

Mass Terror in the USSR: The Story of One Family

By George Anchabadze, Tbilisi

Abstract

Much has been written about the mass terror as a system of government in Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union, though key questions remain unanswered and will be a topic for future research. The unprecedented repressions that began in 1917, after the Bolsheviks came to power, lasted until 1953, and touched (in both the literal and figurative meanings of this word) almost the entire population of the Soviet Union. Behind the statistics describing the huge number of those executed or imprisoned for political reasons, who died during transportation, in the camps or in exile from abuse, hunger and dispossession, stand the fates of concrete individuals and families. Stories about the tragic fates of individual victims during the period of Soviet state terrorism help us to understand the nature of political repression no less than “dry” statistics. The author of this article describes the history of the mass terror in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, and in its autonomous republic of Abkhazia during the 1930s, drawing on the experiences of his own family.

A Large Family in Sukhumi

I was born in Tbilisi in 1949. My parents both were from illegally repressed families (later both families were rehabilitated) and, probably, this is why from an early age I knew about the dark year of 1937, heard about nighttime incursions by security officers, arrests, and the sufferings of prisoners. Punitive authorities across Georgia and Abkhazia acted with extreme cruelty, in fact, destroying the best strata of the population, especially the intelligentsia. The situation was similar in other parts of the Soviet Union. The damage inflicted by the state on its people in the 1920s and 1930s had an extremely negative impact on the future development of society. Its consequences affect us even in this post-Soviet period.

The large family of my great-grandfather Taras Anchabadze, who was a retired lieutenant colonel of the tsarist army, lived in the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi. Taras Zurabovich and his wife, Maria Nikolaevna Dadiani, who was a public figure well-known for her work as the chairperson of the Sukhumi branch of the philanthropic organization “Society for Spreading Literacy among Georgians,” had six sons and one daughter. The eldest son, Valerian, a graduate of the Elisavetgrad Cavalry School, served in the Russian army and was promoted to the position of captain. He served in the First World War, after which he continued to serve in the newly-established Georgian army. The youngest sons—Varlam (Chych), Vladimir (Ladi) and Nikolai Anchabadze also served in the Georgian army.

Vianor Anchabadze’s Medical Service

My grandfather, Vianor Tarasovich Anchabadze, graduated with distinction from the first male gymnasium of Tbilisi in 1908, and received higher education in St. Petersburg at the Imperial Military Medical Academy. After graduating from the Academy (in 1914), he was drafted into the army and participated in various military campaigns until 1918. During the First World War

Vianor Anchabadze began to practice medicine. As a senior regimental doctor and the chief doctor of the joint hospital, he provided exemplary medical service for soldiers and officers and distinguished himself with his attentive and caring attitude toward sick soldiers. His personal courage served as an example to others. He was wounded and later received three military orders.

After the collapse of the Caucasian Front, the regiment, where my grandfather served was moved to Azerbaijan, where cholera was raging in the summer of 1918. Vianor Anchabadze helped combat the epidemic. He received an official award of gratitude from Azerbaijan’s Musavat government for setting up the cholera barracks in Karabakh. At the end of that year Vianor Tarasovich returned to Abkhazia, and immediately became involved in the fight against the Spanish influenza epidemic in the Gudauta area.

In February of 1919, he was appointed as the District Doctor of the Sukhumi District, and in April of the same year as Head of the Health Department of the Commissariat of Abkhazia. During this period he married a noblewoman Vera Andreyevna Shengelaya. They had two children—a son, Zurab (my father) and a daughter, Irina.

In addition to his professional practice, my grandfather participated in social and political activities: he was a member of the Abkhazian National Council and the Popular Council of Abkhazia, and sympathized with the Georgian Socialist Revolutionary Party. As a member of the Abkhazian Constitutional Committee, he was delegated to Tbilisi, where he met Noe Jordania, the head of the independent Georgian state in 1918–1921 and other government officials.

Sovietization of Abkhazia

In February 1921, Soviet Russia invaded the Georgian republic. Four sons of Taras Anchabadze participated in the military operations against the Bolshe-

viks. Among Taras' sons, Valerian Anchabadze, who was a Deputy Commander of the Georgian Group in Abkhazia, deserves special mention. In the rearguard battles to the west of Sukhumi, he led the resistance to the attacks of the 9th Unit of the Red Army, enabling the main force of the Group to withdraw to the east. He died near the Gumist Bridge, where afterwards, in the 1992–1993 post-Soviet period, the main front of the Georgian–Abkhazian armed conflict ran.



The Anchabadze family in 1919. Standing, left to right: Nikolai, Valerian, Tatiana, Vianor, Georgi; sitting: Mariya Nikolayevna, Taras Zurasovich, Vera Shengelaya; in front: Varlam, Vladimir.
Photo: George Anchabadze

After the Sovietization of Abkhazia, an independent Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was proclaimed, which a few months later joined the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic on the basis of a treaty. In 1931, however, Abkhazia lost its “treaty” status and became an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR, a status that did not change until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The first years of Soviet power in Abkhazia were not overshadowed by big dramatic events. The authorities implemented a “reasonably prudent” policy towards the non-proletarian strata of the society. Abkhaz leaders, led by Nestor Lakoba, protected Abkhazian villages from collectivization and “expropriation” as much as they could. Against the backdrop of the New Economic Policy (NEP), life in Abkhazia gradually improved. Under such conditions, almost all of the Abkhaz intellectuals began to cooperate with the new government, hoping for a better future. Vianor Anchabadze, as the Head of the Senior Spa Control Unit of Abkhazia, led efforts to revive Abkhazia’s resorts. “It was a time collapse,” Prof. Kuprava notes in his book, “marked by a lack of medical personnel, equipment, and medicine, and in this difficult period, V. Anchabadze demonstrated efficiency and tre-

mendous energy in the reconstruction and development of the sanatorium and resort business. Through his tireless work in a short time, he achieved considerable success”. In the later period, Vianor Tarasovich continued his professional career at the post of the People’s Commissar of Health of Abkhazia, which he held twice, in 1928–1930 and 1932–1937, respectively. He was then the only non-party People’s Commissar in Georgia.

The house, where Vianor Anchabadze lived with his family, stood next to the house of Nestor Apollonovich Lakoba, the chairman of the Central Executive Committee of Abkhazia. Between Lakoba and Anchabadze, there was no special affinity (one was “an old revolutionary” and the other a representative of the former elites), but their relations were quite normal. Vianor Anchabadze was a member of the government, led by Nestor Lakoba. In addition, their children—Zurab Anchabadze and Rauf Lakoba—were inseparable friends: they attended the same school and spent most of the day together in a big company of Sukhumi youth.

The younger brothers of Vianor Anchabadze also started to cooperate with the Soviet government. In particular, the already mentioned Varlam and Vladimir served in “the Abkhaz Red Army” (the “treaty republic” had its own militia). In the 1920s in the Soviet Union, as we know, there still were no professional military personnel and armed forces recruited former military officers and generals as military experts. Incidentally, the Abkhaz Cavalry Regiment of the Red Army was commanded by the brother of my grandmother—Varlam Shengelaya, a former Guards officer, who at one time fought against the Bolsheviks in the ranks of the Volunteer Army of Denikin, and then in the Georgian army.

The Approaching Terror

But, such a peaceful atmosphere did not last long. At the end of the 1920s, clear signs of the approaching danger appeared. The USSR’s “Great terror”, as Western researchers describe the bloody events of 1937–1938, when the Stalinist repressions reached their peak, started at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, with the decision to implement forceful collectivization and speedy industrialization.

During this period, the brutality of the regime was visible in Abkhazia and from the beginning of 1937 political repressions in the autonomous republic became systematic and regular. Everything started after the demise of Nestor Lakoba, who died in Tbilisi under unclear circumstances in December 1936.

Lakoba was buried in Sukhumi with full honors. But after approximately one month, he was declared an enemy of people. His body was removed from his tomb and destroyed. People who were close to Nestor were

also repressed—the members of his family (mother, wife and son) and relatives, colleagues and friends... The wheel of the Great Terror was gathering momentum in Abkhazia.

Interrogations and Arrests

The children of the repressed “Lakobists” comprised a special group of arrested minors. Rauf, the son of Nestor and also other friends and acquaintances of my father—Tengiz and Kukusha Lakoba, Koka Inal-ipa... Boys, who in the beginning of 1937 were from 14 to 16 years old, were accused of establishing a counterrevolutionary, terrorist youth group, which had the goal of organizing terrorist attacks against one of the leaders of the Communist party.

Regarding the case of the “young terrorists,” their friends, school mates, teachers and others were summoned to the People’s Commissariat of the Internal Affairs (NKVD). Zurab Anchabadze was also called in for an interrogation.

Professor Djulietta Rukhadze in her memoirs about my father describes this fact: “Before the interrogation, the interrogator pulled a revolver from a drawer, pointedly shook it in his hand, laid it on the table and started asking questions. Zurab surprisingly bravely answered the questions, told the security officers that the accused young men were his friends and that he could not say anything about their anti-Soviet activities. Zurab emphasized that he considered the idea of the existence of an anti-Soviet youth organization to be misleading. Such behavior from a 17-year-old boy, in the walls of the NKVD, was tantamount to heroism. The Investigator meticulously recorded everything and the minutes of the interrogation consisted of several pages. A few lines were written on the last page. The interrogator suggested that Zurab sign at the end of the page. Zurab understood that to put his signature on the place indicated by the investigator would have meant that they could have later filled the page as they wanted. This is why he put his signature on the entire page. The investigator sarcastically smiled and asked: “What? Are you very experienced?”

Rauf Lakoba and the other boys accused of terrorism were held in prison until adulthood, and then were tried for belonging to a defunct organization. Later all were shot.

Repressions in Abkhazia

The repressions, meanwhile, took a terrible shape in Abkhazia. In 1951, in Munich, the Gazette 1 of “The Institute for the Study of the History and Culture of the USSR” published the memoirs of S. Danilov on events in Abkhazia that took place during a 20 year period (from

the late 1910s to the end of 1930s), which described the situation of the 1937–38 period: “After the arrest of the head of an institution it ‘became clear’ that the entire organization he led was ‘clogged with enemies of the people.’ It was obvious that immediately a ruthless purge of ‘pests’ and ‘enemies of the people’ would begin. Absolutely everybody was subject to arrest: members of the party, Komsomol members, independents, specialists, researchers, journalists, trade professionals (including the sales clerks). All the local intellectuals in the villages were subjected to arrest—former landlords, rich farmers and those who had something to do with members of the former Abkhaz government; they were all arrested and, at best, exiled to the north, where they were held in a concentration camp, incommunicado.

The detention building and the prison in the city of Sukhumi was overcrowded. Prisoners, after the ‘biased’ interrogations following their ‘confessions’ to crimes were sent in mass to Tbilisi, where they were kept in appalling conditions in the infamous Metekhi castle. However, most of those arrested were shot in Abkhazia itself. The monastery in Dranda was rebuilt to accommodate a large quantity of prisoners”.

Afterwards, Danilov describes the fate of the Abkhaz intellectuals, matching it with the personal fate of my grandfather: “Repressions especially affected the small young Abkhazian intelligentsia,” he wrote. “Almost all of them were killed. The story of Dr. Anchabadze is particularly indicative of this whole era... “

The Fate of My Grandfather

Vianor Anchabadze was arrested by the NKVD on December 10, 1937. The search, which was committed by the secret police in the apartment, resulted in theft. They packed their bags with valuable things (including household items such as sewing machines), placed them in one room and sealed it. Then a car came and took away all the “booty.” As far as I know, the confiscated items were sold at discount prices to employees of the security forces. However, the investigators stole some things for themselves. Zurab noticed how the security officer Kishmishev in the kitchen pulled out the silver spoon from the honey cup, held it over the glass watching as the honey flowed down, then wiped the spoon on a scrap of newspaper and put it in his pocket.

Soon Vera Andreyevna was also arrested and the children were evicted from their large apartment in the city center, and were given a room in an old house in the suburbs.

My aunt Irina shortly before her death in 2005 wrote memoirs about her experiences: “Our childhood ended in 1937, in December.” she writes. They took our father and a few days later arrested our mother. We never saw

our father again. My mother was sent with a group of women prisoners on an extensive journey. Surprisingly we found out on which date she would be transferred so a large group of relatives gathered at the building of the NKVD. The doors opened. The prisoners were brought out into the street. There was a van, in which all were loaded, and it proceeded to the station. These were the last few minutes when they could see their loved ones. Zurab, standing behind the cordon, began jumping up and shouting: 'mother, mother!'

There were no tears in my mother's eyes, but what was going on in her heart, when the iron door shut her in, and when she left with her son calling out to her, I do not want to imagine and I cannot imagine. Pointless, but I often ask myself the questions—Why? For what? By what right? Why did they have to shoot my father, why did they kill so many of my relatives, and separate us from our mother for so many years? Our life was crushed, we were shaken out from our own biographies—these words of Osip Mandelstam relate to all of us, those who one way or another, has come under the blade of the "Great Terror".

Vianor Anchabadze was shot by the decision of the Troyka (a three-man group that ordered executions) in January 1938. Until then, according to information gathered from witnesses who survived, he was subjected to horrific torture and torment in the dungeons of the NKVD.

S. Danilov describes this: "Once I met a friend of mine, recently released after 7 months of detention in the NKVD. I asked him if he knew anything about the fate of my brother who was arrested. The acquaintance anxiously looked around, shook his head (no), offered to go to the boulevard, where away from people, he could tell me about their experiences. We went ... He knew that I was acquainted with Dr. Anchabadze, and that's why he told me the following:

"One night, two security guards opened the door of their chamber, carried in a man who was unconscious, put him in the corner of the cell, and left, locking the door. We rushed to our new comrade in misfortune, but he was so disfigured by beatings and torture, we were unable to distinguish his features. His clothes, however, suggested that he was neither a worker nor a farmer. His face had been beaten into a terrible mess. He unhappily opened his eyes and moaned something (he could not speak). We could not understand him. With great difficulty he managed to explain to us that he wanted water. Writhing in pain, with great difficulty, he slowly drank

the water we offered him. After quenching his thirst, the poor man lay on the floor ... Gradually, we learned from him that he was Doctor Anchabadze. Soon he was taken away from us. Where—I do not know ... probably 'written off'. At a certain hour of the night, we heard the hum of machines in the courtyard of the NKVD".

However, officially the execution had not been reported. Questions asked by relatives in such cases were usually followed by the typical reply: "Your husband (son, brother, father) was convicted under Article 58, as an enemy of the people, and was sentenced to 10 years in the camps without the right of correspondence". Meanwhile, the remains of these people had long been lying in unmarked graves.

Various crooks (often ex-convicts) were taking advantage of the misfortune of cheated relatives. They found out addresses of people whose relatives were deported incommunicado, came and told them that they had met their relatives in camps, who had requested information about their relatives and also said that they would soon return home. The joyful relatives rewarded these crooks with what they had, and invited them to stay with them. And these guests quite often robbed their hosts and disappeared.

Vera Andreyevna spent seven years in the women's camp "ALJIR", which was an acronym for the "Akmo-linsk camp for the wives of traitors to the Motherland." This enormous camp held poor women, whose only fault was to be the wives and daughters of repressed people. Maybe my grandmother survived because prisoners worked according to their professions in the camp, and she worked as the doctor. However, her health was greatly damaged and she died a few years after her release.

All the sons of Taras Anchabadze (my great-grandfather died in 1935), except Vianor were killed in 1937–1938. Varlam and George (the youngest of the brothers) were also shot dead. Vladimir and Nikolai were able to flee from Abkhazia. For several years they hid from the authorities in different parts of the Soviet Union. Nikolai Akirtava, the husband of Tatiana Anchabadze, my father's aunt, a famous statesman and a political figure, a member of the CPSU with pre-revolutionary experience, was also shot dead. In Tbilisi, the only brother of my grandmother, Varlam Shengelaya was dismissed from the armed forces, arrested and shot dead.

I could also describe the misadventures of my mother's family during the Great Terror, but I will leave it for another story.

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