfare of Rustaveli Street from Tbilisi State University to the Georgian Government buildings on April 14th, 1978. With Georgia’s ethnic Georgian population being reported in 1968 and 1970 as hovering around 66.8-68% at the time (USSR Census), the changes in language policy were an utter outrage for the majority of citizens. The uprising began with “as many as 20,000” participants according a phone call received by The New York Times (Whitney, p. 2), as well as a reported “5,000 students” (Whitney, p. 2) being involved in the protest. These numbers tend to fluctuate in public reporting; therefore it is interesting to note here that the officially recorded number by the USSR is that of five thousand participants, the majority of whom were students. This seems to suggest a possible Soviet cover up of information on the event, perhaps in an effort to control the damage that was done and to prevent other republics from getting similar ideas. For example, in the April 15th, 1978 edition of Pravda, the revolt went virtually unreported. A small article was included on the sixth page of the daily newspaper, stating that questions about the “Constitutional Project” were being decided by a “plenum at the heart of the commission, which approved the submission to the Committee with additions and refinements made to the amendments on the basis of public discussion and considered by the extraordinary session of the Supreme Soviet.” (p. 6) Whereas the article is obviously referring to the issues of the constitutional language amendment, this article clearly made no mention of what the “questions” even were, much less mentioning an uprising within Georgia itself. The demonstrations ended
when the Soviet administration in Georgia, giving into popular demands, reinstated the Georgian language as the state language. Shevardnadze came out first to the crowd and *The New York Times* (as well as other news sources) quoted him as asking the crowd “My children, what are you doing?” (Klose, p. A18) before being roughly cursed at. The *Washington Post* reports that the crowd responded to him “We are not your children!” (Klose, p. A18), which underscores the anti-Shevardnadze sentiment of the crowd. Shevardnadze reemerged later and guaranteed the angry crowds that the titular language had been reinstated, effectively satiating the demands of the protestors and thus dissolving the uprising peacefully. (Cornell, Suny, 1994) Due to his “unusual concession” (Whitney, 1978), the events of 1978 are frequently referred to in Soviet historical literature as an embarrassing incident for young Shevardnadze, who at the age of 49 had become the new First Party Secretary of the Georgian SSR where most of the Party’s leadership was nearing geriatric. Therefore, such a concession by Shevardnadze to the protestors created Party criticism and a problem for him: he had to defend his reputation to the Soviet Party as an energetic and motivated leader of the Georgian republic – one who turned Georgia around significantly after his installment.

Furthermore, that the First Secretary lent concessions to the general public was highly unusual. Perhaps such a peaceful resolution demonstrated Shevardnadze’s own priorities to pacify central authorities and local government with that of a crackdown on corruption, alcoholism and other shady business, rather than begin an ethnic clash that would only lead to further the people’s anti-Russian resentment. However, he was not
successful in avoiding causing ethnic issues entirely – for example, how could Shevardnadze approach why the Russian language was more important than the titular national one without inferring that Russian language was of a higher importance and level of civilization? Reinstating the Georgian language was “a clear indication of the uneasiness and caution of government policy toward the new nationalism.” (Suny, 1994, p. 309)

In the aftermath of the protest, April 14th became known as the “Day of the Georgian Language” and has since the 1990s been recognized by the general Georgian public as being the birthday for a renewed Georgian nationalist movement and a day in which to commemorate the uprising that saved the Georgian language from Soviet oppression.

Moreover, the uprising of 1978 significantly expressed and bolstered Georgian nationalism --- Shevardnadze’s attack on the Georgian language expressed a Soviet assault on the majority and another reason for the people to unify together to protect national identity. The rise in national consciousness would be the key rationale that would come into play in the next major uprising.

Interestingly, despite the almost immediate reinstatement of Georgian as the state language and the current democratic independence of Georgia, the 1978 event still has resonance today. Although it is unclear just how widespread, some Georgians feel as though the majority language still needs to be under protection. For example, the Georgian news source “Rustavi2” reported that in 2008 on the anniversary of the 1978 demonstration, members of the Christian Democratic Party marched in memory of the
original protest, their leader citing that “the language needs protection and a national chamber of language control must be created. Participants of the rally would send the corresponding demand to the Parliament of Georgia.”(2008)

1989

Being hailed as the catalyst that lead to the independence of the Georgian people, the Tbilisi uprisings in March and April of 1989 were the most important in recent Georgian history. Often referred to as the 9 Aprilis Tragedia (9 აპრილის ტრაგედია), or The April 9th Tragedy, the event began as an anti-secessionist movement (against Abkhazian secession from Georgia) and quickly escalated into a heated anti-Soviet, pro-independence demonstration, unlike the previous uprising in 1978 (which did not demand separation from the USSR, only changes in policies within it).

As of 1931, Abkhazia was an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. Despite this supposed autonomy, Georgia had strong and direct power over the republic. Under Beria, Georgians and Russians alike were encouraged to settle in Abkhazia, in part to aide in control of the territory and solidify union with the larger republic. During the Stalin years, Abkhazia had “suffered the loss of their native communist leaders, persecution of intellectuals, forced collectivization and the steady imposition of Georgian culture and language.”(Suny, 1994, p. 321) The Abkhaz felt forced to become less Abkhaz by such policies. Thus when the Stalinist terror was over in the latter half of the 1930s there was an internal push to create a more Abkhazian republic. However, this was met with much
resistance from Georgian administration and never proved entirely successful. The root of the spring uprising emerged earlier in the year of 1989, when unofficial leaders and top intellectuals in Abkhazia sent a petition to Moscow requesting permission to cede from Soviet Georgia, in expectation of becoming an Autonomous Union Republic within the USSR. (Cornell, pp. 158-183)

Naturally, once Abkhazia made the move to secede from Georgia in 1989, the other territorially contentious region, South Ossetia, immediately and openly supported this action. Due to rising anti-Soviet sentiments and the rumblings of a Georgian independence movement, both of these regions had grown afraid of the possibility of Georgian sovereignty. Elites in the area had “…a genuine fear of what the success of Georgian nationalism would mean to the minorities, who were directly threatened…” (Cornell, p. 156) However, in Georgia proper, moves toward Abkhazian autonomy ignited anti-secessionist groups, quickly leading into an anti-Soviet display.

The demonstrations began gradually at first, when on April 4th, 1989, approximately one hundred and fifty Georgian nationalists initiated a hunger strike in front of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia’s residence, protesting Abkhazia’s ceding from the GSSR and demanding independence for the nation from the Soviet Union. The hunger strike came as a consequence of the growing anti-Soviet movement, which had gained widespread momentum since the 1956 uprising in Tbilisi and from mounting territorial strains with Abkhazia and Ossetia. The demonstrations quickly expanded, and people from
all over the country poured into Tbilisi, factories shut down and businesses went on strike all in support or in reaction to the commotion.

The demonstrations, led by the “Independence Committee” (most notably including Zviad Gamsakhurdia) protested Abkhaz secession and demanded the punishment of those responsible for the attempt, and the restoration of Georgian sovereignty. The number of protestors is said to have been over 15,000, yet Russian newspaper Pravda reported on April 9th (on only the third page of the newspaper) that there were “…one thousand people, most of which are youths” (TASS, p. 3) who were protesting the questioning of the change of the status of Abkhazia to that of an independent region. Pravda called the leaders of the protest an “informal union” and that “the heat of the atmosphere [of the protest] pushed unacceptable demands” (TASS, p. 3). The report seemed to characterize the protest as something not to be taken seriously, especially given that the protest was not even making the front page of the daily newspaper. Both former First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party Eduard Shevardnadze and the First Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev were away in Great Britain at the time. The Soviet Georgian figures left in power had to demand permission from Moscow to use army forces to disrupt the protest.

Aware of the consequences the demonstrators might face, then Patriarch of Georgia, Illia II, pleaded with demonstrators to leave Rustaveli Avenue in lieu of being put down violently by the Soviet military, due to the presence of tanks nearby. Demonstrators did not heed this warning, however, and at 3:45 a.m. on April 9, 1989 the General on duty, Igor Rodionov ordered Soviet troops, to break up the protestors by any means necessary. The
troops advanced: armed with shovels, CN gas, tear gas, batons, and an order to stop the rioting at all costs. (Suny, p. 322)

Tragically, “by any means necessary,” meant the death of twenty people, most of whom were women. The stampede following the advancement of the Soviet troops on the crowd resulted in the majority of injuries and deaths killing nineteen, most dying of suffocation from the panicked crowds. Videos of brutality by the army surfaced after the attacks. However, the Soviet reports blamed the aggressive crowds for the results of the demonstration, citing that protestors attacked first with rocks, sticks, and knives from the angry mob. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that “Activist Sergei Dandurov reported that several people threw themselves at the tanks, shouting, ‘Death to the Russian occupiers!’ Other demonstrators screamed, ‘Down with the rotting Russian empire!’ and ‘Get off Georgian land!’ as they stoned the tanks and broke windows on a military car” (p. 1A) Whereas the protest began peacefully and became more aggressive, Soviet forces were mobilized to end the protest entirely.

Mikhail Gorbachev blamed all responsibility for the fiasco in Tbilisi on Georgian First Secretary Jumber Patiashvili’s poor decision making in mobilizing the Soviet military:
"Our misguided tendencies were seen in the reactions of Jumber Patiashvili, that is, his resort to force instead of political methods. In this case it was particularly important that Patiashvili failed to reach an understanding with the Georgian intelligentsia. But this is the Georgian intelligentsia! A special group, closely tied to their people throughout history, more there than anywhere else…But Patiashvili and his people… they have a taste for ‘decisive action.’” (Chernyav, 1997, pp. 218-19) Gorbachev’s statement seems to recognize the importance of the Georgian elites, something that had not been acknowledged in the previous uprisings.

Furthermore, while the 1989 incident was a stain on the record of the army leadership, as such an abuse of human rights went virtually unpunished. Shevardnadze allegedly covered up the incident by taking tighter control of the Georgian Party and placing the blame on the Soviet Army. General Rodionov was found guilty in the deaths of innocent civilians and was discharged from his position. The Ministry of Defense blamed provocation from the protestors for the actions that were taken, conducting its own investigation and finding evidence they deemed satisfactory to conclude upon this as fact. Criticism of the military action after the incident led to so-called “Tbilisi Syndrome,” in which the Soviet military would later be extremely hesitant to interfere with interethnic disputes. (Bogert)(Suny, 1993, p. 128) However, blame gaming did not change one significant fact: it was all too obvious to the Soviet regime and the international community that Georgia was headed for independence and “towards the breakup of the union.” (Malia, p. 443).
Georgia’s people had had enough of the Soviet regime and were willing to fight against it. The popularity of the independence movement reached an all time high within the population. Malia points out that “Thus, in the course of 1988-1989 all three Caucasian republics had gone far beyond perestroika---the policy of economic and political restructuring within the Soviet Union under Gorbachev—and towards the breakup of the Soviet Union.” (p. 443)

Hence, if putting down the crowd violently was thought to have been a way to kill off Georgian nationalistic spirit, the Soviets were hardly correct. The “massacre” and suppression of the protest merely bolstered national pride and anti-Soviet sentiment to new heights and cost the regime “any remaining legitimacy.” (Waters, p. 48) Speaking out against the Soviets, nationalists debated even the legitimacy of the Soviet takeover in 1921:

The Associated Press quoted in a dispatch on the Supreme Soviet's meeting from the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, that "from a legal viewpoint, the entry of troops into Georgia and the seizing of the entire territory was military interference, or intervention, and occupation with the goal of changing the existing political structure." (Sydney Herald, p. 7)

Thus, as a consequence of the 1989 protest and the brutality that followed, the Georgian national movement was “transformed into a radical movement” (Suny, 1994,p. 323) that would eventually prove successful in fostering independence for the nation.

Gorbachev’s international advisor, Anatoly Chernyav wrote in his diary that (which was later published) "Georgia is a fateful sign…. If they [Georgians] wanted to leave the USSR, then this is something ominous." (Chernyav, p. 220)
What started as a territorial dispute turned into an independence movement finally resulted in freedom for Georgia. Two years later, in a referendum on March 31st, 1991, Georgians voted in favor of independence from the Soviet Union. On the second anniversary of the 1989 tragedy, April 9th, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia declared the country sovereign and independent from the Soviet Union.
CHAPTER 4: Consequences and Conclusions

The consequences of these three major Soviet-era Georgian rebellions are clear. First and foremost, Georgia experienced an upsurge of Georgian nationalism and a rise in anti-Russian sentiment. Furthermore, the idea that Georgian nationalism must be tied to an independent state grew rapidly. Such changes pushed the independence movement forward in Georgia and away from any hope of reform within the Soviet system. The feeling of anti-Russian sentiment continued through the end of the Soviet period and into the contemporary era, playing a role in the ethno-politics of the region and in conflicts that still are occurring between Russia and Georgia (despite serious changes in leadership and government structures on both sides).

As illustrated in this thesis, the revolts of 1956, 1978 and 1989 in Soviet Georgia were due to and against Soviet authorities’ mishandling of ethno-political issues. Each of these uprisings undermined Georgian territorial and ethnic integrity as well as devalued symbols of national legacy. The invalidation of Stalin as a national hero and symbol of Georgia triggered the uprising of 1956. Whereas after 1956 Georgia may have lost favored status and its elites had less opportunity in central government, the outcome
maintained Georgia within the Soviet Union as well as fostered nation building; Georgian administrators essentially gained more freedom in local affairs (from Khrushchev’s de-centralization policies) provided that as they kept nationalism under control in the region. Shevardnadze’s attack on Georgian ethnic identity through revoking Georgian as the official State language began the demonstrations in 1978. Through this imposition, the Georgian speaking population was able to unify against one power — the Soviets. Such unification was crucial for nationalism to grow within the country. Finally, 1989 was sparked due to territorial disputes with separatist regions within Georgia, which then evolved into an anti-Soviet independence movement for the entire republic. Each of the uprisings was different in that until 1989, a move for complete independence from Russia was not prominent. It was in 1989 that the culmination of the uprisings caused the majority of the Georgian people to finally say ‘enough’ and move forward into an independent Georgian state.

Thus the anti-Russian sentiment that was developed in the Imperial Period was different from the anti-Russian sentiment that became a focal point in 1989’s uprising, with the divergence in these feelings lying in the resulting domino effect after the rebellion of 1956. What one can learn from each of these uprisings is that Georgian ethno-political discontent—that had been growing, if slowly, since Russians took control in 1801—helped to foster the uprisings that took place in the post World War II period, which themselves then led up to the territorial and ethnic issues of today, illustrating for us the roots of the anti-Russian stance of modern Georgia.
This epilogue briefly explores the connection of the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the anti-Russian sentiment that grew during Georgia’s time as a republic in the Soviet Union. I posit that the antipathy which developed exponentially between Russia and Georgia after the uprisings of the Soviet era (as discussed in Chapter 3) are what formed the basis for the mutual antipathy of today. As the foundation of hostility the uprisings, in particular the uprising of 1989 (specifically the broader question of territorial integrity), are partly to blame for the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. Despite these connections, tensions between the two countries also depend on leadership within Georgia. Under current President Mikhail Saakashvili, for example, tensions have run high. Thus leadership contributed and continues to define the parameters of interactions post 1991.

We can further understand current tensions that erupted by taking into account that the 2008 event came after the bloody Georgian civil war that was waged against South Ossetia and Abkhazia from December 21st, 1991 through January 6th 1992, in which many perished. The Georgians fought against the separatists to keep Georgia unified, however, Russia supported Abkhazia and Ossetia. Russian involvement resulted in a cease fire negotiation to avoid confrontation with Georgia on a larger scale. (Spencer, pp. 413-434) The results of this ethnic war was the flight of most ethnic Georgians from the area, unification of anti-Abkhaz sentiments (in Georgia proper), as well as leaving
Abkhazia with a status of de facto independence from Georgia yet de jure still considered part of Georgia, unrecognized by most international powers as independent.

In 2008, the Russian Federation supported separatist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and began granting Russian passports to separatist citizens in 2006-2007. Outraged, Tbilisi fought back against this trend by declaring it illegal and disputing the actions, but soon found itself utterly powerless to stop Russia’s influence on the separatist regions. But Georgia was not willing to let go of part of its sovereign territory to the country that undermined them to begin with.

Thus mounting tensions between the two nations finally exploded in the five day Russo-Georgian war of August 2008, with the invasion of Russian forces into Abkhazia, Ossetia, and briefly deep into Georgia. This “little” war was stimulated by three major political reasons: first, the rise of Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili (former President Vladimir Putin’s public disapproval of Georgian President Saakashvili is a factor in the lead up to the war); second, Georgia’s and NATO’s recognition of an independent Kosovo; something that Russia is very much against; and finally, the agreement of NATO members to one day grant Georgia a “Membership Action Plan”, a sign of Georgian alignment with the West, rather than what was left of the former Soviet bloc. Indeed, many political scholars go so far as to say that “…the real reason conflict escalated was because of his [Saakashvili’s] success in turning the country around and
starting to transform it into a viable candidate for eventual membership in NATO.”

(Asmus, p. 217)

Identity issues were also a factor in this conflict. For example, Abkhazia, which was a player in the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War, problematically dealt with ethnic Georgians in the area during the years after Soviet independence. Due to these issues, many Abkhazians considered Russian citizenship. “About 90 percent of Abkhaz people here have taken dual Russian citizenship. But for people who are not ethnic Abkhaz, dual citizenship is not allowed [by political Russian authorities], and Georgian citizenship is frowned on.” (Bahrampour, quoting interviewee.) Russian withholding of passports to those Abkhaz claiming Georgian ethnicity points to an anti-Georgian stance. However, Georgia maintained their right to the separatist territories and blamed Russia for the dispute.

Coincidently, the international press seems to side with the Georgians in terms of the recent conflict in 2008 when hostilities came knocking yet again (as in 1989) on Georgia’s door due to separatist sentiments in Ossetia and Abkhazia. “It was Russian forces which crossed the state border (in August 2008). There are Georgian territories which are occupied,” says Nikoloz Vashakidze, Georgia's Deputy Defense Minister. “These realities offer a clear picture about who was the aggressor in this war. No PR strategies or tricks can change this reality.” (Esselmont) Statements of a pro-Georgian nature are common in reporting on the conflict.
Furthermore, as in the civil war of the 1990s, the Russian Federation backed the breakaway regions’ (Abkhazia and Ossetia) claims to autonomy, a claim that few national powers supported or recognized at that time. After many years of struggling as a semi-autonomous region they were finally acknowledged after the war in 2008 by Russia (as well as Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru) as fully distinct from the Georgian nation. However, no other countries, and most importantly, no major world powers recognized Ossetia or Abkhazia as independent.

Whereas Russia’s occupation of the area in the 2008 conflict was condemned by world powers, such as the United States, Russia still maintains a presence in these breakaway regions. This presence serves to further erode friendly relations. Public opinion poll shows that Georgians are increasingly against good relations with the Russians, Gallup claiming that the percentage who would like good relations “down 17 percentage points to 47% in May 2009 from a pre-war 64% in June 2008.” (2009) There are also claims of Russian conspiracy against Georgia and the “withholding” of Abkhazia. It is of particular note that such a sentiment has been often reported in many trusted news sources, such as the BBC, that Georgia suspects that the Russian Federation is in a constant scheme to “Divide and rule” what is left of the Republic of Georgia. Furthermore the border between the breakaway regions and Georgia proper is closely guarded by Russian troops (more so in 2008) but one must pass through and be approved by the military for entrance into Abkhazia and Ossetia.
Thus Georgian sympathizers or conspiracy theorists tend to theorize that Russia attempted to weaken the Georgian government by controlling the northern lands due to a pervasive imperial mindset; perhaps further strengthened by the fact that Russia has permanently stationed troops in the region, as well as opened embassies. (Washington Times, p.1) Russia also requires a visa of any Georgians entering Russia – but not of Abkhazians or Ossetians. The BBC quotes Ghia Nodia, director of the School of Caucasus Studies at Ilia State University in Tbilisi: "Some people want better relations with Russia. But politically it is not important," (Esslemont) Such a statement is representative of the assumption (by Georgian academia) that Georgian political leaders are not interested in soothing tensions with Russia, and is a prime example of how some of the Georgian people have grown weary of these tensions. However, the Russian government is not interested in acquittal of the Ossetian and Abkhazian conflict. It would seem that Russian authorities are unsympathetic because of Georgia’s many disagreements with them over territory and where Georgia is headed in terms of political alignment – the West. Reuters reported that on an April 2011 visit to South Ossetia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted that “Russia was ready to do anything to protect the Georgian breakaway region….” This could be indicative of serious conflict between the two nations once again.

Hence Russia remains bitter against her southern neighbor as well. One can say that most conservative Russians feel suspicious and angry in return – the Georgians being held in the same basket of violent treachery as the Chechens. For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov publically accused Georgia a year after the 2008 conflict as being “ready for [to
make] another provocation.” (Pravda) Izvestia reported in 2009 that “In general, Russia believes that Georgia itself is trying to resolve conflicts by using violence,” (Kolodin) making out Georgia to be a tiny Napoleon on the Caucasus. These conflicts are all examples of the current tension between the Georgians and the Russians, a tension that has reached an all-time strain and could perhaps evolve into larger conflicts in the future. But how did relations between Georgians and Russians boil over into today’s resentments?

One might draw the conclusion that the territorial “little war” of 2008 was a continuation or a loose end left by the uprising of 1989. In fact, President Mikhail Saakashvili said in a media report that “Ostensibly, this war is about an unresolved separatist conflict. Yet in reality, it is a war about the independence and the future of Georgia. And above all, it is a war over the kind of Europe our children will live in. Let us be frank: This conflict is about the future of freedom in Europe.” (p. A15) Such a bold statement from the Georgian President speaks to the nature of Georgia’s current feelings toward its northern neighbor. Yet how is this tied to 1989? One could posit that 1989 did not resolve separatist sentiments in minority regions of Georgia. By leaving this issue unresolved, the ability for the separatist regions (as well as Russia) to pick it back up was merely inevitable, as we have seen with the territorial conflicts that followed.

Also in the late summer of 2008, Georgia filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice accusing Russia of ethnic cleansing and human rights abuses in the five day war of the summer of 2008. Recently on 1 April 2011, the United Nations rejected this claim on the basis that the UN had no jurisdiction over the case. The Moscow Times
reported that “The court ruled that even though Russia and Georgia had been at odds for years over the status of the disputed territory, a dispute based on the convention only started during the 2008 conflict and no serious attempt was made to settle it before Georgia filed its case on the last day of the war.” This loss for Georgia also insults their national legacy because the battle remains unresolved and lands that Georgians feel are their sovereign territory are withheld from their direct control. Thus it seems that the status quo, as awkward as it currently may stand, may survive for some time in the future.

In a report published in the Wall Street Journal, President Mikhail Saakashvili openly accused Russia of trying to hinder Georgian independence. “No country of the former Soviet Union has made more progress toward consolidating democracy, eradicating corruption and building an independent foreign policy than Georgia. This is precisely what Russia seeks to crush.” (p. A15) His statement clearly defines his administration’s take on the Russian conflict: one in which Georgia is the victim. More recently in a speech on May 6th, 2011, President Saakashvili exemplified further the continuing contempt for Russian interference in Georgia as well Georgian nationalism as he spoke on the National Day of the Police; “We have succeeded to revive the feeling that this is our country, which belongs to each of us regardless of ethnic and religious interests, to all generations, this is a feeling that however, strong and organized our enemy is, we will be much organized and stronger with the firmness of our souls and what is the most important, we shall always have our dignity. We have all regained our dignity, which irritates our adversaries most of all.” (Rustavi 2, p.1) The fact that the
president of the Georgian nation used the word “irritates” demonstrates a passive aggressive stance. Saakashvili is caught in that he can seemingly do nothing, but must also remain in a defensive stance with Russia.

Whether Georgia’s journey as an independent, democratic nation will be a successful one is yet to be seen, and may teeter upon its relationship with Russia. While Russia is looking inward toward itself and its former republics, Georgia is still determined to “Go West,” and one can assume that Georgia will continue to seek a place in NATO - which will only continue to separate these two countries. Whether the causation of a defensive (“Us against Them”) moral sentiment was earned by either side or not, it continues to shape the outcome of Russian-Georgian international relations today.

Yet where will Georgian-Russian relations go from here? Unfortunately, nothing was resolved at the end of the conflict in 2008. It seems inevitable that this conflict will not end in the near future, and remain merely frozen. Russia appears to be stubborn in their influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, undermining Georgia’s territorial integrity. The Western standpoint of involvement may seem lessened, but could indeed change if violence is to break out once more. One can hope that the permanent resolution is carried out in a peaceful manner, not on the battlefield; however, when it comes to the dynamic between Georgia and Russia over the last century – history tends to repeat itself.
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