

Irma Ratiani

Professor of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
Director of TSU Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature

Georgian Literature against the Red Terror

Dear Colleagues,

I'm honored to give a speech at Princeton University which is one of the world's leading university centers.

Thank you for the invitation!

Before I turn to the main part of my talk, I would like to very briefly acquaint you with the historical path of Georgian literature.

Literature in Georgia has always performed the function of an intellectual leader. Due to its high-quality writing, the country has always represented a significant landscape of the world literary and cultural process.

The Georgian alphabet was created in the third century and is among in worlds' 14 alphabets.

In 2016, UNESCO added Georgian alphabet to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Despite the fact, that Georgian history and cultural consciousness begin already within the pagan period, the history of Georgian writing starts from the era of Christianity, from 4th century, and the first literary piece – *'The Life of St. Nino'* - is dated back almost to the same period.

After this date, Georgian literature went through a 16-century path of development, including the periods of Early and Late Middle Ages, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Critical Realism, Modernism, Avant-garde, Socialist Realism, Neo-realism, Post-modernism and many other trends, that reveal its close connection with the world literary process.

However, today I will focus on one very interesting and significant stage in the history of Georgian writing, the era of *Flourishing Bolshevism*, which brought quite heavy consequences to Georgian writers and many proud pages to the history of Georgian literature.

Theoretical preamble

If we bear in mind the inherent aspiration of literature to intellectual and representative freedom, we may form a clear idea of the contradiction that arises in conditions of a totalitarian regime between the artistic text and the actual context. The primary feature of totalitarianism as enforced rule is creation of ideological dictatorship, forming of clichés and their implementation. This obviously restricts literary freedom. It was clearly illustrated in 1920s-1930s, in the period of *Flourishing Bolshevism* when the modernist trends already established in Georgian literature found themselves in conceptual antagonism with the ideological principles of young Soviet rule.

The Bolshevik Revolution which occurred in 1917 in Russia reached Georgia in 1921. At that time, Georgia was enjoying three years of freedom, which was gained in 1918 after the fall of the Russian Empire. Nevertheless, the era of freedom was short-lived. After the invasion of the Red Army, the hardest battles took place in Georgia, thousands of young Georgians, including women, died fighting the enemy. Georgia was defeated in this battle and soon, was forcibly included in the Soviet Union.

The Bolsheviks justified themselves by the principle of democracy proposed in the theory of Marxism. To the question: “What will be the course of this revolution?” Engels was arguing: “Above all, it will establish a democratic constitution, and through this, the direct or indirect dominance of the proletariat (Engels). Berdyaev called this strange model of democracy, determined by the almost necessary precondition of violence, an “authoritative i.e. communist democracy”, and considered it as the most unsuccessful one. He was sure, that domination of masses puts into a very difficult condition the cultural elite. “Cultural elite is in deadly agony, its moral and material condition is becoming more and more unbearable...There is no order which demands culture of the highest quality, spiritual culture, genuine philosophy and genuine art” (Berdyaev).

After the establishment of the Bolshevik rule, Georgian culture suffered some serious consequences:

1. A politically one-party and socially unified political rule, the so-called **Communist Democracy** limited the right of a *free choice* for artists;
2. New ideology, deprived of spirituality, found himself in a complete antagonism with **Modernism**, already established in Georgian art and culture. Modernism, on its side, reflected the crisis of the times – the common skepticism and nihilism that existed in a society oppressed by intellectual terror.
3. **The idea of the Integrity of Culture suffered degradation:** subordination of culture to *the taste and necessity of masses* caused the decline of general cultural path. Two models of culture came into being: on the one hand, a Mass Culture, which rescued itself but lost the dignity, and on the other hand – Elite Culture, which was able to keep the self-respect, but suffered the isolation, and became useless for *a working Soviet people*.

In this situation, it was not difficult for the leaders of the young Soviet state to distinguish between *Ours* and *Enemies*; The young Soviet government was glorifying the obedient and punishing the disobedient. *Who is not with us, He is against us!* - hat was a slogan.

The “brave” revolutionaries have long since developed as cynics and fanatics. The aggressive desire to build an ideal society turned into a certain governmental ideology, an irrational structure, which at its own assumed the demiurgic i.e. constructive function, which implied “creation” of a new

social model, and “remaking” people according to the corresponding pattern. However, gradually – because of the approach of the practical implementation of the goal set – Bolshevik leaders were transformed into heartless seekers of authority. The striving towards “creation” and “remaking”, built on violence and terror, gradually turned into chaos and misfortune, and, finally assumed the form of organized evil.

The effect of the first and the most acute decade after the Bolshevik Revolution proved painful for the Georgian (and not only Georgian) literature: literature, as one of the most significant ideological levers for the new Bolshevik government, gradually turned into a proscenium for political and social “orders”.

A direct literary reflection of the Bolshevik governmental ideology was **Soviet discourse**. According to the classical definition, “Soviet discourse was a socio-cultural phenomenon of linguarhetorical nature” (Vorozhbitova). A socio-psychological key to its mentality was the anthem. On the one hand, it was a discourse of a “new democracy” and leftist intelligentsia, where the word-fiction dominated over the word-object, and on the other one, it was a “superficial discourse” that had no depth and was devoid of the experience of national individuality.

Soviet discourse took shape of a **Socialist Realism**. The term was introduced by Maxim Gorki in 1934, at the Congress of Soviet Writers, and from the very beginning was divided into several branches: *proletarian literature*, *socialist realistic literature* and *soviet publicist works*.

Proletariat was regarded as the messianic class which was charged with the historical mission to organize a revolution and to transform the unjust society into a just one, even - with the use of force. Socialist Realism was a reflection of proletarian culture; it *viewed a person as a socially active element*, which, with the use of forcible methods, was involved in the process of creation of a new history. “Socialist realism preached the necessity of historicism in art: historically specific artistic reality should have assumed in art the form of a “three-dimensional” model (in Gorky’s words, a writer is trying to reflect “three realities” – *the past, the present and the future*”) (Borev).

A place of honor was given to the terms/concepts: *Soviet literature*, *Socialist realism*, *Soviet critical school*, which expressed extremely well the priority nature of literature marked under the token of ideology, promising special privileges to the “servants of the muse”.

In particular, to whom did the Bolshevik government show sympathy?

- a) A small group of enthusiasts excited (or intoxicated?) with the idea of “saving the masses”, which created an exaggerated model of Soviet discourse – Proletarian discourse. In order to implement the core idea of the revolution they supported radical means of social innovation, including vandal ones too – torture, murder, destruction, – in general - terror as the shortest way to the cultivation of mass character: „I will kill my mother, I will strangle my father, if the party orders me to do it...” (A quote from a poem by a Georgian proletarian poet).
- b) Authors of an average talent, for whom loyalty to the ideological machine represented at least a minimal guarantee of stable well-being. They were creating poems and odes praising the Soviet country, bulky novels on the collective work and heroism of Soviet people, on the life of the people and their ruthless fight against “the still surviving bourgeois and aristocrats”.

- c) Terrified intellectuals, for whom normal, human fear defined the obedience of the state structure; they were persuading themselves in the truth of the Soviets country as a successful project; with amazing stubbornness they followed the zigzags of the ideology and likewise stubbornly refused to acknowledge the disapproval towards their own existence.
- d) The critics, having turned into slaves, who were entrusted with creating a common propaganda background: they regularly distorted the interpretation of an exceptional text. Quite a few texts of Georgian writers of landmark significance felt victim to such a wrong interpretation.
- e) A small group of gifted authors, believing in the *bright future of communism*. They were doomed for great disappointment: sooner or later, their “romances” with the Soviet government ended in frustration, which was manifested in various forms - isolation, infantilism, alcoholism, suicide, etc.
- f) Genuine talented writers, “forgiven” and “spared” by the Soviet government only for the sake of its own “advertising” and “PR”. Due to these writers, locked in a “golden cages”, the young country was able to be involved into the international literary rivalry. However, the fate of the majority of these talents was tragic. They felt guilty.

The question, which arise after this discussion is following:

- Against this tragic background, what was the fate of those who did not fall within any of the above-mentioned categories, i.e. *marginal authors*?

“Marginal Authors”: Fatal struggle against the *Red Terror*

The most of texts which were considered as marginal by the Soviet criticism were *Modernist* or *Avant-garde* texts. Accordingly, modernism and avant-garde can be defined as a pattern of anti-Soviet discourse.

High Modernism, with its diverse forms and tributaries, striving for representational freedom, as well as with the artistic tendencies of quest for the truth and establishment of individuality, constituted the main threat to Soviet agitators. This wing of literature, which rejected Socialist Realism, was based upon the progressive Western spirit and modernist philosophy (intuitivism, Freudianism, pragmatism, neo-positivism), however, the traditional synthesis of the national values with the Western tendencies was observable almost in every direction, especially in a new interpretation of the national identity, “which was associated with the awareness of the national cultural image against the background of the inevitable process of Europeanization – in order to acquire a strong position before the European culture” (Tsipuria).

The first name I want to bring here is Mikheil Javakhishvili, executed in 1937 by the regime of Stalin and Beria, author of a great Georgian book written in 1924 – *Jakho’s Disposess*. Mikheil Javakhishvili worked on the edge of Realism and High Modernism, and he was considering not only the markedly totalitarian essence of the Georgian reality, but also its tragic outcome – estrangement of personality with the universe.

“Breaking of hearts, knocking out of brains, tearing of souls - this is our time” (Javakhishvili). It was clear for him that the imposed “ideal” order and “realized” utopian illusions were driving people to the slavish obedience. The only way out was an activation of an individual *self*, and increasing the power of the character's inner world. Therefore, the issue of a rejected individual, locked in the exaggerated model of a dangerous, brutal time and looking for the salvation, takes shape in Javakhishvili's fiction. However, salvation is not just a hope, but also the need, inevitable necessity, which makes the person to think over his essence and to work out an alternative reality through the most painful passages of transformation. According to the scale and depth of the set goals as well as of their solutions, Mikheil Javakhishvili is a worthy like-minded counterpart of his contemporary Western modernist authors.

Alongside with Javakhishvili were standing other prominent Georgian writers for whom principles of humanism and modernist art overweighed the pragmatic political tasks of the Bolshevik period and who insistently joined the leading literary tendencies of their time. So long, Niko Lortkipanidze works on the impressionist model of relationship between the individual and the world, introducing into Georgian prose typical characteristics of impressionism, generated in the Western cultural space; Vasil Barnovi and Leo Kiacheli go deeper to the theme of spiritual split of the individual; Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (early prose) and Grigol Robakidze introduce the expressionist manner of reflection. In Grigol Robakidze's prose the principle of “activation of art” is combined with “demonstrativeness”, as a result of which the powerful expressive effect of the word and essential abstraction of thought are achieved.

The more efficient role in introducing the tendencies of European modernism in Georgia was performed by Georgian poets: Galaktion Tabidze - reformer of Georgian verse and outstanding figure of contemporary Georgian poetry, Terenti Graneli – famous for his escapist philosophy, and Georgian Symbolists - *Tsisperqantselebi (The Blue Horns)* – Titsian Tabidze, Paolo Iashvili, Grigol Robakidze, Valerian Gaprindashvili, Kolau Nadiradze, Nikolo Mitsishvii, Giorgi Leonidze, Shalva Apkhaidze, Shalva Karmeli, etc.

In this regard, a significant event was publishing of a collection of poems *Artistic Flowers* by Galaktion Tabidze. “The reform carried out by Galaktion Tabidze led to the appearance of qualitatively new poetry and verse - with renewed versification, polyphonic rhythm, unique euphonic-melodic organization and, what is the most important, the poetic language which had not existed before and which was able to render adequately the inner reality of the personality” (Doiashvili). Galaktion Tabidze and Georgian modernist poetry overcame in favor of art the utilitarian approach to poetry and harmonized the level of Georgian verse culture with the Western standards. Observing the work of another wing of Georgian modernist poetry, Georgian Symbolists - *The Blue Horns*, one can say, that Georgian Symbolists set themselves and successfully achieved a very ambitious task: to position Georgia *as a cultural center of modernism* in relation to the Russian imperial center. Georgian Symbolists do not recognize as a cultural center St. Petersburg or Moscow, but the European center - Paris, however, as *the most sacred country* - a sacred place for poetry, exactly, was declared Georgia (Iashvili), their homeland.

“There is no a drop of blood not Georgian in me/There is no a thread of nerve of not a Poet in me”, stated Galaktion Tabidze and it was a brilliant attempt of welding poetry with national dignity.

Another interesting aspects of Georgian modernism was the feeling of Georgia as a magical place where the West and the East meet. This tradition was established in Georgian writing in the 12th century, when the genius Georgian poet of the Middle Ages, Shota Rustaveli, displayed the dialogue of Western and Eastern cultures for the first time in his masterpiece – *The knight in the Panther's Skin*.

Thus, the cultural dialogue of the West and the East, activated from 20th century worldwide, was quite organic for Georgian literature, and was expressed in the poetry of Georgian modernists. A clear example to this is a well-known line by Titsian Tabidze, which became almost a slogan of Georgian Modernism: *"I put the rose of Hafiz in the vase of Prudom / I plant in Besiki's garden the Flowers of Evil of Baudelaire"* (Tabidze). Hafiz is a 14th-century Iranian poet, very well known in Georgia for that time already, Prudom – 19th c. French poet "Parnassian", Besiki – 18th-c. Georgian poet, famous for his love to the oriental poetic forms, and Baudelaire - a well-known French poet, symbolist, modernist. Titsian Tabidze's line is imbued with the spirit of Goethe's *West- Eastern Divan*. The meeting of the West and the East in 20th century Georgian poetry is also quite powerfully reflected in another Georgian poet's – Ioseb Grishashvili's poetry: he devoted numerous verses to Tbilisi; the urban text of the poet is under obvious influence of the Eastern poetics.

Avant-garde art and literature created no less threat to the Soviet cultural policy. Georgian Avant-garde, represented by very talented and interesting authors (Simon Chikovani, Nikoloz Shengelia, etc.). It was named H2SO4, and displayed artistic and aesthetic sympathy to the Western and Russian models of avant-garde (for example, sharing a special language "*Zaum*"). It adored urbanization, industrial progress and material values, introduced aggression and energy of destruction, declaring wars as the only hygiene of mankind (Marinetti). "Thoughtful aloofness, ecstasy and sleep" of literature was replaced by "dynamics", "onslaught movement", "chronic sleeplessness" and "dangerous leap". Avant-garde once again allowed Georgian literature to feel the taste of communion with the world literary movement, very different from the sour taste of socialist realism, locked in the boundaries of expanding Soviet ideology. However, Soviet leaders understood that Avant-garde, due to its characteristics, allegedly must fit well the revolutionary mood which reigned in Soviet Union. They tried to adjust their political interests with the Avant-garde aesthetics. As a result, some part of avant-garde artists (not all of them, because there was definitely a difference of opinion on the matter) even openly declared their confidence in the Soviet government and joined the so-called "Soviet Avant-garde", creating its revolutionary wing. However, soon after the disappointment came in: "The alliance of political and artistic radicalism" was over; revolutionary illusions were destroyed; representatives of "Soviet Avant-garde" found themselves in the claws of one of the most violent ideological dictatorship and were punished for their excitement.

A rather long list of Georgian writers, representatives of the progressive, Modernist and Avant-garde wing, destroyed by the Bolshevik government can be drawn. They went through the hell of threats, fear, exile, arrest, torture, murder, suicide, - sacrificing themselves in the name of their dignity and art. Poets and writers, who established and flourished Georgian Modernism and Avant-garde: Mikheil Javakhishvili – executed, Titsian Tabidze - executed, Paolo Iashvili - committed suicide, Valerian Gaprindashvili – executed, Grigol Robakhidze – sent to the exile...

One of the most notable punitive bodies was the *Union of Georgian Soviet Writers*, where sessions were held and writers passed judgment on their colleagues...

The tragic essence of the situation is created not only by the ruined fate of individual persons, but by the total break of the whole paradigm of the literary process, which as a rule needs a long cultural rehabilitation. Writers put up with sacrifice, for they believed that all other ways were either compromise, which they could not allow, or a wrong mechanism of prolonging one's existence. The writer himself was a tragic personality who felt victim to his own principles.

The fate of writers was shared by progressively thinking literary critics, whose number due to known reasons was quite small (in this way Vakhtang Kotetishvili fell victim to the repressions of 1937).

The stream of repressions was going on during the World War II as well.

In 1941, preparations of an anti-Soviet conspiracy against the Bolshevik dictatorship began in Georgia. The conspiracy was led by professors and graduate students of Tbilisi State University, as well as young poets and writers, including Kote Khimshiashvili and Giorgi Dzigvashvili. The conspiracy failed. On October 17, 1942, according to the Soviet court's decision, 17 young people were executed, and the rest were deported to Siberia. The leaders of the conspiracies were killed with extreme cruelty - they cut off their heads and publicly dragged them through the streets.

In 1949, one more wave of political punishment of students took place, which included Chabua Amirejibi, the future classic of Georgian literature.

We have to admit that as a result of the "great political cleansing" in 1934-1949, the natural path of Georgian literature was cut. Moreover, Georgian literature proved to be completely isolated from the international literary process.

However... it was not so easy to tame the Georgian literature. Writers "learned" to use indirect ways, because the totalitarian political rule was assessed as an inevitable historical reality, while getting out of it - a long-term political process. Literature should have opposed it by indirect paths of fight. This model of anti-Soviet literary discourse continued to work under the *mask effect* and conceptually may be defined as a strategy of "indirectly casting stones". Writers fight with all weapons available to them: allegory, satire, irony, absurd; they fight on their own territory and beyond it - in emigration - openly and underground. All roads were effective to attain one's end, though in this case the writer himself was no more the character of the tragedy, but - only a tragedian who tries to replace the reality with an intense process of Mythopoeia. This model of anti-Soviet literary discourse emerged as a generator of the genre diversity of Soviet period literature: literary genres as **literary anti-utopia, mythic-realistic novel or satirical novella and drama** were dynamically implemented in Georgian literary space.

One of the best examples to this is Polikarpe Kakabadze's play "Qvarqvar Tutaberi", which was published in 1929, just eight years after establishment of the Soviet regime in Georgia. This text threw into dismay the censors of a young Soviet government. The play narrates the "revolutionary" adventure story of Qvarqvar Tutaberi - an idle, cowardly, uneducated and cunning man, over a short period, in the early months of the establishment of the Soviet rule. Occasionally Qvarqvar is a supporter of the Russian Emperor, occasionally - a representative of the so-called "temporary government", occasionally - a supporter of the Bolsheviks... His position is always determined by one

main principle: Who holds the power? Young Soviet censorship was very confused by the humorous character of the play: the scenes were full of comic situations, dialogues – with absurd, unbelievable “logic”, the characters were caricatured and often exaggerated. The play was, on the one hand, caricaturing of foolish and flattering person (and people like him), politically immature and mentally unprepared for the “new times”, which was quite acceptable for Soviet criticism, and on the other hand, it was a satirical-grotesque mocking of the existing environment, but Soviet censorship did not pick on due to the humoristic attitude of the text. Thus, humor appeared as a mechanism protecting from the ideology. At present, after almost a hundred years from the creation of the play, the author’s intention is quite clear: Qvarqvare is the symbiosis of disgusting and unacceptable qualities, which will never come into being in a normal society, but only in the society being under the ideological pressure. Qvarqvarian way of life is a tragedy which might be overcome only by nonconformists.

Only nonconformists are able to find a way out of totalitarianism, under the historical guarantee that the survival of genuine literary texts, even under extreme tyrannical circumstances, is not threatened; for it is time that will save what is valuable rather than the volition of individual persons, no matter how successful dictators they might be.

Revision

The heyday of Bolshevism was the most difficult time for Georgian culture and literature. Although it was not easy for the authors to express their individual voice even after Stalin's death, this period still could not be compared with the era of physical destruction that greatly affected Georgian culture in the 1930s-1940s. It is all the more tragic to realize this when the ethnic Georgian Joseph Stalin was at the head of the state, and another ethnic Georgian, Lavrenty Beria, carried out punishing operations. The Georgian intellectual society condemned them to eternal contempt, and in the post-Soviet period began to review the life and work of authors who fell victim to the Red Terror.

In 2009, at the initiative of the national research center - Institute of Georgian Literature, the first international symposium- "Totalitarianism and Literature. 20th Century Experience" (წიგნობა) was held, which was attended by more than 200 scholars from all over the world. After the symposium, a collection of materials was published by the Cambridge Scholars Publishing. The book gained great international recognition. In 2016, another international conference was held on the topic - "Literature in Exile. 20th Century Experience ", which highlighted the life and work of writers forcibly expelled from the country. The materials of the conference were also published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

In 2017 Georgian Comparatives Literature Association in partnership with the Institute of Georgian Literature and the Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia received a grant from the National Science Foundation on the topic - "Bolshevism and Georgian literature". The project was implemented in two parts. The first part of the research was - "Bolshevism and Georgian literature. 1921-1941", and the second part - "Bolshevism and Georgian literature". 1941-1956". Both books are bestsellers on the Georgian academic book market.

Georgian Comparatives Literature Association was also granted with the project – “Georgian “Soviet” Folklore”. The project focused on the extent of the Red Terror in the villages of the highland

regions of Georgia. Hundreds of stories and legends were recorded. The presentation of the project was held publicly, at the National Parliament library of Georgia.

This year we have announced an International symposium – Socialist Realism in Art and Literature, which will be held in September, in Tbilisi. The aim of the conference is to reveal the political, social and aesthetic aspects of Socialist Realism in literature and various fields of art.

Also, recently, we are working with Brill Publishers on a project – “Georgian Literature. Handbook”, where a solid place will be given to the Georgian writing of the Bolshevik era.