

Erase, Rewind, Repeat: Russia's Habit of Planting Fake Memories

In May 1921, the Bolshevik Soviet administration of Georgia was preparing to celebrate Independence Day. You read that right: the Kremlin stooges that invaded an independent country with the full force of the Red Army, the country whose sovereignty and borders they solemnly pledged and recognized only a year earlier, were readying to celebrate its independence. Cynicism? Certainly. Political calculation – definitely. But importantly, a habit of twisting the truth and falsifying memory would be perfected in the putrid corridors of the Cheka and the KGB and become a political instrument of domination and whitewashing. The machine is still going strong in Putin's Russia – and the web of lies that it weaves sometimes ends up conjuring images so absurd as to confuse its staunchest detractors.

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The lessons from the fall of the short-lived but vibrant Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921) are not a simple historical curiosity. They may serve as a case study in Russia, combining the crimes of aggression, persecution, and purges with subtler but no less damaging instruments of memory politics – something that can be instructive as we all grapple with Moscow's ongoing aggression against Ukraine.

So, let us get back to that gloomy Tbilisi spring of 1921. The Red Army invaded in February 1921 on the pretext of a “workers’ uprising” in the region bordering already Sovietized Armenia and Azerbaijan – which it barely took an effort to window-dress as genuine. There were two good reasons for the nakedness of that aggression.

One was internal: we can have it from the words of Filipe Makharadze, the leader of the Georgian Communists and the head of the “Revolutionary Committee” right after the invasion. He wrote at the end of 1921 in an internal report that the situation of the Georgian Communist Party at the



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beginning of 1921 [was “hopeless.”](#) In exchange for Bolshevik Russia recognizing the country’s independence in 1920, the government in Tbilisi agreed to “legalize” the Communist Party but Makharadze says that the legalization “was a trap.” Soon, most Communist leaders were behind bars for illicit activities. Others were tracked by counterintelligence. By the beginning of 1921, “the Communist Party of Georgia was beheaded entirely,” writes Makharadze, to the extent that “when the Red Army attacked, no [Communist] party cell, no party member had any idea about its purpose or objectives.”

Another reason was external: in December 1920, the League of Nations turned down Georgia’s application to join this international body, a precursor of the United Nations. The reason? *Le Temps* [reported](#) on that debate, something which is quite curious from today’s perspective. Paris named the “Russian issue” as the reason for its opposition. Namely, the French representative argued that since Article 10 of the League of Nations obliged its members to defend other members should they be threatened, protecting Georgia against Bolshevik Russia “would be quite complicated.” When the British and Norwegian representatives (none other than Fridtjof Nansen) objected, the German representative asked rhetorically: “Which of you is ready to send an expedition force?” Historian Beka Kobakhidze says that Georgia lost its geopolitical significance once the Bolsheviks captured Baku with its oilfields. The League of Nations’ decision was only the formalization of that fact. The message was heard loud and clear in Moscow.

So, the invasion it was. After initial confusion and disarray, the Georgian Army regained its spirit and [took a stand](#) at the entrance of Tbilisi, even briefly routing the invaders on 18-19 February. Close to ten thousand Georgians were defending the city, including 166 young military academy cadets (remember them; it would be useful for our story), and some 40 thousand militaries were resisting

country-wide. But the invasion force was too large. When the Kemalist Turkey’s troops invaded from the south, the situation became untenable. The high military command decided to leave Tbilisi on 24 February. Military resistance to the Bolsheviks formally ended in March. The Constituent Assembly convened one last time to transfer full powers to the government and ordered some ministers to leave the country and seek support abroad.

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But even though the Bolsheviks took the capital, their situation was precarious. To start with, they had few local supporters. If in other (re)conquered lands, they were flying the red banner of workers’ liberation from the nationalist governments, the Social Democrats were in power in Georgia and were by far more popular than the Bolsheviks. The Social Democratic Party congress that the occupiers allowed on 10 April 1921 erupted into [bitter criticism](#) of the regime and affirmation of the [will to fight](#) for independence. The country had inhaled the air of independence with full lungs and did not want to let it go.

“We have to admit,” [wrote](#) Makharadze to the Kremlin, “that in the past three or four years, Georgian masses have gotten used to Georgia’s independence [...] I have to say, this development was unexpected for me, too, but it was impossible not to take it into account.” Here you have the reason for the Bolshevik’s “softly-softly” approach at the beginning of the occupation and the attempt to keep the pretense of the country’s independence. But Silibistro Jibladze, a veteran Social Democrat with years spent evading the Tsarist gendarmerie,

was not fooled. He [wrote](#) to his émigré colleagues in June 1921: “The main issue is not in [so far the absence of] physical terror, but in the moral terror that has already started and which will be necessarily followed by arrests and other kinds of trouble...”

But the majority were not so foresightful. Arch-priest at one Tbilisi church, a “citizen priest” as he called himself, Nikita Talakvadze, [confided](#) in his diary: “For several days, after the Red Army entered Tbilisi, inhabitants were fearfully awaiting executions, but when none came, life returned to its usual old pace.” Even if they persecuted the intelligence, army, and national guard officials, the new overlords left political opponents and ordinary people alone. A mere “change of government” took place; the new masters signaled that life goes on, and so does the independent Georgia.

Not only did the Communists allow the fallen Georgian soldiers (including cadets) to be buried with honors and accompanied by large mourning crowds on the grounds of the central Tbilisi church, they also took steps toward symbolic reconciliation. Forty-two Georgian and Russian soldiers who fell in one of the last battles on 4 March were buried together in the capital. Georgian Bolsheviks and the Russian military spoke of “the last victims of Menshevism.” And in May, they were trying to hijack Independence Day.

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In the provinces, counter-demonstrations were held, flags of independent Georgia were flown, and speakers decried occupation. The Red Army had to disband these gatherings by force. Many were wounded, several were killed, and mass arrests were made. The “soft” phase started to wane and marking 26 May was forbidden beginning in 1922. Georgia’s independence had to be forgotten.

Drawing the Veil of Forgetting

One should resist the temptation to paint Russia’s every trick of information warfare as part of a grand design, an intentional move of a chess grandmaster. Much of it is improvisation, sometimes borne out of bitter internal political contests. Over the years, adaptations were made due to historical circumstances. However, the intent to obfuscate and modify historical memory was always there. After all, as the popular saying goes, the Soviet Union was a “country with an unpredictable past.”

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The components of the disinformation policy that the Bolsheviks and then the USSR mounted are still familiar. Their first task was to preempt mass rebellion and thus split the Social Democrats from their support base. They accused the former government of:

- “Selling the country to the Western capitalists” - when Soviet Russia invaded it;
- “Attempting to give Adjara to Turkey” - when the fleeing troops of the Georgian Democratic Republic kept control of Adjara and ceded it to

the Bolshevik government while Soviet Russia signed off two districts under Georgian control to Turkey under the Treaty of Moscow and then the Treaty of Kars;

- “Starting the war with (Soviet) Russia and unnecessarily sacrificing ‘Georgian boys’” - when it was Bolshevik Russia that initiated the aggression;
- “Trying to bring foreign (Western) troops to Georgia” - which was not even an option available at that time;
- “Stealing the National Treasure” - which was indeed taken by the government-in-exile but then returned with an itemized list of cultural artifacts. Only limited treasury funds were indeed (and quite logically) used to finance the government-in-exile’s representation.

Obviously, some of these messages were directed at the “workers and peasants” - a core base for all parties at that time, whom the Bolsheviks desperately tried to wrestle away from Social Democrats (in vain). But interestingly, the Communists also nurtured nationalist sentiment, trying to position themselves, and not their predecessors, as the true defenders of Georgian interests.

“We had to show to the masses that we are truly standing on the pro-independence platform; it was impossible to speak about independence and to deny or destroy it by actions,” wrote Makharadze. “Yes, this was a concession to the nationalist feeling of the masses, but not an essential one,” he continued, saying that the concession was necessary so the Bolsheviks could “take away the trump card” from their opponents.

A combination of both messages was used to cajole and corrupt the few remaining elements of the erstwhile democratic system - left-wing political parties that opposed Social Democrats. Social-Federalists and Socialist-Revolutionaries, relatively marginal during the previous government,

sided with the new masters early on and helped publicize and proliferate the Bolshevik talking points.

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While the defection of these parties helped create confusion in the first year of occupation, their services were soon no longer required. Russia is keen on killing such circumstantial allies first. The 26 May 1921 fiasco led to the regime’s hardening. Holdover political parties and their newspapers were closed down. Despite the objections of veteran Georgian communists – Makharadze, Budu Mdivani, and others – the Kremlin ordered the formal trappings of independence to be eradicated. By 1922, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic became a part of the Transcaucasian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic and, in that form, joined the newly founded USSR. Protestations of the Georgian Bolsheviks were not forgotten – in the late 1920s, most of them were accused of “nationalist leanings,” pushed out of the top positions, and then executed during the 1937-38 Stalinist purges.

From Vilification to Ridicule

As they were just settling in, [writes](#) historian David Khvadagiani, the Bolsheviks in Tbilisi feared insurrection led by the ousted Social Democrats. Many of them still remained in the country and had loyal followers. Early propaganda portrayed them as vicious, murderous people bent on unleashing the imperialist war. The propaganda movie [Their Kingdom](#), which hit the screens in 1928, manipulated archive footage and peppered it with quotes from the Communist Party pantheon to push this message.

However, the armed insurrection against the Bolsheviks, which started at the end of August 1924 under the political leadership of the inter-party committee of the Georgian Democratic Republic, failed. Cruel repression followed, and hundreds were killed, both during and after the insurrection. Political prisoners and Georgian army officers were executed. The reign of terror, it turned out, was only deferred in 1921 and not averted.

With the enemy decimated, the tone of propaganda changed from vilification to ridicule. The 1934 film, *The Last Masquerade*, [portrays](#) the Social Democrats as hapless buffoons. The mutual recriminations followed the failed insurrection among the émigré party rivals, notably the Social Democrats and the National Democrats. The Cheka was there to exploit the vitriol.

In 1925, curiously, Soviet censorship allowed the publication of the memoir by Zurab Avalishvili, former diplomat of the GDR and one of the founders of the National Democratic party. He was particularly scathing towards the Social Democratic government, saying their rule was “a preparatory period for the triumph of the Soviet dictatorship... oriented towards Moscow and not towards the West.” The censors went through the 1927 memoirs of General Giorgi Mazniashvili, who returned to Soviet Georgia and even enrolled in the army. These are full of factual mistakes but deeply critical of the Social Democratic government. The party felt it could handle and even use the latent nationalist tendencies for control.

But the most tragic development came afterward. Enter the 1930s with their purges and the decimation of the whole political class. People who had personal memories and experiences with the Democratic Republic were gone. Importantly, so were their opponents, the Georgian Bolsheviks, who fell victim to Stalin's ire. What was propaganda in the 1920s became proscribed heresy by the late 1930s. Then followed the catastrophe of the

Great Patriotic War (World War II), death and destruction. Even though Georgia was largely spared military action on its soil, Georgian recruits (in the opening year of the war, there still were “national” Army divisions) took particularly heavy losses, sent to a desperate rescue as the Red Army was routed in Ukraine. The heavy curtain of forgetting fell on already adulterated memories.

“Discovering”

Fast-forward to the late 1970s and 1980s. The awakening of independence-oriented movements and thinking in Georgia sought to uncover the truths and reclaim the memory of the Republic. What did they find? What could still be accessed with some effort? Well, those Soviet publications from the 1920s, which, as we saw, had already been infected by propaganda messages.

The fresh-faced, anti-Soviet activists in Georgia discovered an adulterated memory. Because it was forbidden, it must be true – they thought. And then the confirmation bias kicked in: the new nationalist movement of the 1980s was strongly nationalistic. They found emotional and intellectual kinship with the National Democrats and not the Social Democratic government of 1918-1921. As for the Social Democrats, the hatred of all things socialist had deeply penetrated the dissident movement – and for a good reason. It was hard for the new nationalist movement to treat the writings of the Georgian socialist thinkers of the 1910s and 1920s as genuine, and it was even harder to consider that popular adhesion to these ideas was widespread and genuine.

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Thus, in the 1980s, those propaganda narratives - that Mensheviks fled the country without fighting, the cynical ridicule and denigration of the political class in 1930s films, and that the GDR's government stole the national treasure - resurfaced again. Moreover, these narratives gained even greater credibility because many of their authors were purged in 1937, which somehow "rehabilitated" them from their old sins against truth and reason.

Remember those cadets who fell defending Tbilisi?! There were 166 of them who fought heroically against the Russian invaders in the villages of Kojori and Tabakhmela. Nine fell on the battlefield. In a surprising distortion of scale and proportion, it is their sacrifice that is remembered every year in February, while politicians even forget to name the other fallen. Why? For one, indeed, the death of these youths in the prime of their life made its mark even then. But in a more sinister fashion, the Bolshevik propaganda wanted only the cadets to

be remembered as victims of the unreasonable resistance of the Social Democrats as "children sent to their deaths." Obviously, Georgia having a regular army that resisted occupation was a far more dangerous memory to keep.

Russia kills, but not only people. It kills memories, and worse – it adulterates them in a way that can poison our present.

And so it continues. Any Western researcher or current politician touches Soviet historiography at their peril. For it is not history that is recorded there, but a sedentation of propaganda narratives, glued together like the charred scrolls of Heracleum. And it will remain so until the doors of the KGB archives are thrown open. In the meantime, we must remember: Russia kills, but not only people. It kills memories, and worse – it adulterates them in a way that can poison our present ■

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