

Jonas Bernstein

Georgia's Political Theater

An autocratic ex-dissident, a professor with a prison record, and a charismatic hit man battle it out in Stalin's native land.

Politics in post-Soviet Georgia is a contact sport, more often than not marked by an exchange of mortar fire in the fourth quarter. The center of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, lies in ruins following a two-week shootout between gunmen loyal to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the popularly elected autocrat, and his opponents. The contest has gone into overtime: Zviady, as his supporters like to call him (it means "proud, overbearing,

arrogant"), has returned to Georgia following a brief exile in neighboring Armenia. From his new base in Mingrelia, the western region that is the home of his ancestors, Gamsakhurdia is vowing to usurp the usurpers, and gathering armed supporters for a march on the capital. Meanwhile, the new rulers, who insist their insurrection was a popular one, have demonstrated their commitment to democracy by gunning down unarmed demonstrators.

It is perhaps not surprising that the art of compromise has not found fertile ground in a nation where a simple greeting—*gamer jova*—literally means "I wish you victory." Today, Georgian politics is dominated by gangster intellectuals—theater critics with guns.

On the face of it, it is hard to understand why a philologist and former dissident, who was once nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by the U.S. Congress, would end up with the



Zviad Gamsakhurdia

reputation of a Nicolae Ceausescu. In 1974, Gamsakhurdia helped start up Georgia's first human rights monitoring group—dubbed the Initiative Group, after the Moscow organization of the same name—along with music scholar Merab Kostava and Valentina Paylodze, the choirmaster in Tbilisi's main Georgian Orthodox church. The Initiative Group wrote about the plight of the Meskhetians, a southern Georgian ethnic

group that had converted to Islam under Turkish rule and was deported to Central Asia and elsewhere by Stalin in 1944. Through samizdat, the group protested state interference in church affairs, as well as the Soviet army's use of the site of an old monastery for artillery practice. For exposing corruption among the Orthodox hierarchy and the republic's officialdom, Paylodze was arrested for "anti-Soviet slander" and sentenced to one-and-a-half years in a labor camp.

"I received information from Gamsakhurdia on several occasions," recalls dissident historian Ludmilla Alexeyeva, who at that time worked for Moscow's samizdat *Chronicle of Current Events*. One of his contributions detailed the use of torture on people arrested for "economic crimes." The information was so horrific that Alexeyeva and other human rights activists did not believe it and did not use it. A year later Gamsakhurdia's allegations were substantiated when police officials in Georgia went on trial for such abuses. In January 1977, Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava helped

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form the Georgian Helsinki Watch Group, once again following the lead of the Moscow dissidents like Yuri Orlov, Andrei Amalrik, and Andrei Sakharov.

Yet Gamsakhurdia left no one with the impression that he was the next Sakharov. "He was sort of burning with strange passions," says one Westerner who knew him in the 1970s. Speaking of those passions, Alexeyeva says: "He wasn't a human rights activist—he was a nationalist from the beginning." He was clearly not a pacifist. In 1976, there were three bombings in Georgia, one of them near Tbilisi's Government Hall. While no one implicates Gamsakhurdia, Alexeyeva recalls that he welcomed the attacks. "Fortunately there were no victims, but there were several explosions, and he was very impressed—he liked it. It was later discovered that the bombings had been done by a single person, not an organization. The man was arrested, and Gamsakhurdia defended him, calling him a Georgian hero." Gamsakhurdia even approached a Western government about financing and arms. The request was denied.

Alexeyeva believes that Gamsakhurdia felt protected from persecution by his father's reputation. Following a prison term in the Solovki Islands—Lenin's Gulag—during the 1920s, Konstantin Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's greatest twentieth-century novelist, was rehabilitated. It was Gamsakhurdia Sr.'s intercession with the authorities that got his son off the hook in 1956, when Zviad, age 17, was arrested for nationalist agitation during Georgian student protests against Khrushchev's de-Stalinization. (Gamsakhurdia said last year that the protests arose "out of a sense of national pride," not support for Stalinism.)

"He and half a dozen other lads founded what was for all intents a secret political society calling for Georgia to secede from the Soviet Union and become a free country," says Elizabeth Fuller, an analyst with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "They printed leaflets, and inevitably they were all rounded up by the KGB. Zviad's father at that time told Khrushchev that if they received a severe jail sentence or were sentenced to death, then he, Konstantin, would commit suicide. Khrushchev backed off and they got a jail sentence of only a few months." In Gamsakhurdia's version, as told to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* last year, he and his comrades were saved by "the efforts of Georgian writers and scholars"—no mention of his dad.

In April 1977, however, real trouble found Gamsakhurdia, when he and Merab Kostava were arrested for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda." The two finally went on trial in May 1978, the same week that Yuri Orlov, founder of the Moscow Helsinki chapter, was tried and sentenced to seven years in a labor camp. Gamsakhurdia and Kostava

were found guilty and given three years' hard labor. The day of his conviction, Gamsakhurdia appeared on Soviet television and said he was guilty of "slandorous inventions" against the state, adding: "My activity in disseminating anti-Soviet literature did great harm to our country." He also fingered Igor Belousovich of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Al Friendly of *Newsweek*, and David K. Shipler of the *Washington Post*, saying they had provided him with anti-Soviet literature.

Following the broadcast, Sakharov was tactfully critical: "I feel great disappointment. It is a heavy thing to see a man broken. It is hard for us to imagine the pressure and the isolation he faced, but the amazing thing is that people do stand up to such pressure. People like Orlov, Kostava. . . . That Gamsakhurdia did not is his misfortune, his tragedy, his guilt."

The broadcast had all the earmarks of a KGB editing job; Gamsakhurdia's friends and relatives expressed doubts that the confession was voluntary, and were quoted to that effect

by the *New York Times* and *Baltimore Sun*. But when Soviet television then brought correspondents Craig Whitney and Harold Piper for slander before the Moscow City Court in July 1978, Gamsakhurdia, appearing as a prosecution witness, said his confession had been voluntary. (The two journalists

"Zviad Gamsakhurdia is destined to lead Georgia along the path to true freedom. I think the hand of Providence can be seen in this. He is called to it by his origins, his genes, his career, his entire life."

were found guilty and fined; they refused to issue a retraction.)

"What Gamsakhurdia has since said, and what his wife told me when I spoke to her three years ago," says Elizabeth Fuller, "is that Gamsakhurdia and Kostava had decided, before they were ever arrested, that one of them would repent and get the shortest possible sentence, so that that one would go back to Georgia and be the nucleus, the focus, of Georgian dissent." In any event, things worked out rather well for Gamsakhurdia: he was released a year later, while Kostava remained in prison until May 1987.

Gamsakhurdia's reputation suffered as a result. But by the mid-1980s, the leaders of the Georgian national movement decided to put aside personal and ideological differences and accept Zviad back into the fold. In April 1989, he helped organize the huge pro-independence rally that was brutally crushed by the Red Army. Nationalist sentiment was galvanized, and Gamsakhurdia's Helsinki group, renamed the Helsinki Union, was able to forge alliances and outmaneuver other pro-independence groups like the National Democratic Front and the National Independence party. (In a tactical blunder, these groups chose not to run candidates in the 1990 elections to the Supreme Soviet, arguing that it was an illegitimate body imposed by Moscow.) Gamsakhurdia's populism went down well with the masses, particularly in the countryside. As a result, his "Round Table"

coalition gained control of the parliament. Last May, he won the presidency with 87 percent of the vote.

As Georgia's leader, Gamsakhurdia soon began to display the Larouche-like paranoia for which he has become famous. He denounced his political opponents as "hooligans" and "degenerate representatives of the intelligentsia" (not entirely false), as "agents of the Kremlin," "agents of the center," as pawns of Communists, neo-Nazis, and—his favorite—Eduard Shevardnadze. (Gamsakhurdia's hatred of the former Soviet foreign minister is perhaps understandable, given the torture Georgian political prisoners suffered while Shevardnadze was Georgia's interior minister; as the saying goes, even paranoids have enemies.)

A cult of personality, weirdly reminiscent of the one that surrounded another Georgian-born leader, soon emerged.

"He came upon the world with the mark of brilliance," wrote Gamsakhurdia's culture minister in a pro-government newspaper last June. "He was no ordinary man. Zviad Gamsakhurdia is destined to lead Georgia along the path to true freedom. I think the hand of Providence can be seen in this. He is called to it by his origins, his genes, his career, his entire life." A group of fanatical female supporters known as the "tent ladies" camped outside the parliament building in Tbilisi, regularly haranguing and even attacking opposition legislators. The women—also referred to as the "Black Pantyhose," a mocking reference to the feared Soviet "Black Beret" militia—were reportedly orga-

nized by Manana Archvadze, Gamsakhurdia's wife. Some observers paint Archvadze as the real hard-liner—a Caucasian blend of Elena Ceausescu and Eva Peron—who counseled her husband to show the opposition no mercy.

If so, the advice worked. Opponents were systematically harassed—and some jailed, including Georgi Chanturia, head of the National Democratic party, and Dzhaba Ioseliani, chief of the Mkhedrioni ("Horsemen"), a paramilitary group that was originally allied with Gamsakhurdia's Round Table. Yet to some degree the crackdown had more bark than bite: as the confrontation escalated last summer, most opposition newspapers remained open, and government opponents virtually took over Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main drag. They denounced Gamsakhurdia as "Ceausescu" and "Saddam Hussein," and even suggested that he fly to Cuba and join Fidel.

Last fall, the confrontation became more violent. On September 2, Gamsakhurdia's militia shot at a crowd of unarmed protesters. Like the Soviet authorities after the massacre in Vilnius a year ago, the president claimed the demonstrators fired first. Initially, Gamsakhurdia's response to mounting criticism from abroad was to cry "conspiracy,"

and to insist that Georgia is a model democracy. In December, however, he let the cat out of the bag, declaring that "in Georgia there is no room for opposition, so let [the opposition] get out and join those on whose payroll it is." Several days later, he stripped a group of opposition parliamentary deputies of its powers.

Gamsakhurdia's autocratic tendencies were in evidence well before he was elected Georgia's president. Under his leadership, the Helsinki Union, his erstwhile human rights group, mutated into a Georgian chauvinist organization. In the summer of 1989, following pogroms against Meskhetians in Uzbekistan, Georgia's Communist government indicated it would be willing to allow the Muslim minority to return home. Gamsakhurdia, whose group had taken up the Meskhetians' plight back in

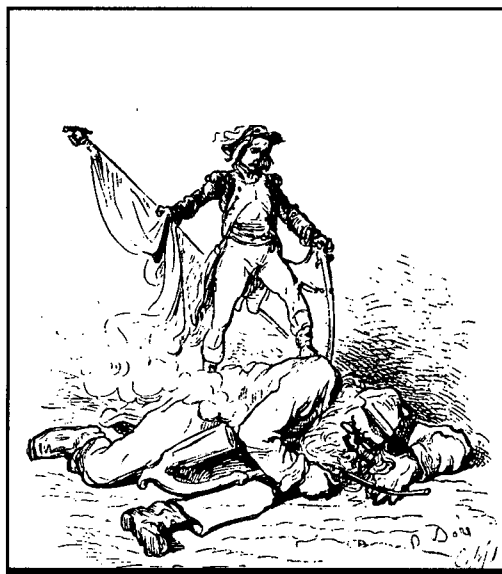
1976, helped organize protest demonstrations around the theme of "Georgia for Georgians!" The Helsinki Union issued a document stating that the Meskhetians should be allowed to return to Georgia only if they dropped their Turkish names for Georgian ones and converted to Christianity.

In November 1989, the inhabitants of South Ossetia, an autonomous region inside Georgia, demanded reunification with their Persian Muslim brethren across the border in North Ossetia, part of the Russian republic. A caravan of thousands of Georgians, reportedly led by Gamsakhurdia, descended on Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital. Os-

setian leaders claim that the Georgians committed atrocities in the ensuing violence. In late 1989, the Georgian government abolished South Ossetia's autonomous status and imposed a blockade. Violence between Ossetians and Georgians left 250 dead last year, and well over 50,000 South Ossetians have fled into North Ossetia.

It must be said that most Georgians, Gamsakhurdia supporters and opponents alike, feel that South Ossetia was unfairly carved out of Georgia by the Bolsheviks in 1921, the year Georgia's short-lived independence was crushed. The South Ossetian Popular Front, which includes paramilitary formations, maintained close links with Soviet hard-liners like Col. Victor Alksnis, at least prior to the failed August 19 coup. Early last year, one of the leaders of Pamyat, the ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic Russian group, showed up in Tskhinvali to declare his support for the Ossetians. There is also little doubt that prior to the coup the KGB was busy trying to foment ethnic turmoil in Georgia.

Nonetheless, a significant portion of the blame for the bad blood between Georgia and its minorities can be traced to Gamsakhurdia's views on ethnicity. His 1990 book, *The Spiritual Mission of Georgia*, a compilation of



lectures and essays, puts forth the theory that the Georgians are descended from a "proto-Iberian" people driven out of Europe, Asia Minor, and India by the spiritually and culturally inferior Indo-Europeans. These proto-Iberians, who settled in the Caucasus and the Pyrenees, were "Jupiter's race," "the Japhetic race"—i.e., the original white race.

The volume includes an exegesis of *Praise and Glorification of the Georgian Language*, a work ascribed to Ioane-Zosime, a tenth-century Georgian monk. Gamsakhurdia writes:

Ioane-Zosime explained explicitly . . . that the Georgian nation and its language, adorned and blessed in the name of the Lord, is a Lazarus among the nations and languages, four days (i.e., 4,000 years) dead, humbled and rejected, which must bear an unprecedented testimony to Christ, will rise in the future, regain its universal position as mankind's spiritual teacher, and at the Second Coming of Christ will become exposé of sinful humanity.

These theories have guided at least part of his politics. Gamsakhurdia has stated that the Ossetians have no right to autonomy in Georgia because they are "new-comers from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries." In June 1990 he called mixed marriages "fatal to the Georgian family and the Georgian language," and suggested that they would be banned in an independent Georgia. On the other hand, his criticisms of the Abkhazians, a Muslim ethnic group that has also been calling for secession (there were bloody clashes with Georgians in 1989), have been made more in sorrow than in anger. "Their origin is indeed Ibero-Caucasian," he states in *The Spiritual Mission of Georgia*, "and had they knowledge of their descent they might never have started such conflicts with their kindred nation."

Gamsakhurdia is not the only Georgian politician given to strong-armed tactics and wacky ideas. The new regime is certainly not dominated by civil libertarians. While provisional prime minister Tengiz Sigua, who resigned as Gamsakhurdia's prime minister last August, is by all accounts a reasonable—if undistinguished—pol, the real power is in the hands of a military council led by a real pair of deuces: the aforementioned Dzhaba Ioseliani, a Bashir Gemayel wannabe who heads the Mkhedrioni paramilitary group; and Tengiz Kitovani, chief of the Georgian national guard, who broke with Gamsakhurdia last August. In January, the two were trying to win legitimacy in Georgia and support in the West by promising to cede power to a civilian government "in about a month." Both denied having any long-term political ambitions.

Ioseliani, 65, a doctor of philology known in Georgia as a playwright and theater critic, has a résumé similar to

Gamsakhurdia's. Yet his first job, apparently, was as a criminal. In his early twenties, Ioseliani committed several armed robberies, during one of which he reportedly tore the earrings off a woman's ears; her husband died of either suffocation or a heart attack after being gagged. Ioseliani and his droogs were later busted for bank robbery, and he served fifteen years in prison.

An admirer of Francisco Franco, Ioseliani formed the Mkhedrioni in 1989. In various interviews, he described the group as a "peace corps" established to "work for political and national accord for progressive reforms in Georgia and to avert ethnic conflicts," to help out in natural disasters or, if necessary, "to defend Georgia from anarchy and defend our borders." (He even offered a unit of Mkhedrioni to the Allied forces during Operation Desert Storm.)

Yet some Georgians charge that this group of young Christian warriors (it numbers from 1,000 to 5,000, depending on the estimate) have behaved more like a Lebanese militia than a civic group. "They would just steal cars they liked, and it was declared that it was a requisition in the name of national defense," says an émigré who maintains

contacts with both sides of the conflict. "It was complete lawlessness. They literally taxed people in the rural areas—a certain amount of meat, a certain amount of grain—in the name of supplying 'the guardians of Georgian borders' with

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food. People just dreaded their appearance." In an interview with the Moscow weekly *Megapolis-Express*, Ioseliani admitted only that his men "expropriate ill-gotten money from underground millionaires" to buy weapons. Since Gamsakhurdia's flight from the besieged parliament building on January 6, Ioseliani's men have been on Tbilisi's streets, enforcing the Military Council's state of emergency. They are blamed for shooting into crowds during two pro-Gamsakhurdia rallies in January. Five people were killed.

Then there is Tengiz Kitovani, Gamsakhurdia's former national guard chief. Stories circulating around Georgia suggest that he also has a corpse or two in his past. According to one account, while ferrying his brother—who was on the run after murdering someone—into hiding, Kitovani drove his car over several people leaving a wedding. A second version involves a vendetta: after a friend of his was murdered, Kitovani ran over the killer—back and forth, to make sure the job was thorough.

Indeed, there is a lack of quality leadership in the former Soviet republic. This should not be seen as a reflection on Georgians as a whole: their hospitality is renowned, and among them are many savvy businessmen and impressive intellectuals and artists. The tragedy of Georgia, the land that produced J.V. Dzhugashvili, is perhaps best summed up by an émigré: "In Georgia, good people don't go into politics." □

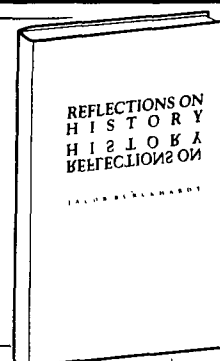
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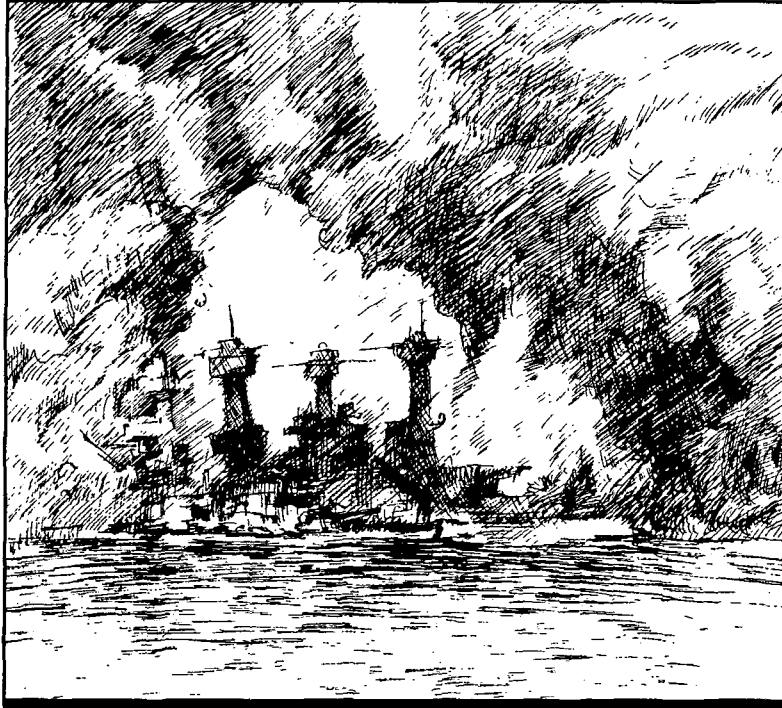
Thomas Mallon

The Golden Pearl

Infamy commemorated.

Honolulu

At 7:06 a.m. local time on December 7, 1941, the Opana mobile radar station on Oahu picked up an enormous blip. The activity was duly reported, but higher-ups told the radarmen not to worry: it could only be the big squadron of B-17s due in from California to reinforce the base. Forty-nine minutes later the first wave of Japanese Zeroes began destroying the Pacific fleet. The B-17s, arriving later, would land amidst American antiaircraft fire.



Fifty years later to the week, the skies over Oahu are once more crowded with aircraft flying west. Plane after plane carrying members of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association is landing in Honolulu for the attack's golden anniversary, the red tailmarkings signifying not the Japanese air force but TWA. On Wednesday, December 4, all 433 passenger seats on Flight 1 from St. Louis are filled, and a traveler can look forward over dozens of septuagenarian heads—gray or bald, and capped with PHSA headgear—sticking above the seatbacks.

The pilot announces that the plane today weighed 734,000 pounds at takeoff, but now, descending toward Honolulu, is hundreds of thousands less, having burned off the fuel required to carry it here. The statistics, like the instructional safety film that preceded them hours ago, carry the mind to the focal point of this anniversary, the sunken USS *Arizona*, which, at the bottom of the harbor, beneath its memorial, still holds what remains of three times as many men as are on this

crowded plane, and which every day, even now, continues to leak two or three of the million gallons of fuel that were pumped into her shortly before the attack.

"Survivor" is a term embraced today by Americans claiming triumph over a host of humiliations ranging from incest to smoke in the workplace. But the eager self-love with which the word is spoken into talk-show microphones cannot entirely dilute the word's power, and during early December, as it

appeared stenciled and stitched on hundreds of aging chests and heads, the term surely still had meaning. Separated from death by just yards and seconds and fate, these men could scarcely think of themselves as anything else. One theme of discussion at the commemorations would be whether, fifty years later, the war was truly over. The President would say yes, but individual psychologies keep their own timetables. Some of those arriving on Flight 1 might beg to differ, like the oil drops still rising from the *Arizona*, and the Allied bomb, buried near Leibnitz, Germany, which on the evening of Wednesday, December 4, according to Friday's *Honolulu Advertiser*, suddenly exploded, injuring two people and leaving a twenty-foot-deep crater.

There was a danger that December 7, 1991 would be remembered for overkill of a different sort from that unleashed in 1941: the Pacific Command issued more press credentials to journalists covering the Pearl Harbor anniversary than were given out during the Gulf War. Even so, on Thursday morning, December 5, by which time the commemorations were underway, there were hundreds

Thomas Mallon's most recent book is the novel Aurora 7 (Ticknor & Fields).