

Book Review Essay

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“My Dear Fatherland, When Will You Ever Flourish?” Recent Historical Literature on Georgia

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Abstract: The history of Georgia and the entire South Caucasus or Transcaucasia is a heavily marginalised field in international historical scholarship. This book review essay identifies and discusses major trends in recent publications on the modern history of Georgia in order to improve the chances of its integration into larger historical contexts and debates.

Keywords: historiography, nation, state, Georgia

How should the history of new states be written? States with unsecured borders, a lack of internal stability, nascent nation-building, imagined and real friends and foes within and beyond their borders?¹ East and Southeast European history offers rich illustrative material in this regard, given the multitude of new and resumed processes of state-building since, and indeed prior to, the late 1980s. The opening question represents a familiar predicament for historians of these regions, especially for those in the early stages of their careers. Recent research trends have superseded the inquiry into the history of state and nation formation, turning instead towards socioeconomic and cultural histories of translocal, transregional, and transnational entanglements. Experiences of violence in connection with state and nation-building processes have discredited the subject even more. However, it would be naive to abandon the topic entirely, even if it is difficult to make it attractive for Western scholarly audiences familiar with the constructivist turn which has dominated the field of national history in past decades. To make the discussion of a topic partly responsible for its political relevance is a weak

¹ The quote in the headline is a line from a poem by Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907) from 1861, quoted in Ammon, 130.

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argument. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the historiographic lacunae resulting from an excessive preoccupation with the history of nation and state-building, which may distract from the equally important social, economic, environmental, or migration history. The critical assessment of national historiographical traditions may provide the crucial foundation for going beyond national historiography without rendering the subject of nation and state-building itself obsolete. It also affects the self-understanding of historians, irrespective of whether or not they are from the region they focus on, and whether or not they belong to a diaspora. Discussing recent literature on nation and state-building affects the ego of the historian, especially given their assumed roles as cultural mediators and progressive thinkers.

While for some countries the topics of state and nation formation have already been thoroughly explored and the research could thus proceed to the novel perspectives and topics mentioned above, in other countries, especially those newly formed after 1989, this has been an entirely new subject. Using three recent publications as examples, this review essay asks where historiography on Georgia is situated in this geography of historical knowledge production. The three publications are Matthias Dornfeldt and Enrico Seewald, “Germany and Georgia. The History of Official Relations” (*Deutschland und Georgien. Die Geschichte der amtlichen Beziehungen*, Berlin: be.bra, 2018); Philipp Ammon, “Georgia Between Sovereignty and Russian Occupation” (*Georgien zwischen Eigenstaatlichkeit und russischer Okkupation*, Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2020, 1st ed. 2015); and Hubertus Jahn (ed.), *Identities and Representations in Georgia from the 19th Century to the Present* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021). A post-Soviet country in the Caucasus region, Georgia had to redefine its place on the cultural maps of the world regions after 1991 and has received growing attention in recent years. One reason for the sudden cultural visibility of the country has been the growing stream of tourists visiting the country; a second reason was the territorial conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the “August War” with Russia in 2008; while the third reason was the increased interest in Georgian literature and art in general, which was further promoted by making Georgia the Guest of Honour at the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair. This essay on recent historical literature seeks to contribute to the assessment of the current repositioning of this newly emerging cultural space.

The most important recent historical work on Georgia written in German is “Georgia Between Sovereignty and Russian Occupation” by Philipp Ammon, first published in 2015 by Kitab in Klagenfurt, with a new edition appearing in 2020, published by Vittorio Klostermann. An initial reading of this book may cause readers to raise an eyebrow, as the author regards the topic of the book, the history of Georgian–Russian relations from the 18th century to Georgia’s incorporation into the Soviet Union in the 1920s, as an explicit contribution to understanding

present circumstances, that is, the geopolitically charged Georgian–Russian conflict after 1991, with its escalation into the Georgian–Russian war of 2008: “Georgia has not been at peace since then [1991]. It has become a venue for a re-run of the Great Game between America and Russia in the Middle East” (7). One would expect political relevance to generate interest in this work, which, since the topic is without precedent on the German scholarly market, merits attention even “simply” as a study of the historical “roots of the Georgian–Russian conflict” (9). The second reading leaves a much more positive impression. If readers peel away the layers (I. Introduction and II. Prehistory: Christian Georgia and the Third Rome), they arrive at an informative book that provides six chapters of ripe synthesis based on the older and more recent Georgian, Russian, German, and English literature, thus serving as a sound basis for further research. Chapters III and IV discuss in chronological order the relationship between Georgia and Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries. The book focuses on the status of Georgia as a state, which results in a narrowing of the perspective to political history, and here primarily to the Treaty of Georgievsk of 1783, when Georgia sought Russia’s protection against Persian and Ottoman aggression under the reign of King Erekle II, the annexation of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801, the end of the Bagratid dynasty, and the incorporation of the other Georgian territories into the Russian administrative system, which lasted until the end of Tsarist rule with the February Revolution of 1917. Chapter IV also explains the agrarian question in detail, the peasant liberation of 1864, and the circumstances of impoverished peasants and nobles. Here, it would also have been useful to include other processes associated with the concept of modernisation (for example, urbanisation, industrialisation, social class formation).

The monograph discusses the regional history (for example, of Imeretia), which was central to Georgia as a historically fragmented country. At this point at the very latest, I asked myself why the author did not include at least one or two maps illustrating territorial change in his book which, on the whole, seems to suffer from a lack of illustrations. At least the important political rupture of 1783/1801 is well illustrated, and the parts of the book on the rejection of Tsarist rule in the form of conspiracies and other forms of opposition are vividly portrayed. One such example was the noble conspiracy of 1832, after which, in 1845–1854, the governor Prince Vorontsov succeeded in establishing imperial rule more broadly with the expansion of Tbilisi, as well as transport, social and technical infrastructures, and in making the regional nobility loyal. In Chapters V to VII the author chose a thematic approach and examines the literary myths of the Russian Caucasus and Georgian romanticism, Russophilia and the gradual process of adaptation to imperial Russian culture and rule (V), the national movement with its generational cohorts (VI), and the church conflict (VII). The author uses a more

personalised presentation format here in the sense that these chapters, of about 30 pages each, are built around biographies of individuals. The literature builds heavily on the groundbreaking works of David Marschall Lang (1957 and 1962), Jürgen Gerber (1997), Ronald Grigor Suny (1988), and Oliver Reisner (2004), but it is also based on critical source reading.² The most innovative and illustrative is Chapter VII on the church conflict, which shows how Georgian–Russian enmity was generated and deepened through multiple forms of imperial violence, such as the abolition of autocephaly, the introduction of an exarchate, the Russian/Church Slavonic language in church services and church schools, the displacement of Georgian by Russian priests and church dignitaries, as well as the destruction of churches and monasteries and theft of valuables and cult objects. These policies led to de-churching rather than secularisation at the end of the 19th century and prepared the ground for a socialist/social democratic/Menshevik movement that was national, but not anti-Russian, in orientation and quickly gained ground after the February Revolution of 1917. The concluding Chapter VIII on the formation of consecutive manifestations of statehood after the end of the Tsarist Empire (Transcaucasian Federation, Democratic Republic of Georgia 1918–1921) and their loss to or transformation into a Soviet republic in 1921/22 is as vividly described as it can be when depicting state formation and dissolution in the context of war and revolution. The chapter ends with an account of the 1924 uprising, which aims to make resistance recognisable as a recurring topos in the history of Georgian–Russian relations.

When reading this work, I sometimes had the impression that the author was diminishing the importance of his historical account, from sentences such as: “The account of Georgian–Russian relations from the 18th to the 20th century reveals a historically deeply rooted history of conflict, fraught with all kinds of emotions, which most recently once again culminated in open warfare in August 2008” (212). On the one hand, the author shows not only a history of conflict but also a history of cooperation; and on the other, historicisation and contextualisation are often abandoned in favour of speaking to contemporary politics, which often leads to sledgehammer-style black-and-white formulations. Historical scholarship usually applies more subtle ways of expressing the topicality of historical perspectives.

² David Marschall Lang. 1957. *The Last Years of the Georgian Monarchy 1658–1832*. New York: Columbia University Press; David Marschall Lang. 1962. *A Modern History of Georgia*. London: Grove Press; Jürgen Gerber. 1997. *Georgien: Nationale Opposition und kommunistische Herrschaft seit 1956*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag; Ronald Grigor Suny. 1988. *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press in association with Hoover Institution Press; Oliver Reisner. 2004. *Die Schule der georgischen Nation. Eine sozialhistorische Untersuchung der nationalen Bewegung in Georgien am Beispiel der „Gesellschaft zur Verbreitung der Lese- und Schreibkunde unter den Georgiern“ (1850–1917)*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag.

I wonder if the author is aiming to attract the attention of a non-scholarly readership, or if he intends to veil his uncertainties and hesitation in situating the history of a peripheralised small state in imperial and post-imperial research.

The two Berlin-based political scientists Matthias Dornfeldt and Enrico Seewald outline the history of official relations between Germany and Georgia in a heavy book with numerous illustrations. They have presented similar accounts for Germany and Ukraine (2017), Lithuania (2017), Slovakia (2018), Belarus (2019), Albania (2019), Kosovo (2021), and Azerbaijan (2021). Their aim is to provide an “overall account of bilateral official relations” (8) from a German perspective, something which has not been available to date. This work was commissioned by the Georgian Embassy and meets formal scientific requirements, including bibliographical criteria, and at the same time also has a representative character. Its scientific value lies primarily in the evaluation of archival records of the Political Archive of the Foreign Office (*Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes*) in Berlin from World War I to the violent incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet system, which makes up the first 120 pages, and the publication of a number of key documents in a subsequent section of approximately the same length.

Beyond the source section, the work is of only limited relevance because of its underlying narrative that political relations between Germany and Georgia have always been and continue to be cordial. The text and documents also repeatedly emphasise the friendly attitude of Georgian society towards the Germans and Germany. At the same time, however, with explicit reference to the pioneering research of Fritz Fischer from the 1960s, the two authors emphasise the instrumental character of Imperial Germany's relations (25). During World War I, Germany supported the so-called foreign peoples (*Fremdvölker*) in the Russian Empire in order to break up or revolutionise the Tsarist Empire from within and, at the same time, pursued economic interests (valorisation of manganese ore) and, in 1918, increasingly geopolitical interests in Georgia, since general Erich Ludendorff, in particular, saw the country as a springboard to exerting power in Iran and India. The first part of the text on “German knowledge of Georgia before World War I” is sketchy, but the subsequent parts (2–4) provide a useful description of the German political view of Georgia, the establishment of consular missions in 1918, the recognition of the social democrat-led Democratic Republic of Georgia in 1920 to the end of the Georgian diplomatic mission in Berlin, and the German consular missions in Transcaucasia. They describe sequences of events and also name and introduce lesser-known individuals. Part 5 on “Germany and Georgia in World War II” is again a very superficial account, providing some information on the cooperation of émigré groups with what was referred to as the Russia Committee under Count Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg and the national socialists' plans for economic exploitation. The concluding section on the period between

1990 and 2018 reveals the diplomatic intent of the publication once more and presents a barely recognisable image of Georgia as a “stable democracy, an emerging economy, and a society on the move” (127). In so doing, the authors revive the genre of bilateral relations: to my knowledge, there are no comparable publications on Georgian–French or other bilateral political relations.

In this context, reference should also be made to the annotated collection of sources by Marc Junge and Bernd Bonwetsch on the Bolshevik terror in 1930s Georgia (including the non-Georgian nationalities), which dealt with an important aspect and is a relevant and controversial point of reference for further research on the topic.³ Unfortunately the two publications discussed here do not inform the reader about the period after 1991. Those interested in the contemporary history of the country should refer to the thematic issue “Dreamland Georgia. Interpretations of Culture and Politics” of the journal *Osteuropa* (“Traumland Georgien. Deutungen zu Kultur und Politik”, issue 68/7, 2018). Another worthwhile read is an edited volume by Luka Nakhutsrishvili, titled “A New Spelling of Georgia. Politics and Culture of a Country on the Road to Europe” (*Georgien, neu buchstabiert. Politik und Kultur eines Landes auf dem Weg nach Europa*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018). The book was funded by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and came out on the occasion of the Frankfurt Book Fair. Using an essayistic style, the book discusses the fundamental political and cultural historical topics of Georgia’s most recent history after 1991.

The English-language book market has a wider range of publications covering the post-1991 period. A particularly useful introduction is the monograph by Stephen Jones, published in 2013, which discusses the theoretical approaches to various subject areas and analyses social and economic history beyond the process of state-building.⁴ Another valuable contribution is the edited volume by Cambridge University historian Hubertus Jahn, published in 2021 with the title *Identities and Representations in Georgia from the 19th Century to the Present*. The volume originates from a conference that Jahn convened during a visiting professorship in Munich in 2017. The 12 contributions by international researchers from different disciplines analyse a wide range of topics from the 19th century to the present, a period that, as the volume states, “reflects a reorientation of Georgia toward the West” (2), largely as part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The sequence of the contributions is not explicitly discussed, but Jahn rightly draws attention in his introduction to the importance of the “interplay between

³ Marc Junge and Bernd Bonwetsch (eds). 2015. *Bolschewistische Ordnung in Georgien. Der Große Terror in einer kleinen kaukasischen Republik* (Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Historischen Instituts 5). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.

⁴ Stephen Jones. 2013: *Georgia. A Political History since Independence*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris (paperback 2015).

empire and nation as represented in literature and school textbooks or articulated through national movements, uprisings, and various types of official scenarios” (7–8). The contributions are theoretically sound and also provide a critical examination, whether implicit or explicit, of the well-known triad of fatherland, language and religion as key to Georgian self-understanding, as emphasised by the renowned Georgian national leader of the second half of the 19th century, Ilia Chavchavadze. The contributions are more informative regarding Georgian society in the 19th and 20th centuries than either of the aforementioned publications, whether seen through the prism of individual personalities, social groups or institutions, or through analysing state-building processes. Although the point of reference is often Russia, in the form of the Tsarist state or the Soviet Union, the volume contextualises its topic in a more nuanced thematic social and cultural context. In the contributions on history, for example, Khatuna Gvaradze discusses the close connection between the issue of women’s rights and the Georgian national movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, evoking parallels with the Polish women’s movement, in particular. In so doing, Gvaradze starts a new chapter in the historiography of the European women’s movement of this period, something which Georgian women explicitly repeatedly drew on around 1900.⁵

The representation of political rule is the focus of the contribution by Hubertus Jahn, which describes the Tsar’s visits to the Caucasus as representations of empire, and also those by Lasha Bakradze and Katrine Berndtsen Gotfredsen, which discuss the historical memory of Stalin in his hometown of Gori and in Georgia more broadly. Jahn places the royal visits in the larger historical context of Tsarist travels, like the journeys made by Tsarina Catherine II to the Baltic provinces or along the Volga to Kazan in the second half of the 18th century. The voyage of Tsar Nicholas I in 1837 became the reference point for all the subsequent Tsarist voyages in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Jahn vividly illustrates how these journeys showcased the Russian Empire’s multireligious and ethnic composition on the domestic stage in a paternalistic manner (for example through meeting church dignitaries and representatives of ethnic groups), but also served as outward displays of power vis-à-vis Persia and the Ottoman Empire. The visits were social highlights, albeit requiring significant input of resources from regional societies. The two chapters on Stalin arrive at very different conclusions on how to deal with the Stalin Museum, opened in 1957 in Stalin’s hometown of Gori, in front of which a Stalin monument was erected, only to be demolished in 2010.

5 A further groundbreaking edited volume with feminist perspectives on Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia is Maia Barkaia and Alisse Waterston (eds). 2018. *Gender in Georgia. Feminist Perspectives on Culture, Nation, and History in the South Caucasus*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn.

The historian and director of the Georgian Museum of Literature, Lasha Bakradze, maintains that “in Georgia today, Stalin is actually not a political talking point” (10), but in view of the political and touristic importance of the museum, he advocates for its preservation, albeit with a radical redesign involving international museologists and exhibition experts. Bakradze makes it clear just how daunting the task is: “It also has to be fundamentally changed without destroying its singularity” (14). During her field research in Gori in 2010–11, anthropologist Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen found that, as is the case throughout Georgia, inhabitants of the city displayed ambivalent attitudes towards the notorious compatriot, the monument and the museum, which is only partly related to politics in general and has more to do with the fact that Stalin was a son of the city of Gori and a Georgian. Jeremy Smith’s contribution can also be included in this thematic context. Smith sees the bloody suppression of protests in Georgia against Khrushchev’s 1956 speech as a turning point in Georgian–Russian relations. Thereafter, Georgian nationalism began to develop an anti-Russian connotation of which there was very little evidence before 1956. Smith also offers a nuanced analysis of the background to the protests, pointing to the growing political insecurity caused by the ousting of supporters of Lavrentiy Beria, the Georgian leader of the Communist Party and long-time head of Soviet intelligence who was assassinated in December 1953.⁶

Timothy K. Blauvelt and Anton Vacharadze emphasise the importance of the Georgian language as “the central marker of identity for the emerging Georgian national movement” (103) in the late 19th century and vividly demonstrate how Georgian intellectuals, such as Jakob Gogebashvili, sought in vain to strengthen native-language teaching by means of what they referred to as the “natural method” in the face of the growing dominance of Russian in schools and other institutions. Zaal Andronikashvili locates 19th-century Georgian political romanticism in the oeuvre of the poet Nikoloz Baratashvili (1817–45) as the first step towards understanding the idea of freedom territorially in a post-monarchical political order, thus drawing attention to the first generation of the modern Georgian national movement. Nikoloz Aleksidze provides an erudite contribution placing the conjuncture of canonisation (sainthood) in Georgia after 1991 in a broader historical context, highlighting the differences with the Armenian tradition and the late nationalisation of saints in the Georgian tradition. Anthropologist Martin Demant Frederiksen provides a fascinating counterpoint by drawing attention to the dehumanisation of small groups of atheists in contemporary Tbilisi.

⁶ Timothy K. Blauvelt/Jeremy Smith (eds). 2016. *Georgia After Stalin. Nationalism and Soviet Power*. London and New York: Routledge.

Anthropologist Nutsa Batiashvili discusses the fluid collective identification patterns in colonial and postcolonial contexts (“the period of margin and liminality”, 41), which are characterised by “incompleteness and thus movements towards fuller, more complete, rounded versions of ourselves” (41). She emphasises that Georgians have often interpreted Georgia’s European affiliation as “a return to Georgia’s natural path of development” and have argued about “the nature of Georgianness” (42) since the 19th century. Undoubtedly, such questions can be contemplated at length, and Georgia is not the only country to engage in such reflection. But where does such a chapter take us, analytically?

The volume does not offer an exhaustive overview of the post-1991 period, instead limiting itself to cultural historical approaches to selected topics. The focus on the two key concepts of “identities” and “representations” provides targeted insights to this broad field. The book cover, which features a print of a photomontage from 1912 entitled “The Georgian dream comes true”, showing a Georgian on a flying carpet with Mount Kazbegi in the background, underlines the central theme of the book with heart-warming self-irony.

Two other recently published monographs (one of them having just gone to print at the time of writing this review) comprising thematically and chronologically focused accounts in English deserve a mention: *Clientelism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom. The Trials of Nestor Lakoba* (London, New York: Routledge, 2021) by Timothy K. Blauvelt and the forthcoming *Lived Nationality: Police and Practice in Soviet Georgia, 1945–1978* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press) by Claire Pogue Kaiser.

The three books discussed in more detail of course only provide a narrow basis for a more general perspective on historical literature on the recent/modern history of Georgia. Historical research is carried out by a small number of historians; in Germany, for example, there is no institutionalised basis for research, not even in the form of bilateral or international historical commissions. However, universities in Tbilisi, especially Ilia State University with its international staff, are opening up to international research on Georgia’s past and present. So far, the small number of German-language historical accounts on Georgia include only initial overviews, among which the monographs by Oliver Reisner (2004) and one of the three works studied here, by Philipp Ammon (2017, 2020), stand out. The two more recent accounts of nation and state development presented in more detail take a perspective based on the history of Georgian–Russian or Georgian–German bilateral relations. The English-language literature has done a better job by publishing thorough overviews of national history (particularly the works of Lang and Suny) and of the new Georgia after 1991 (the monograph by Jones). Here, too, the paramount importance of the Georgian–Russian/Soviet relations are a key take-away (Jahn).

Nevertheless, I wonder whether bilateral perspectives ought not to be supplemented by or broken up by multilateral ones. In September 2021, in cooperation with Mirja Lecke (University of Regensburg) and Oliver Reisner (State Ilia University Tbilisi), I organised an international conference entitled “Georgia glocal”, which aimed at precisely such multilaterality, an event that proved to be quite fruitful.⁷ The broader regional (South Caucasian) context is also missing from the literature discussed here, and it is easy to imagine how Iran or the Ottoman Empire/Turkey need to be included in analyses of Georgia’s larger historical framework. Moreover, current approaches in comparative area studies drawing on the Caucasus at the intersection of different world regions or as a world region in its own right warrant further consideration. However, this would require advanced linguistic abilities beyond the Russian-language skills of the majority of historians of Eastern Europe, which alone are insufficient for such an all-encompassing regional perspective. Other relevant topics, which have so far been largely absent from the historical accounts on Georgia, are urban history on and beyond Tbilisi,⁸ relations with the different nationalities and minorities, migration, and economic history, to name but a few. Focusing on the former, between 2018 and 2021, Liana Kupreishvili from the Ilia State University Tbilisi conducted research on sex work in Tbilisi from the late 1980s to the present at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg, as part of a research group funded by the German Research Fund (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, DFG) on “Urban Ethics”. She is currently preparing a manuscript on the topic.

Without doubt, the achievement and loss of statehood (1783/1801, 1918–21, 1991) has a prominent place in the recent historical literature on Georgia. This is evident from the literature discussed here, but also from additional publications that have commemorated the centenary of the emergence and the end of the Democratic Republic of Georgia 1918–21. The strong thematic focus may in part be due to a state-centric historiographic tradition, while the broader public might have been less interested in the political than in the social and economic order. However, even in the literature on state formation and collapse, more complex approaches that emphasise the processual character and degrees of autonomy and sovereignty and incorporate insights from neighbouring disciplines have rarely been used.

⁷ See the conference report by J. Stadelbauer. 10 November 2021. “Georgia Glocal/Georgien global, 9–11 September 2021, Regensburg und digital, *H-Soz-Kult*, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-9129>.

⁸ As a starting point, see L. van Assche, K. Salukvadze, and N. Shavishvili (eds). 2009. *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: When Europe and Asia Meet*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.

Another typical characteristic of the specialist literature on Georgia is the remarkably strong intertwining of literature and history, which is in part closely connected with questions of bilateral cultural relations and affiliations. This is rooted in the fact that literary fiction has always taken on functions and articulated themes that the more institutionalised historiographical literature could not and indeed did not want to (particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries). This presents significant scope for cooperation on multidisciplinary research projects.

Bionote

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