

## Representations and Identities in Georgia in the 19th and 20th Centuries

**Veranstalter:** Hubertus Jahn, Cambridge; Historisches Kolleg, München

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Among the post-Soviet countries, Georgia has always played a special role. It has a rich history that goes way back to the ancient world; as part of the Caucasus, it was the first „Oriental“ encounter of the Russian Empire. After the Russian Revolution, Georgia became the crux of Soviet national policy. And it was, of course, (in)famous as Stalin's country of origin. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it quickly leaned towards „the Western World“, which marked the beginning of tensions with post-Soviet Russia that are still with us today. All these changes and historical events were responsible for the development of specific identities and representational forms both in the imperial and post-imperial periods of the country's history. In order to discuss these „Representations and Identities in Georgia in the 19th and 20th Centuries“, Hubertus Jahn, currently a senior fellow of the Historisches Kolleg in Munich, brought together several renowned scholars of Georgian studies.

In his keynote address, DAVID DONDUA, the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, identified the core topics of Georgian identity. First among those is an awareness of Georgia's democratic roots and consequential close connections to Europe. As a second aspect, he mentioned the close entanglement of language and national identity, embodied in the writer and public activist Ilia Chavchavadze as one of the most famous national heroes. His third point was the Orthodox faith, personified in the pro-European and highly influential current patriarch. These topics were consistently picked up during most of the following discussions of the conference. Commenting on the conference's program, Don-

dua was surprised by the emphasis on Stalin, quoting the Georgian dictum: Iosif Dzhughashvili was born in Georgia while Stalin was born in Russia.

The first panel was indeed dedicated to Stalin and to the Stalin Museum in Gori, which in these days serves as a subject of many local controversial discussions. In his talk „The Past and Future of the Stalin Museum in Gori“, LASHA BAKRADSE (Tbilisi) introduced the audience to the museum and its history. He explained that in Georgia there is, in fact, not the same revival of a Stalin cult as is occurring nowadays in Russia. He concluded with the suggestion to keep the museum in its current form as an authentic demonstration of Stalinism, while at the same time to offer exhibitions dealing critically with the topic in a new, second building.

In her talk „Soviet, National, Local? Representations and Perceptions of Joseph Stalin as a Political and Cultural Figure in Gori“, KATRINE BENDTSEN GOTFREDSEN (Malmö) emphasized the ambivalence of the feelings that Georgian people have towards Stalin and his division into two bodies – the Soviet politician on the one hand and the son of Georgia on the other who can still be representative for national imaginations.

In his paper „Stalin-Cult. Georgia. Museum. Representations of the Past in the Present“, OLIVER REISNER (Tbilisi) also discussed the museum and specifically its possible future. He focused on the myth of Stalin and the role the Stalin cult played in state-building processes in the multi-national Soviet empire. Like the speakers before him, he pleaded for a historiography of the museum combined with a pedagogical deconstruction of Stalin's myth, because this cult was still somewhat combined with a national story in Georgia.

MALKHAZ TORIA (Tbilisi) followed in the discussion on identities in the multi-national empire with his paper „Decline of the Soviet Empire, Claiming the Past, and Decisive Events in the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict“. He discussed the genealogy of the separatist movement in the Abkhazia region of Georgia in the late 1980s, when it was still difficult to predict the collapse of the Soviet empire. Using one village as a micro-analytical example, he documented the huge role of his-

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torical narratives in the creation of an ethnic „ownership“ of the territory.

As last speaker of the panel, NUTSA BATIASHVILI (Oxford) analyzed „The Liminal: Colonial Identity on the Margins of an Empire“ in a post-colonial approach. She argued that Georgia's experience of nationhood in the present is conditioned by the experiences of *in-betweenness* and *liminality* in relation to the Russian Empire, European civilization, and the backwardness of Asia, which are inherently part of the civilizational narrative of Europe and modernity. In his comments on the papers, NIKOLOZ ALEKSIDZE (Oxford) considered the major problem of Georgian history and identity to be the need to deal with both Russian colonialism and Stalin's legacy.

The second panel „Representations of Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities“ started with the paper „National Identity and Perceptions of Citizenship in Georgia“ by NATIA MESTVIRISHVILI (Tbilisi). Based on a public opinion survey, she analyzed the respondents' definitions of national identity and good citizenship, which led her to the conclusion that a strong national identity is predominantly linked to conservative views and leaves less space for a European identity.

JEREMY SMITH (JOENSUU) discussed in his talk „March 1956 and the Georgian Nation“ the collision of Georgian nationalism and Soviet power. He presented several historical narratives of the demonstration on the 3rd anniversary of Stalin's death that led to an intervention of the Red Army and the killings of several people. Anti-Russian attitudes and violence followed this event and determined important questions about centre-periphery relations and the matter of nationalities in the USSR, thus demonstrating the way in which nationalists do not just designate 'primordial' characteristics to other groups but also assign guilt and blame to entire national groups.

MARTIN DEMANT FREDERIKSEN (Copenhagen) presented a paper titled „Tales of the Inhuman: Unrepresented Identities in Contemporary Georgia“, which addressed the fate of confessing atheists in contemporary Georgia. In his view, atheists are seen by a majority in today's Georgia as almost inhuman, due to an alleged lack of social

and moral qualities. Living in a state that considers religion as one of the pillars of the nation, they experience much more violence and threats than non-Orthodox religious minorities. The commentary by FLORIAN MÜHLFRIED (Jena) led to a lively discussion about the role of the Church in contemporary Georgian society.

The last conference day started with TIMOTHY BLAUVELT (Tbilisi) whose presentation on „Modernity and Pedagogy in the Caucasus Educational District in the Period of Reaction“ outlined the change of language policy towards the so-called natural or direct method of teaching in the 1880s. While the local community perceived this measure as an act of Russification, he argues that it was less of an imperialistic than of a practical nature. In fact, Blauvelt described it as a reaction of the local administration to a perceived broad need for the Russian language within the Caucasian population at a time when not enough teachers were available.

NIKOLOZ ALEKSIDZE (Oxford) spoke about „The Cult of Saints and the Body Politic: Sainthood and Nationhood in Georgia“. As was common in the medieval period in Europe, the cult of saints in Georgia was also integrated into the political discourse. While the time between the 15th and 20th centuries produced no new saints, the phenomenon re-emerged after that period and endures until the present day. In order to establish a continuity of the nation, as he argued, the national body is divided into a political and a natural part, for whose creation saints were used, which in many cases created a conflict with traditional theological guidelines.

ZAAL ANDRONIKASHVILI (Berlin) discussed the topic of „Georgian Political Romanticism: The Cultural Semantics of the Caucasus between 1830 and 1880“. He showed how the political conflict with Russia was carried out in the aesthetic realm, especially in literature. His focus was on the Georgian romantics Alexander Chavchavadze (1786-1846), Grigol Orbeliani (1804-1883), and Nikoloz Barat'ashvili (1817-1845). While he discovered a certain ambivalence between the nationalistic works and the careers of these authors, he nevertheless pointed out that their biographies must be taken into account if one

wants to properly understand their writings.

KHATUNA GVARADZE (Munich) in her paper „The Women’s Question in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries and Georgia’s National Movement“ discussed the liberation and education of Georgian women. Due to the lack of higher education in Georgia they often went abroad, choosing Switzerland as a favorite destination. Women’s liberation in Georgia was linked to both social and national questions. The only way for women to free themselves was through intellectual pursuits such as teaching and writing. Critics of the movement, however, feared a loss of Georgian identity as a result of feminist activities.

In the conference’s last presentation, HUBERTUS JAHN (Cambridge) spoke about „Visits of Tsars to the Caucasus as Representations of Empire“. These visits were made in order to demonstrate the rulers’ power to the local population and to the adjacent empires. Jahn addressed the imperial aesthetics, protocols, and ceremonies, which were adapted since the visit of the first tsar, Nicholas I, to the region in 1837. These ceremonies were full of symbolism. They served the purpose of demonstrating a close connection between the tsar and the local populations, but also of displaying the Russian Empire as a multi-ethnic „empire of difference“. Furthermore, the tsars’ journeys were not only a prominent symbol of Russia’s civilizing mission in the Caucasus, but they also provided a basis for the creation of a „Russian Orient“.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Keynote*

David Dondua (First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia)

##### *Panel I: Memory Cultures*

Lasha Bakradse (Tbilisi): The Past and the Future of the Stalin Museum in Gori

Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen (Malmö): Soviet, National, Local? Representations and Perceptions of Joseph Stalin as a Political and Cultural Figure in Gori

Oliver Reisner (Tbilisi): Stalin-Cult. Georgia. Museum. Representations of the Past in the Present

Malkhaz Toria (Tbilisi): Decline of the So-

viet Empire, Claiming the Past and Decisive Events in the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict

Nutsa Batiashvili (Oxford): The Liminal. Colonial Identity on the Margins of an Empire

Nikiloz Aleksidze (Oxford): Commentary

##### *Panel II: Representation of Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*

Natia Mestvirishvili (Tbilisi): National Identity and Perceptions of Citizenship in Georgia

Jeremy Smith (Joensuu): March 1956 and the Georgian Nation

Martin Demant Frederiksen (Copenhagen): Tales of the Inhuman: Unrepresented Identities in Contemporary Georgia

Florian Mühlfeld (Jena): Commentary

##### *Panel III: National and Imperial Identities in the 19th and 20th Centuries*

Timothy Blauvelt (Tbilisi): Modernity and Pedagogy in the Caucasus Educational District in the Period of Reaction (1880-1905)

Nikoloz Aleksidze (Oxford): The Cult of the Saints and the Body Politic. Sainthood and Nationhood in Georgia

Zaal Andronikashvili (Berlin): Georgian Political Romanticism. The Cultural Semantics of the Caucasus 1830-1880

Khatuna Gvaradze (München): The Women’s Question in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries and Georgia’s National Movement

Hubertus Jahn (München): Visits of the Tsars to the Caucasus as Representations of Empire

Oliver Reisner (Tbilisi): Commentary

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