

Analysis

Interpreting the Past – From Political Manipulation to Critical Analysis?

By Oliver Reisner, Tbilisi

Abstract

Georgian historians are not alone in taking a bifurcated view of Russia, with some seeking closer ties and others blaming it for Georgia's problems. Over time, these views have influenced the writing of Georgian textbooks. The first generation of textbooks published after the collapse of the USSR simply included superficial updates to Soviet versions. The second generation critically redefined Russia's role in Georgia's past. The most recent, third, generation focuses on equipping young Georgian citizens with the tools of critical analysis. However, unless there is more dialogue between the two camps of historians, politicians will continue to manipulate history for their narrow purposes.

Two Approaches to Georgian History – Academic and Reformist

The issue of Russia weighs heavily on Georgia and has divided the community of Georgian historians into two camps. One group seeks closer ties with the northern neighbor, while the other blames it for many of Georgia's problems.

On 27 March 2009 several Georgian scholars, mainly historians, who are members of the Historical Legacy non-governmental organization (NGO), addressed an appeal to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, expressing their concern about the deterioration in relations between Russia and Georgia during recent years. Stating that the Georgian people gratefully remember "Russia's great historical contribution to the survival of the Georgian nation" and that Russian soldiers died for the return of Georgian autochthonous territories (!). On the other hand, they note that Georgians contributed to building Russia's state, culture and science over the last three hundred years, and claim that one of the main factors driving the catastrophic relationship between the two states is the "elaborate falsification of the history of our countries due to distortion of facts and false interpretation of historical actors." They assert that the "cleansing of the historical memory" that disconnected the generations finally led to clashes between the brotherly peoples and provoked bloody conflicts to solve "the geopolitical tasks of third powers." Implicitly this statement argues that the current pro-Western leadership subordinated Georgia to US foreign policy interests at the price of its national values and past.

Consequently the same historians claim that they are preventing the Georgian people from being turned into a blind weapon in the hands of anti-national powers and reviving the memory of the great and tragic history of Georgia among their compatriots. They assert that especially the young generation should realize "the true past

of their own nation." That is why they established the Historical Legacy NGO in Tbilisi with the intention of conducting "objective research" on the most important periods of Georgian history to overcome the "distortion of historical facts for political purposes". Thus, they intend to demonstrate Georgia's "real" situation in the 16th to 18th centuries and Russia's role in common fights with foreign foes in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as the cultural interactions between the two peoples. Hoping that both the Georgian and Russian publics will well receive these activities, ideally scholars in the Russian Federation should take up similar efforts not only to collaborate in re-establishing the historical truth for a better understanding of the young generations of the Russo-Georgian historical community, but also to pay respect to their great ancestors.

Ten members of Historical Legacy signed this appeal (two from the National Academy of Sciences of Georgia, among them a former minister of education under president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, two from Ivane Javakhsishvili Tbilisi State University, one president of the NGO "For a Neutral Georgia", one deputy chair of the Georgian Union of Journalists, one representative of the Georgian Alumni Union of Moscow State University as well as one Georgian vice-president of the Russian Academy of Social Sciences and the *igumen* of the Bezhini monastery), which the Russian president published on his official website. This group of academicians, mainly coming from Soviet-style *intelligentsia* organizations, which since the Rose Revolution no longer represent the Georgian state, seek to mobilize public support for their own contested and authoritative interpretation of the past as "true history". Since *perestroika* started in the late 1980s, most of them condemned Russia's influence and impact in modern Georgian history.

As in the late Soviet and early independence period, various political actors used history to articulate and legit-

imize political positions and demands for national independence as well as territorial integrity against Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists, charging that their alternative interpretation of history was mere falsification. History became a tool for political competition. In fact, the letter to Medvedev and its intentions indicate the scholars' longing for their lost status as a national *intelligentsia* with the sole authority to interpret the "true" past.

In the opposing camp, we have the group of pro-Western reformist intellectuals like Ghia Nodia, Aleksandre Lomaia and Gigi Tevzadze. They are attached either to the Ministry of Education and Science or the newly formed Ilia Chavchavadze State University. They introduced major changes to the general school curriculum five years ago. The most important change concerning history is the introduction of an integrated program for social sciences, covering history, geography and civic education. Their latest "National Plan for the School Year 2008–2009," seeks, in addition to historical and geographical knowledge about Georgia, to spur the development of patriotic minded and responsible Georgian citizens and to support the pupils' independent orientation within a broader world. To achieve these objectives, several special skills are highlighted: orientation within time and space, historical interpretation, application of historical and geographic concepts, and the elaboration of a position, its critique and defense. Additionally, it seeks to develop general skills, such as problem definition, analysis and solving, finding and organizing information, creativeness, communication, research, team work, etc. In contrast to the previous subjects "History of Georgia" and "World History" that were taught in an authoritarian style, now the pupils should be empowered to draw their own conclusions from a past presented from different angles in an integrated manner. This approach is in line with European methods of history teaching, as defined by the latest resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

But they implemented the whole reform process in a top-down manner, from the Ministry of Education and Sciences to the schools and universities without much consultation on the ground, which caused a lot of dissatisfaction and resentment. After five years, the school reform process that seriously shifted the subject of history from authoritative, knowledge-based teaching towards more skills-based learning is in jeopardy because it is implemented by ill prepared and badly paid history teachers and academics. These instructors neither want, nor are able to comply with the new requirements for teaching and textbook writing, which represents an appreciated source of income for the academics.

Now textbooks are mainly prepared by reformist historians and practitioners as well as political and social scientists. A large gap remains between the intended objectives outlined in the ministerial regulations and their skilful implementation.

Three Generations of History Textbooks: What is New?

Georgia's textbooks have evolved considerably since Georgia gained independence. The first generation of history textbooks, published immediately after the demise of the Soviet Union were just reprinted older textbooks with only the state symbols and some obsolete textual expressions about the Soviet Union replaced with those of independent Georgia.

The second generation introduced a national narrative of Georgian history that had formerly been a "dissident" view. It presented a Georgian history in which Georgians fought back foreign invaders in a number of glorious wars and battles. National heroes were re-established as those who made history. The historians critically redefined Russia as an aggressive colonial power that did not adhere to commitments undertaken in the Treaty of Georgievsk concluded in 1783. Instead of providing protection, Russia annexed Georgia twice: in 1801 (Kartli-Kakheti) and in 1921 (Democratic Republic of Georgia). The diverse consequences of the integration of Georgia into the Tsarist as well as Soviet state were presented as colonization and expansion by the Russians intent on subduing the Georgian nation. These books remained silent about Georgian participation in the leadership of the Russian empire and the USSR even though Georgian nobles held high positions in the Imperial military, Bolshevik party and secret police (NKVD). Georgia's cultural revival in the second half of the 19th century was interpreted as resistance to Russianization, ignoring the indebtedness to asymmetric intercultural exchange with Russian influences. The 20th century history of Georgia as part of the Soviet Union was mostly ignored, even though a lot of Georgian families fell victim to the "Great Terror".

The second generation of textbooks from the late 1990s aimed at strengthening patriotic feelings to counterbalance the serious and traumatic defeats in Georgian state-building of the early 1990s. They ascribed all the problems of the recent past to Russia and absolved the Georgians from any responsibility for what happened in the previous decades. Even if these textbooks were translated into Russian, Armenian and Azeri, these minorities received no mention. The history of Georgia seemed to be a Georgian affair.

The latest, third generation of textbooks reflects serious changes in Georgia's educational policy and approach

to teaching and learning history. Seventh grade pupils are not confronted with a chronological chain of events of national or world history, but rather are introduced to the concept of time and different forms of calendars, space, economics, state and administration over the centuries. They also study modern forms of state building in the 19th and 20th centuries (France, Russia, Georgia during its first independence 1918–1921, USA, Fascist Germany, Soviet Union, contemporary Iran and China) and different cultures and religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity) and their diverse appearances in Georgia.

The new 10th grade textbooks ask pupils “What is history?” and attempt to explain to them the specifics of historical knowledge and different kinds of historiographies. In a second step they ask “How do we study history?” explaining the different possible approaches to coming to terms with the past. In one of the textbooks the authors decided to take the annexation of Georgia by the Tsarist Empire in 1801 as one of the examples for the possibility of different interpretations by contemporaries and later historians. This type of discussion represents a huge step towards a more reflective, multi-perspective approach towards national history. (Unfortunately I did not manage to analyze the reformed 9th grade curriculum covering a full chronological course of the history of Georgia in the latest textbooks.)

Methodologically, the new textbooks replace an author’s narrative with short introductions and several extracts from different kinds of historical sources, major terms are explained to the students and open questions proposed for discussions. In most cases, a teachers’ handbook accompanies the textbook advising on possible applications of the given topics and explaining how to achieve the learning outcomes. Since there are different textbooks available, the pedagogical council of each school can choose the one most convenient to it.

Obviously all the textbook authors implemented the national curriculum differently, but most of the authors who wrote the first and second generation textbooks did not produce a textbook of the third generation. The older academicians refused to apply the new requirements of issue-based, more student-centered and learning-outcome-oriented textbooks. Many of the new textbooks do not adhere to a chronological order of historical narration.

Still missing are representations of minorities as well as majority-minority relations in Georgia as part of the Soviet system and the Soviet nationality policy. Surely,

Georgians profited from this policy for their consolidation as a titular nation in academia, state structures and the arts. The new historians presented the Georgian national narrative mainly as a victim of Russian power, a position that allowed them to describe minorities as Moscow’s “fifth *colonna*” and make claims of “historic” Georgian territories that justified neglecting the minorities living there and their rights as minorities – including denial of a right to unilateral secession. The general problem is that the new textbooks cannot rely on sufficient new research or historical syntheses, especially about Stalinism in Georgia. Therefore, the newly introduced history curricula are not perfect, needing revision and sincere feedback from history teachers.

Towards an Independence of Georgian History as Historiography?

In parallel to the ongoing political processes between government and opposition, there is no dialogue between the representatives of the two historical camps, which inhibits the achievement of a post-Soviet consensus about the history of Georgia that in the future might be further elaborated and revised. Both sides continue to use history as a tool for their political struggles. Interestingly, the Museum of the Russian Occupation opened by President Saakashvili in 2006 in the premises of the National Museum on Rustaveli Avenue holds Russia responsible for all the faults of Soviet rule, as if Georgians did not participate at all in the Soviet enterprise. Saakashvili himself relied on a historical narrative introduced by dissidents in the 1970s, politicized by journalists and students during *perestroika*, and finally further elaborated by professional historians in the 1990s. This currently dominant historical narrative about Russia’s role in Georgian history is a target of criticism for academicians in the above mentioned appeal to President Medvedev, even though they once defended it. Similar to the conclusion of the Georgian cultural scientist Zaza Shatirishvili, who once defined the antagonism between the “Old” intelligentsia and the “new” intellectuals as one of personal relations rather than principles, we can conclude that in the field of Georgian history there is no possibility that historiography will be independent from political interference as long as there is no professional dialogue between the two camps. Without such dialogue, history will continue to be misused to define the status of opposing groups.

About the Author

Oliver Reisner is historian and member of the Centre for Black Sea and Caucasian Studies, University of Georgia, Tbilisi.