

Preface: Georgia on everybody's mind: the aftermath of war

Ronald Grigor Suny*

Department of History, University of Michigan, USA

The history of independent Georgia must appear to distant observers as an improbable melodrama: a spectacle of larger-than-life characters, explosive passion, revolutions, wars, and the destruction of the state. Mass resistance to Soviet rule in the late 1980s led to vicious repression in April 1989, the rise of a charismatic but unstable leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, independence when the USSR collapsed, civil and ethnic war, a *coup d'état*, the invitation to the former Communist chief, Eduard Shevardnadze to return to Tbilisi – and this was only Act I. The next decade was marked first by the consolidation of state power, although only in part of the country – Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Achara remained independent of Tbilisi – and later the erosion of the promised democracy, economic hardship, and rampant corruption and criminality. Act III began with a revolution of roses, the bold entrance of a tall, confident reformer, Mikheil Saakashvili, new promises of democracy and the rule of law – this time many of them fulfilled . . . for a time.

The play is not over, and it is not yet clear if this is the last act for Georgia's third president. His years in power took the shape of an arc – rising in the first three years and then steadily declining in the last few. From his election in January 2004 through to 2006, Misha, as everyone calls him, was extraordinarily popular. He fired the traffic police and ended the ubiquitous practice of bribe-taking. The 'thieves-in-law' connected to past governors were arrested and forced to pay, literally, for their crimes. Achara was brought back under Tbilisi's control. However, in place of the semi-anarchy of the Shevardnadze years, the new regime concentrated power in the presidency, emasculating parliament and the independent media. Building the state took precedence over establishing democracy. Corrosive nationalism, always available for exploitation in Georgia, was deployed ever more frequently as the president failed to achieve his goal of reintegrating South Ossetia and Abkhazia into Georgia. Even the minority nationalities within Georgia proper – the Armenians of Javakheti and the Azerbaijanis of Kvemo Kartli – were either neglected or subjected to Georgianization. Relations with Russia worsened. Confrontation instead of negotiation with the great neighbor to the north went along with closer affiliation with Europe and the United States.

The Georgian government wagered on the West, believing that membership in NATO and a close relationship with the neo-conservatives of the George W. Bush administration was a winning hand in its conflicts with Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia's internal wars became a factor in the global struggle between a rising regional hegemon, Putin's Russia, and the global ambitions of the Americans. Ever a gambler, Misha risked everything on 7 August 2008, when he launched a massive rocket and artillery barrage against Tskhinvali. Putin and Bush were in Beijing at the Olympics; Medvedev was cruising on the Volga; perhaps his American-trained army could take South Ossetia before the locals or the Russians could effectively resist. He seriously miscalculated. The war was lost; the army disintegrated; and

*Email: rgsuny@uchicago.edu

Russia soon recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The dream of integration, of NATO, of Georgia in Europe was gone.

Losing a war that one has initiated has serious political consequences, as American and Israeli leaders have recently learned. Georgians turned rapidly against their president. The opposition decided that instead of democratic elections, the place to change rulers was in the streets – as had already happened twice before. Those who confronted Saakashvili had no coherent programme, no real alternative, except to get rid of Misha. Isolated like Coriolanus, the Georgian president decided to make a stand and not go quietly as his immediate predecessor had. The audience, both in Georgia and elsewhere, waits for the denouement.

The cool, detached, scholarly articles in this collection tell in detail the sad story of a beautiful country that deserves better. Yet, as dire as the situation seems at the moment of this writing, the experts here also give us signs of some hope. Georgia has survived nearly 20 years of division and devastation, but at the same time it has emerged from various forms of authoritarianism into a more open – and potentially democratic – polity. Civil society has developed its own voices; individuals have found novel ways of expression. While political parties remain weak, political consciousness and interest in the fate of the country has grown stronger. The pernicious legacies of the Soviet past fade steadily into the background, and the efforts of Western NGOs, the openness to the outside world, and the multiple contacts with world culture give promise that younger generations will think and act more responsibly than their elders. Culture and history matter, and Georgia has vast resources in its long and rich historical experience on which to build a different future. This is a country that faced annihilation at several points in centuries past, yet forged a national consciousness and sense of self under a variety of empires. Georgia's fate is now in the hands of its own citizens.

Most visitors to Georgia leave the country with memories of a *supra*, that festive moment celebrating Georgian generosity and inclusion. Around the table laden with unique dishes and glasses of local wine, toasts are given for family, friends, lost loved ones, the motherland, strangers and those not present. The symbolism of that table, so central to Georgian culture, may contain within it the sense of empathy and shared fate required to find solutions to seemingly irresolvable problems. Only time will tell if the pernicious virus of national chauvinism will win out or whether the better angels of tolerance and hospitality on which Georgians pride themselves will triumph.