

**New Memory – New Identity: Active Forgetting in the Process of the Formation of New Memory
(Georgia in the 1990s and 2000s)**

Abstract

The paper discusses the problem of distancing from the past and strategies of forgetting which were used in Georgia in the last years of the USSR and the first years of independence. New future of the country required the “new past”. On the first stage of its construction which started from the end of the 1980s and lasted approximately a decade, *active forgetting* quite often expressed in the form of the revenge on the past was the main strategy of dealing with the Soviet past. On the next stage, the above-mentioned form was not abandoned, however, the accent in the politics of memory was shifted to the passive forgetting and the construction of new sites of memory.

Key words: memory construction, active forgetting, sites of memory.

Shared memory of the past is the main determinant of the collective identity. It bounds the group and forms collective identity. Exactly the memory enables us to comprehend our identity – both on the individual as well as on the group level (Assmann A., 2010; Assman J., 2010). The paper investigates the forms of distancing from the past, the means and methods of forgetting which were used in Georgia during the process of formation of the new memory. The study builds on Maurice Halbwachs’s idea of collective memory as a constructed phenomenon (Halbwachs, 1992). The problem is discussed through the concepts of active and passive forgetting, offered by Aleida Assman (Assmann A., 2010). The first implies purposeful negation and destruction of the icon of the past, whereas the second is comprised of non-purposed acts – when a particular object is left beyond the focus of interest and loses its meaning. These objects are termed as *sites of memory* by Pierre Nora who considers them to be the tools for cultural maintenance of collective memory; these areas are aimed at “stopping time” and avoidance of forgetting (Nora, 1992; Nora, 1989).

The American historian Eric Foner mentions that in the period of radical changes and transformation of country’s political and economic structures, “a new future requires a new past” (Foner, 2002, p. 77). From the second half of the 1980s, this period started in Georgia. It became clear that the image of the past created during the Soviet period, which was aimed at legitimizing the common future of all Soviet peoples and creating the shared Soviet identity, did not meet the new goal - the achievement of independence - and a new future of the sovereign Georgian state. This was a turning point in the organization and construction of memory. During *perestroika*, the tabooed events of the past emerged in the public discourse, and the society quickly recollected nearly forgotten facts, names of heroes and traitors who changed their places. The process of re-assessment of the past and the changed attitude toward the sites of memory became apparent.

The first public manifestation of this process came through the publication of the poetic collection dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the October Socialist Revolution, under the title “One Thousand Lines of the Poet.” The book was published in 1985 by the publishing house “Merani” and contained selected works of thirteen Georgian poets, only two of which were still alive by that time:

Karlo Kaladze and Kolau Nadiradze (1895-1991).¹ The poem of the latter - “25 February 1921”² was written in 1969 and had never been published before. The poet speaks about the mourning people, a rider on a white horse, stalking the silent city of Tbilisi with a red flag and a sickle of death in his hands. Obviously, after the publication of the poem, entire administration of the publishing house and editors of the book were dismissed from their positions and the author of the poem was condemned publicly at the session of the Writers’ Union, but not expelled “due to his age and health condition”.³ Still, the poem awakened the slumberous society and triggered the process of reconsideration of standard vision of the Soviet past.

In 1987, the traumatic memory of the Soviet past manifested itself in the unusual and exceptional form in the Mtatsminda (Holly Mountain) Pantheon in Tbilisi - the graveyard of famous writers and public figures and one of the most important sites of memory. The case could be termed as the *active forgetting* (Assmann A., 2010, p. 97) or the *revenge on the past* (Nora, 2005, p. 391). In the autumn 1987, when the 150 anniversary of Ilia Chavchavadze – the famous Georgian writer and public figure of the 19th century – was celebrated in Georgia, the grave of the communist leader of early Soviet time Philipe Makharadze was blown up in the Pantheon. His name was associated with the murder of Ilia Chavchavadze in 1907 (although this has never been explored scientifically or justified judicially). The Communist government preferred to restore the grave without much noise on the following days. The Georgian writer Rostom Chkheidze mentions that “this was the most beautiful and impressive explosion ever taking place in our life” (Chkheidze, 2011, p. 4). Was beautiful or not, this incident had a huge resonance and appeared to be the first symptom of further developments. At the end of 1989, the Communist government re-buried the relics of famous Bolsheviks – Philipe Makharadze, Silibistro Tordia and Mikha Tskhakaia – from the Mtatsminda Pantheon to the common grave of revolutionaries in the park of Khudadov; later on, they were re-buried in different cemeteries by their relatives.⁴

The removal of the state flag of the Soviet Georgia from the government building on the Rustaveli Avenue, during the hunger strike in November 1988, at the presence of thousands of protesters and *militia* (police) (Mchedlidze, 1999, p. 143), was another sign of *active forgetting* and *revenge on the past*. The government preferred not to react openly on the fact which was even unimaginable at that time.

On February 25, 1989, on the very first time during the Soviet history, the mass protest movements were launched in the streets of Tbilisi and other cities; mass rallies were organized against the Soviet intervention in Georgia in 1921 and occupation of the country by the Soviet Russia (Mchedlidze, 1999, p. 155). During the rallies, the publicly staged flags of the Soviet Georgia were changed with the flags of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921). The latter was forbidden for decades, but quickly surfaced from memory and became the inseparable part of every meeting and demonstration.

¹ Bregadze, Levan. A History of a Poem. Retrieved on 22.02.2018 from http://www.nplg.gov.ge/civil/statiebi/statiebi/erti_leqsis_istoria.htm

² The date when the Soviet rule was established in Georgia; it was celebrated for decades as the main holiday of the country.

³ Chkhikvishvili, Nino. A history of Kolau Nadiradze’s Great Poem. Retrieved on 22.02.2018 from <http://artinfo.ge/2016/02/>

⁴ Newspaper “24 saati”, 2010. Retrieved on 10.02. 2014 from <http://24saati.ge/index.php/category/news/2010-04-18/5555.html> (in Georgian).

Communists, still in the governing structures of Georgia, tried to maintain control over the processes through the politics of concessions and repressions, aspiring to become the leaders of the emerging tide of nationalism. As Stephen Jones mentions, before the tragedy of April 9, 1989, the two forms of nationalism were colliding in Georgia: the “official” one, supported by the ruling elite, and that of the street populist nationalism (Jones, 2013, p. 39). Alongside with the prohibition of rallies and demonstrations, the official media covered formerly tabooed issues – the invasion of the Red Army in Georgia in 1921, the anti-Bolshevik rebellion of 1924, the repressions of 1930s. More to the point, in January 1989, the government created a commission for rehabilitation of the persons repressed in the 1930s and 1940s (Jones, 2013, p. 44), whereas in 1990, the 26th of May – a day when the Act of Independence was adopted by the Constituent Assembly of Georgia – was declared as a public holiday in a still Soviet republic (Mchedlidze, 1999, p. 188).

The change of toponyms in 1989-1990 was a part of the active forgetting. The process was pursued by the Soviet rulers. Manipulation with place names by government elites in the times of political and ideological changes was observed in different countries. In the case of Georgia, this was a part of what is called by Stephen Jones as an *official nationalism*. Naming is a strong tool for identification with the past, “whereas renaming represents a way of creating new connections between the past and the present”. Place names are “symbolic monuments that greatly influence public memory” (Alderman, 2008, p. 195-196). Quite often, toponyms are changed for highlighting national identity and national history. Naming is based on a particular representation of history, it is the ideologically justified process aimed at grounding the past in the present and legitimating historical meanings. Toponyms permeate our verbal and visual vocabulary through appearing on street addresses, road signs, maps (Alderman, 2008, p. 197-196).

In the above-mentioned period, the titles were changed of most of the main cities and regional centres, streets, squares, metro stations which were named after the revolutionaries and the Communist Party officials. They got back their historical names or were titled after the Georgian historical and public figures, writers, poets, scientists, historical events. Their selection fully corresponds to the practice of maintaining historical continuity which is named as “discursive continuity” by Zerubavel and which serves to mental bridging the gap between the past and the present.

The demolition of the sculptures and monuments of the Soviet leaders as well as the symbols of the Soviet system represented another case of the *active forgetting* and the *revenge on the past*. Monuments are especially important sites of memory which serve the function of ensuring coherence and consensus among the wide part of the society bounded by the shared historical memory. Debates which precede and accompany inauguration of monuments are important historical sources, as they reflect attitudes and viewpoints of different generations on the facts and events monuments are dedicated to.

From the end of the 1980s, the monuments of the Soviet state and party leaders were removed down from their pedestals. Some of these monuments were destroyed openly and with celebrations; others were quietly removed from the squares and parks of cities and villages. Here the cross of the two above-mentioned forms of nationalism could be observed.

In 1989, the monument of Sergo Orjonikidze – a famous revolutionary and functionary, one of the founders of the Soviet rule in Georgia – was dismantled in Tbilisi. This monument suffered the most severe fate out of all Soviet monuments: it became the object of the “revenge on the past” after the tragedy of 9 April 1989, when the peaceful demonstrators protesting against the Soviet regime in

front of the Government seat in Tbilisi were killed by the soldiers of the Soviet Army. On the morning after the tragedy, the huge grey statue at the crossroad of two main avenues in the central part of Tbilisi was found with the hands painted in bloody color and pasted with all sorts of household rubbish. At night, the city authorities circled the monument with a wooden fence and later removed it without much noise. Orjonikidze's native village was renamed back to its old name Kharagauli; besides, one of the districts of Tbilisi, named after him, was renamed into Vake-Saburtalo district. Orjonikidze's name was maintained in the history textbooks and works of historians, although in a negative context – that of a person which took a leading role in the Sovietization of Georgia. Nevertheless, it assumed minor, if not insignificant place in the collective memory.

Last time, his name appeared in 2012, although even without mentioning, in the computer game “Kakutsa Cholokashvili”⁵: the main plot of the game is the struggle against the Bolshevik occupation of Georgia.⁵ The final scene of the game presents Kakutsa Chokashvili sitting at the table with the inscription “Sakartvelo” in front of him and with the Eiffel tower on its background. On the wall behind, there is a portrait of Sergo Orjonikidze, with red horns and beards of devil.

Next to Orjonikidze, the sculpture-composition in front of the Government seat on Rustaveli Avenue named as “Labor, Science, Technique” (erected in 1958) was publicly destroyed.

The most important event was the demolition of Lenin's monument at the Lenin's Square in the very center of Tbilisi, on August 29, 1990. Special decree on this issue was adopted by the Presidium of the Council of People's Deputies. The attempt of legitimization of this decision by those-days Head of the Presidium of the City Council, Nikoloz Lekishvili, represents a sample of the official nationalism. It clearly demonstrates the aspiration of the Communist Government to maintain its grip on the formation of the collective memory. In this line, the demolition of the founder of the first communist state was declared not as the step towards forgetting, but as the concession to the “demands of the society” (*“This resolution was taken collectively, under the unequivocal consent of the members of the presidium. It is widely known fact that the great portion of the population demands demolition of the statue of Lenin from the main square of the city and argues for the renovation and reconstruction of the square and its surrounding”*). Lekishvili mentioned the superfluity of Lenin's monuments in the city (*“Such a great number of monuments of one person could be hardly found at any other place”*); the necessity of keeping order in the capital city (*“There were several attempts of arbitrary removal of the monument; as a result, the pedestal was damaged ... Every day the monument was guarded by police units, the law-defenders were detached from their main duties. Systematic clash between police and ordinary citizens had a negative influence on the daily-life of the city”*). He spoke about the generous aim to restore the traditional image of the central square (*“The square will be reconstructed, plates will be paved and in the future the place will take its traditional appearance”*); highlighted the unity of the population and government (*“The process of dismantle of the monument started yesterday evening and was over by the midnight. By this time, a huge number of citizens were assembled on the square and they were assisting representatives of the city council in the demolition of the monument ... The issue of the appearance of the main square as well as the plan of its reconstruction will be discussed with the society”*). Unexpectedly, Mr. Lekishvili has linked the demolition of Lenin's monument to the traumatic memory of March 9, 1956 (*“It should be also considered that the erection of the monument on the square is connected to the bloody events of March 9, 1956. This fact was*

⁵ Computer game “kakutsa Cholokashvili. Retrieved on 17.10.2018 from <https://www.myvideo.ge/v/1562777>

additional irritant factor for the population; it caused unpleasant associations among the citizens of Tbilisi).⁶ It could be argued that this passage aimed at demonstrating the sincerity and conviction of the government's move, as well as ensuring more public legitimacy.

The demolition of the statue of Lenin in Tbilisi was followed by renaming the square into the Liberty Square and similar actions in other cities and settlements. As early as the last years of the Soviet Union, the statues of Lenin almost disappeared from the public space, followed by the monuments of Georgian as well as international revolutionaries and communist leaders.

The government did not oppose to the public initiative to bury Merab Kostava, one of the renowned figures of the national-liberation movement (who died tragically in the car accident in October, 1989) in the Pantheon of Mtatsminda. The burial ceremony was a clear manifestation of the street populist nationalism expressed in the public speeches (Farewell to Merab Kostava, 1992), which was also supported by the government (the official nationalism). This was the first site of non-communist memory which was not implemented in the form of active forgetting.

The case of the building of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Tbilisi (in 1992-1994 – the seat of the Parliament of Georgia, later on, till 2006 – the house of the Constitutional Court) represents the most apparent example of the revenge on the past. The building was erected in 1938, by the famous Soviet architect Alexei Shchusev⁷ and represented the most renowned building of the Stalinist period in Tbilisi. Shchusev used the elements of the medieval Georgian architecture as well as the local construction material – tuff of Bolnisi. The building reflected harsh political processes in the Soviet Union; the main façade represented the Stalinist empire style, whereas the remaining parts were the examples of constructivism.⁸ Alongside with the Soviet monuments without any artistic or aesthetic value, the façade of the building decorated with bas-reliefs by the renowned Georgian sculptors Jakob Nikoladze and Tamar Abakelia became the victims of the revenge on the past. They were destroyed by the activists of the national-liberation movement, as they depicted the moments of revolutions in Russian Empire and building of socialism in Georgia.⁹ Unfortunately, the process did not stop in the 1990s: later on, in the 2000s, the building was partly destroyed by the private investor to whom it was transferred by the state. Finally, it became a part of the hotel “Biltmore” – one of the strangest modern constructions which is almost out of the context in the panorama of Tbilisi center.

The developments of the early 1990s - economic collapse, political rivalry, civil war and conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia followed by the flow of IDPs created a new reality, termed as a “trauma of victory” by Peter Sztompka (Sztompka, 2005). The problem of the formation of new memory was moved to the backstage. Later on, the main accent of the politics of memory shifted from the active to

⁶ Nikoloz Lekishvili's interview with the “Tbilisi” newspaper. In: *The Lessons of Independence – to the Future through the Comprehension of the Past*. Retrieved on 16.10.2018 from <https://lessonsgeo.wordpress.com/1990/08/01/%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9D%E1%83%AA%E1%83%90-%E1%83%97%E1%83%91%E1%83%98%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%9B%E1%83%90-%E1%83%A3%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98-%E1%83%97%E1%83%A5%E1%83%95%E1%83%90-%E1%83%9A/> (in Georgian).

⁷ Academician Alexei Shchusev was awarded the First degree Stalin Prize for this project in 1941.

⁸ Vardosanidze, Vladimir. *Metamorphosis of the Soviet Architecture*. Retrieved on 26.02.2018 from <https://www.scribd.com/document/> (in Russian).

⁹ High relief by Nikoladze reflected the “History of Formation of the Bolshevik Organizations in Transcaucasia” and “Peaceful Building of the Soviet Union” and were created in 1934-1936; Abakelia's frieze with bas-reliefs consisted of five compositions: “Demonstration in Batumi”, “October in Georgia”, “Industry of Georgia”, “Agriculture of Georgia”, and “Happy Life” (1936-1937).

passive forgetting, from the revenge on the past to the creation of new sites of memory. However, the forms of active forgetting and revenge on the past have not disappeared from the repertoire of the creators of the new memory. For example, on May 5, 2004, the fire was flamed by the demonstrators on the monument of Memed Abashidze (1873-1937) staged at the entry of the Batumi boulevard. The monument in flame marked the detachment from the symbols of the previous government and signified the victory of the Rose Revolution. The matter is that Aslan Abashidze – the Head of the Supreme Soviet of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic in Georgia in 1991-2004¹⁰ – permanently highlighted his kinship with Memed Abashidze and referred to his authority for legitimization of his 13-years long rule in Adjara region. After the Rose Revolution, the new government tried to make a dividing line with the semi-separatist and corrupt regime of Aslan Abashidze; the above-mentioned fact was a first signal of this new policy. Followed to the Rose Revolution, the Bronze statue of Memed Abashidze was removed from the entrance of boulevard and relocated to the corner of the street named after him. The local intelligentsia and citizens of the city of Batumi sent a special letter to Tbilisi, arguing that the politics of Aslan Abashidze should not have any influence on the attitude towards his grandfather; re-location of the monument was considered as the disrespect towards history and the public shame.¹¹ Finally, in 2013, the statue of Memed Abashidze was relocated once again and moved into the European Square close to the area of the Constitutional Court.

Stalin's memory appeared to be the only one which resisted the politics of active forgetting. After the criticism of the cult of personality, the Communist government demolished his monuments from the public spaces in the Soviet Union in general and in Georgia in particular. Although, his image was still maintained in Georgia – mainly in the regions and villages. At some places, dismantled busts were relocated to the private yards and ground floors of the local admirers of Stalin. In Gori – the home town of Stalin - his statue of bronze being the 6 meters-high was erected on the main square of the city, at the top of the 9 meters-high pedestal (which served the purpose of tribune) in 1952 and remained to stand there until June, 2010. The August War of 2008 brought a new spirit to the discussion regarding the monument of Stalin. On October 3, 2008, those-time minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Giorgi Baramidze, came with the initiative to remove the monument of Stalin from the center of Gori and to make it a part of the “Museum of the Russian Aggression”; according to the idea of the Minister of Culture Nikoloz Rurua, the museum should be placed in the building of the Stalin's museum. On August 7, 2009 students arranged a demonstration, demanding removal of the monument from the city center. On June 25, 2010, at midnight, the statue was removed, and the citizens of Gori found the empty pedestal next morning. The president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, stated: “it is necessary to deal with history in civilized way, thus the monument will be housed in the yard of the museum; however, it is not a normal thing to have together the museum of occupation and a statue of the person who carried out this occupation.” The monument disappeared for some time, later on, journalists found it in the hangar for tanks near Gori. On April 9, 2012, the minister of culture stated that the monument would not be brought back to the yard of the museum, whereas the museum would be renamed and transformed into the „Museum of Victims of Stalinism (Totalitarianism).“

¹⁰ He resigned under the pressure of the central Georgian government and mass opposition rallies during the 2004 Adjara crisis, and has since lived in Moscow, Russia.

¹¹ Khalvashi, Tamta. *The periphery of Shame*. Human Rights and Monitoring Center. 28.03.2016. Retrieved from [emcrightspr](#) (in Georgian).

As soon as the political leadership in Georgia changed after the parliamentary elections of 2012, debates on the Soviet monuments flared up again. The process now was passed to other regions of Georgia. In different villages (Akura in Telavi Region, the city of Telavi, Zemo Alvani in Akhmeta Region, Kiketi, etc.) admirers of Stalin periodically took out his busts from their inner yards and installed them again to the previous places, whereas those which were still kept on old places were commemorated publicly. This was followed by the new wave of revenge on the past/active forgetting: in January 2013, the on-line campaign was launched on Facebook under the title “50 monuments of Stalin one should paint until s/he is alive”.¹² Some restored monuments of Stalin were painted in pink color; Stalin’s ‘supporters’ took them back for restoration and re-installed again; nevertheless, they were repainted once more. The efforts of restoration of the Stalin’s monuments met with severe criticism of the Western partners of Georgia; the central government denied its connections to these developments and stated that the issues should be dealt with the local self-governing units; several ministers condemned the cases of restoration of Stalin’s monuments.

On September 18, 2015, the public organization “Gorelebi” (citizens of Gori) appealed to the city municipality for the permission to re-erect the monument of Stalin. At the session on October 2, the local self-governing entity, after 2 hours long discussion, voted (12 vs 1) against the restoration of Stalin’s monument in the city of Gori. Although, it was also mentioned that this issue might be discussed again later.¹³ Before the fate of the monument is resolved, Stalin’s portrait keeps its eye on the inhabitants of Gori and its visitors from the façade of a supermarket, located in front of the fortress of Gori.

Conclusion

In the last years of the Soviet Union, the need of the “new past” emerged in Georgia, which would ensure the background of the independent future. The process of its construction could be divided into several periods, depending on the degree of structuring of the memory politics and main methods and means of representation and comprehension of the image of the past. On the first stage which started from the late 1980s and continued about a decade, the *active forgetting* was actively used, which sometimes appeared in the form of the *revenge on the past*. This clearly reflected the process of re-evaluation of old meanings and ascription of the new ones. At a later stage, this form of dealing with the undesired past did not disappear, although accent in the memory politics gradually shifted to the passive forgetting and creation of the new *sites of memory*.

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¹² Tsuladze, Zaza. 50 monuments of Stalin one should paint until s/he is alive. Retrieved on 23.04.2019 from www.amerikiskhma.com/a/georgia-stalin-vandalism/1600958.html (in Georgian).

¹³ Stalin’s Monument will not be Installed at the Territory of the Museum. Retrieved on 23.04.2019 from <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/regioni/347967-stalinis-dzegli-muzeumis-mimdebare-teritoriaze-ar-daigmeba.html?ar=A> (in Georgian).

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