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**THE SECOND WORLD WAR
IN THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE
OF CONTEMPORARY GEORGIA**

**The Second World War in the Political Discourse
of Contemporary Georgia**

This article deals with political decisions and public discussion related to the memory of World War II in Georgia. This issue does not attract much public attention, which may be explained by the fact that the war was not fought on Georgia's territory and did not lead to any change in its status. The few debates that are there are linked to the contemporary political issues, such as attitudes to the West and Russia. As the Russian leadership under Putin has intensified its efforts to use the memory of World War II to project its 'sharp power' in Georgia and in other places, the pro-western part of the society responded by demands to make the commemoration of the war more 'European', for instance, by moving the date of the official Day of the Victory over Nazism from 9 to 8 May. The Georgian origin of Joseph Stalin, the architect of the Soviet victory over Nazism, further complicates the issue.

Keywords: World War II, politics of memory, sharp power.

I am not a historian; neither am I a sociologist carrying out empirical research on the "collective memory" of WWII in Georgia. I am looking at the issue in a strictly political way. I will not try to present an overall picture of how Georgians, or different parts of Georgian society, actually remember WWII; my focus is on the clashing views of how Georgia as a country *should* remember it. In discussing this, I will mostly analyse the work of Georgian historians

and public intellectuals, as well as media representations of the issue; my principal methodology, if this has to be mentioned, may be defined as an elite discourse analysis. I argue that the current conflicting attitudes to the war, or the preferred modes of remembering it, are largely defined by current political rivalries and controversies rather than the actual events of the mid-20th century.

I will start with a brief overview of the current status of the problem: What makes the memory of WWII a divisive issue in Georgia? Then I will proceed to discuss the controversies that accompany the possible ways of celebrating the victory in WWII; the section after that will compare the major narratives of WWII and its legacy, and how the Georgian perspective fits into them. At the end, I will discuss contemporary attitudes to the fact that Georgians fought on both sides in the war.

THE STATUS OF THE ISSUE

Attitudes towards WWII are not among the hottest topics in today's Georgia. The main reason for this may be that the war was not fought on Georgian territory: At one point, the front came very close, but the Wehrmacht troops were stopped at the Caucasus Mountains. Georgians did not experience Nazi occupation and the subsequent (re)establishment of Soviet Communist control; they did not have to go through moral dilemmas related to Nazi occupation, such as collaborating in the persecution of the Jewish community. The country was spared from all that.

The war did not in any way influence the political status of Georgia as a nation; it had been part of the Soviet Union since 1921 and remained so after WWII. The political regime, administrative divisions and borders, ethnic composition remained the same.¹ This makes Georgia rather different from the western parts of the former Soviet Union, or the countries of the former Soviet bloc, not to speak of those territories that became part of the Soviet Union as a result of the war. All this makes war memories comparatively less dramatic and emotional.

¹ The only exception was a 1944 deportation of a small group of Muslim Meskhetians or Meskhetian Turks to Central Asia by Stalin's regime wary of their pro-Turkish sentiments. However, in recent decades, this issue was discussed not in the context of WWII politics but as a humanitarian problem related to the prospect of their repatriation. Pentikäinen, Oskari and Tom Trier (2004) *Between Integration and Resettlement: the Meskhetian Turks*, ECMI Working Paper #21, September 2004, available at https://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_lfpubdb/working_paper_21b.pdf.

Georgia's main direct connection to the war was through more than seven hundred thousand people who were conscripted to fight in the Soviet army. More than three hundred thousand of them never came back.² That is a huge number for a country like Georgia with a population of about 3.5 million at the time of the war.³ Almost every Georgian family had somebody who went to the war; almost everybody had either a loved one or a close relative who died. On the other hand, there were about thirty thousand who fought on the other side, for the Georgian military units attached to the Wehrmacht. Most of them were first captured as POWs by the German army.⁴ This fact is less vivid in Georgia's collective memory but, unlike during Soviet times, it is now taught in schools and occasionally discussed in the media, so young Georgians are also aware of it.

With few veterans of WWII still alive, the direct memory of the war tends to gradually fade away. Young Georgians no longer have grandfathers who recount stories to them of fighting against the Nazis. Much more recent wars are present in people's minds, such as those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the early 1990s, or with Russia in 2008.

Nevertheless, each year, when 9 May comes around, which is the official date for celebrating the victory in the war, a new round of discussions begins, sometimes in the media, and more intensely on social networks. These discussions have become much livelier in recent years, presumably being stimulated by the contemporary political environment and the divisions within Georgian society. The central topic is about comparing the moral status of the two war parties, German Nazism and Soviet Communism: Should they be put on the same level as the greatest embodiments of evil in the 20th century or, despite all the crimes of Stalin's regime, does German Nazism represent a qualitatively higher magnitude of evil? There is also a more specific divisive issue: When exactly, and how, to celebrate the day of victory in WWII?

On 9 May, different attitudes are expressed through events and counter events that take place in Vake Park in Tbilisi, where the

² Mikheil Bakhtadze, Kartvelebi meore msoplio omshi [Georgians in the Second World War], Chemi Samkaro #17, 2017, available at <https://www.gfsis.org/files/my-world/17/3.pdf>.

³ Warren K. Guinn, "A Footnote to the 1939 Census of the USSR", *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Apr. 1963), pp. 421–424.

⁴ Георгий Мамулия, «Грузинский легион в борьбе за свободу и независимость Грузии в годы Второй мировой войны» [The Georgian Legion fighting for the freedom and independence of Georgia in the years of the Second World War], Tbilisi 2007.

memorial for those who fell in WWII was erected in Soviet times (the park was then also renamed *Victory Park*). These events are never big, with maybe tens or, at most, hundreds of people on both sides, but the contrast between conflicting views is clearly pronounced.⁵

Debates between competing narratives have become livelier in recent years. What contributed to this revival? The most apparent reason is Russia becoming more aggressive in putting forward its narrative of the war as a tool in its “soft power” (or as I would prefer to say, “sharp power”⁶) offensive. Being on a fault-line between Russian and western zones of influence, Georgia is one of the targets in this offensive. This rivalry is not only about issues related to NATO and EU expansion, oil or gas pipelines, etc., it is also about values and norms, about moral supremacy and moral legitimacy.

In this competition, Georgia positions itself as part of Europe, rather than that of the “Russian World”. There is a fairly strong consensus among the major political players in Georgia, as well as most of the public, that the country should pursue the course of western integration, whatever the current policies of NATO and the EU are. However, there is not complete agreement; the Russian perspective, the Russian narrative is also present in Georgia. Some Georgians are genuinely more attracted to Russia or dislike developments based on western models; on the other hand, Russia actively supports the spread of its perspective in Georgia, through propaganda and the support of pro-Russian groups.⁷

It is in recent years that Putin’s government has started to more openly and consistently weaponise the Russian narrative of WWII in the international arena, especially in neighbouring countries.⁸ This has caused a counter-reaction; the pro-western forces in these countries resist these efforts by trying to develop their own narrative of WWII.

⁵ “Counter rallies on VE day in Tbilisi”, Civil.ge 09.05.2019, <https://civil.ge/archives/304722>.

⁶ Walker, Christopher and Jessica Ludwig, (2017) “The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence”, *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>.

⁷ Tughushi, Lasha (ed.), *Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia*, European Initiative – Liberal Academy Tbilisi, 2016. <http://www.ei-lat.ge/images/doc/policy%20document.pdf>.

⁸ Sergey Radchenko, “Vladimir Putin Wants to Rewrite the History of World War II”, *Foreign Policy* 21.01.2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/21/vladimir-putin-wants-to-rewrite-the-history-of-world-war-ii/>; Leonid Bershidsky, “Putin’s Latest Obsession: A New World War II Narrative”, *Bloomberg*, 10.01.2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-01-10/putin-s-latest-obsession-rewriting-world-war-ii>.

Keeping this in mind, it would be an oversimplification to reduce any issue related to the memory of WWII to the fight between the two “soft powers”. Not everybody in Georgia sees it that way. It may be possible to remember WWII independently of the described clash of narratives between Russia and the West. As a matter of fact, however, it is this clash that largely defines contemporary public debate on WWII in Georgia.

HOW TO NAME, AND CELEBRATE, THE VICTORY IN WWII

Officially recognised national holidays, and the attitudes towards them, might be the most salient expressions of different modalities of remembering the past. As of today, 9 May is a national holiday in Georgia, as it had been in the Soviet Union. There is no simple continuity, though. After the Round Table nationalist coalition won elections and came to power in November 1990, it cancelled all the existing Soviet public holidays except for New Year’s Day, as those were imposed by the Russian Communist regime.⁹ However, in February 1995, under Eduard Shevardnadze’s government, 9 May was reinstated as a public holiday.¹⁰

This story of abolishment and restoration is in itself an indicator of the controversy over the issue of commemorating the victory in WWII. The cancellation was based on an assumption that this was Russia’s war and victory in it was also Russia’s. Among other things, it allowed the empire to maintain its control over Georgia: Why should Georgians celebrate a victory of its imperial master?

When the public holiday was reinstated, it could not be just restored as it had been before; the difference to the Soviet attitude had to be stressed as well. In particular, its name was modified; it was now called the “Day of Victory over Fascism”, unlike in the Soviet Union or Russia today, where it is simply the “Victory Day”. The Soviet version implied full clarity over the key question: *Whose victory?* It was “our” victory, the “us” including the *Soviet people*. The war in which this great victory was achieved was called the “Great Patriotic War”, with *patria* being the Soviet Union or the Russian Communist empire.

⁹ https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/32086?publication=0&fbclid=IwAR2iq-3xb_6QnFaphlogu7oz3QTwCqRAuqARPHBYRmPhypDW98O5CWV6Qg.

¹⁰ https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/32086?publication=0&fbclid=IwAR2iq-3xb_6QnFaphlogu7oz3QTwCqRAuqARPHBYRmPhypDW98O5CWV6Qg.

New Russia fully appropriated this understanding of the war. Georgia, however, can no longer accept being part of the Russian Soviet *patria*, even retrospectively. Therefore, it cannot call the victory in WWII “our victory”. But if it was not ours, why celebrate it at all?

On this subject, there may be two different approaches. The very fact of the participation of seven hundred thousand Georgians and their huge sacrifices made it *our* war; in that sense, a victory in it is *ours* too. These people deserve our respect and recognition; we should celebrate it primarily for their sake, and as they would see fit.

However, there is another narrative. Its starting point is that becoming part of the Soviet Union was not *our* choice. In 1921, Georgia, an independent nation, was militarily conquered by the Bolshevik regime, induced to join the Soviet Union, and kept there by force afterward. *We* were an occupied country, *our* inclusion in the Soviet Union was an illegal act. Respectively, taking part in the war was not *our* choice either; those seven hundred thousand people were obliged to do so. The result of the war strengthened the Soviet Empire that kept *us* captive. Yes, Nazi Germany was a hideous regime, but so was the Soviet Union. It might have been a “patriotic war” for the Russians, but not for *us*. *We* should not celebrate the victory of one dictator over another as *our* victory.¹¹

Can any compromise be found between these two narratives? There are two areas of consensus. One is the evil character of Nazism; nobody questions that. The fact that Nazism was defeated was a good thing in itself. The second is that over seven hundred thousand participants and over three hundred thousand dead are huge numbers for Georgia; as much as these people contributed to an ultimately just cause, the defeat of Nazism, paying homage to their sacrifice is justified. It’s still wrong to call the war “patriotic”, but it is acceptable to commemorate Georgia’s sacrifice and its contribution to the defeat of Nazism.

All the above hardly describes genuine causes for reinstalling 9 May as an official holiday. In February 1995, Shevardnadze’s government was still courting Russia,¹² and making Russia happy

¹¹ One cannot divide Georgian political parties based on one or the other of the two described narratives – especially because all the major parties profess a general commitment to a pro-western orientation, and also because the issue has never been specifically addressed in the political debate.

¹² Kevork Oskanian, “The Balance Strikes Back: Power, Perceptions, and Ideology in Georgian Foreign Policy, 1992–2014”, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (April 2016), p. 629.

could be an important reason for taking that step. On the other hand, the decision also enjoyed domestic support; some of it might have been motivated by nostalgia for Soviet times and preference for a more pro-Russian course, but there was also a genuine demand for finding ways to express appreciation for the Georgians who fought in the war. However, just restoring anything “Soviet” in an independent Georgia would be controversial; the commemoration had to be reformatted in some way.

Even though Georgian politics later drifted in more pro-western ways, the issue of having a national holiday to honour the victory over Nazism did not become contentious. The strongly pro-western government of Mikheil Saakashvili did not revisit the issue; more naturally, it was never questioned by the current Georgian Dream government that is much more accommodating to Russia.

However, during roughly the last ten years, the issue has made a comeback. While nobody questions the legitimacy of celebrating the victory over Nazism as such, the exact day of commemoration has become a debatable issue: should it stay on 9 May or be moved one day earlier, which would be the date used in Europe? Simply put, should Georgia celebrate the day of victory over Nazism together with Russia or with Europe?¹³

The first initiative of this kind was put forward by the Coalition for the European Georgia, a group of NGOs, in December 2010.¹⁴ The pro-western government of Mikheil Saakashvili did not act on this appeal by formally moving the date of the public holiday to 8 May, but on 8 May 2011, for the first time, there was a limited official tribute, with the foreign minister Grigol Vashadze stating that “like all of the civilized world”, Georgia commemorates the victory over Nazism on 8 May.¹⁵ Since 2012, when the more Russia-friendly Georgian Dream came to power, the issue was almost forgotten – though not fully. In May 2019, a group of civic activists and academics petitioned the government to move the commemoration of the victory over Nazism to

¹³ Maia Metskhvarishvili, “Lasha Bakradze: Archevnis sakitkhia, evropastan ertad vizeimot pashizmze gamarjveba, tu rusettan” [Lasha Bakradze: It’s a matter of choice, should we celebrate the victory over Fascism with Europe or with Russia]. *Netgazeti* 09,05.2016, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/113088/>.

¹⁴ “Arasamtavrobo organizatsiebi axali saerto saxalxo dgesastsaulebis shemogebas itxoven” [NGOs call for establishing new public holidays], 23.12.2010, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/361811074962611/>.

¹⁵ “Грузия празднует День Победы 8 мая, “как и весь цивилизованный мир”, заявила глава МИДа”, *NEWSRu.com*, 08.05.2011, <https://www.newsru.com/world/08may2011/mid.html#>.

8 May.¹⁶ In May 2020, the Media Development Fund, another Georgian NGO, initiated a campaign aimed at “standing up to the Kremlin’s manipulation of WWII” and “commemorating VE Day with Europe.”¹⁷

So far, these initiatives have failed to attract widespread public attention and support; however, they have influenced media reporting regarding commemorations of the victory over Nazism. Every May, it has become routine for the media to ask the same questions about how and exactly when tribute should be paid to those who fought in the war.¹⁸

Supporters of the status quo note that the real difference in dates is about time zones. Nazi Germany signed an act of capitulation at 22:43 on 8 May, in Central European time; but in Moscow, it was already the next day. If this is all about time zones, Georgia is doomed to be on the Russian side; time-zone-wise, Tbilisi is to the east of Moscow. But apparently, the issue is not about pure geography.

The chief reason why the idea of moving the day of commemoration of the victory over Nazism keeps coming back appears to refer to attempts by Russia to instrumentalise the *Victory Day* celebrations as a weapon of its sharp power. In recent years, these efforts have become increasingly aggressive, especially in post-Soviet countries. There are obvious reasons for Russia to do this. Admittedly, having played a central role in defeating German Nazism was the only unquestionably good deed of Soviet Russia, its most important and valuable service to humanity. Moreover, this was the time of the highest point of solidarity between the different nations constituting the Soviet Union; even then, this solidarity was not perfect, but the

¹⁶ Mariam Varadashvili, “Nazizmze gamarjvebis dged 8 maisis gamocxadebas itxoven – petitsia” [They demand the day of victory over Nazism to be celebrated on May 8th], *Netgazeti* 10.05.2020, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/363063/>.

¹⁷ Media Development Fund, “New Campaign: Georgia should stand up to the Kremlin’s manipulation of WWII and commemorate #VEDaywithEurope”, 05.05.2020, http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_news/509.

¹⁸ “Gamarjvebis dge: 8 mai si tu 9 mai si? Rodis unda agvnishnot” [Is the Victory Day on May 8 or 9? When shall we celebrate it?] – *Radio Tavisupleba*, 07.09.2020, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E1%83%92%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%AF%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%93%E1%83%A6%E1%83%94-8-%E1%83%9B%E1%83%90%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98-%E1%83%97%E1%83%A3-9-%E1%83%9B%E1%83%90%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98-%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9D%E1%83%93%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A3%E1%83%9C%E1%83%93%E1%83%90-%E1%83%90%E1%83%A6%E1%83%95%E1%83%9C%E1%83%98%E1%83%A8%E1%83%9C%E1%83%9D%E1%83%97/30599320.html>; “Sakartvelo fashizmze gamarjvebis dges kvlav 9 maisis agnishnavs” [Georgia still celebrates the day of victory over Fascism on May 9th] – *Netgazeti*, 09.05.2020, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/451066/>.

vast majority of the Soviet people genuinely considered Nazi Germany an enemy and accepted the notion that the war was “patriotic”. This makes the victory in WWII the most, if not the only, legitimate item of the “usable past” that the former nations of the Soviet Union may celebrate together. Russia tries to turn these celebrations into an effort to revive the new sense of togetherness, this time around its Eurasian project. While doing this, it also tries to belittle the western role in the victory and re-legitimise its geopolitical acquisitions made in the course of and after WWII.¹⁹

In Georgia, Russia has an additional resource for using the WWII memory as its sharp power tool; the figure of Joseph Stalin.²⁰ Stalin was ethnically a Georgian, and he led the Soviet Union to victory in WWII. There are many Georgians who are proud of Stalin as their kin who was also one of the greatest statesmen of the 20th century, and others who consider him a symbol of communist dictatorship and the Russian occupation. The latter use two main arguments for denouncing Stalin, a humanist one and a nationalist one; he was a brutal dictator responsible for the deaths of millions of people (including Georgians), but he was also a Russian imperialist who, in 1921, led Russian Bolshevik troops to conquer his own country. On the other hand, Stalin’s leadership in the Soviet victory in WWII is the main argument for die-hard Stalinists justifying their continuing reverence for their idol.²¹ These people are the most natural allies of Russia in its project to use the memory of WWII for reviving pro-Russian sentiments in today’s Georgia.

Against this backdrop, the 9 May celebrations have become a major occasion for Georgia’s openly pro-Russian forces to show themselves. The Georgian chapter of the “Immortal Regiment”, Putin’s propaganda project that uses Victory Day commemorations for projecting Russia’s sharp power,²² plays an important role in this. Its leaders do not hide

¹⁹ “The Appropriation of Victory Day by the Russian Propaganda”, Institute for Development of the Freedom of Information (IDFI) Blog Post, 8 May 2020, https://idfi.ge/en/russian_propaganda_and_immortal_regiment.

²⁰ Nino Dalakishvili, “Stalinizmi rogorc religia da rogorc iaragi” [Stalinism as a religion and a weapon], Voice of America, 15.04.2016, <https://www.amerikiskhama.com/a/ori-stalin-sentiments-in-georgia/3287854.html>.

²¹ This motive was even used by Irakli Garibashvili, the prime-minister in the Georgian Dream government, to justify Georgia commemorating the victory in WWII. “Georgian PM Says WWII Was ‘Won by Georgian’”, Civil.ge, 09.05.2015, <https://civil.ge/archives/124589>.

²² Svetlana Prokopenko, “Russia’s Immortal Regiment: from Grassroots to ‘Quasi-Religious’ Cult”, RFE/RL, 12.05.2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-immortal-regiment-grassroots-to-quasi-religious-cult/28482905.html>; Mila Milosevic-Juaristi, “The Immortal Regiment: Pride and Prejudice of Russia”, Real Instituto Elcano, 27.09.2018, <http://www>.

their dependence on Russian funding.²³ On 9 May 2019, this led to a stand-off between pro- and anti-Russian activists which required the involvement of the police.²⁴

It may be simplistic to reduce Georgian divisions about the war to Russia's sharp power activism and the liberal pro-western reactions to it. However, with the war receding into more distant history, there are fewer and fewer "natural" reasons for most Georgians to care how it shall be commemorated. This revival of interest is stimulated by the competition between geopolitically charged western and Russian narratives.

CLASHING NARRATIVES OF WWII

Against this backdrop, it makes sense to dwell a little bit more on the substance of the western and Russian narratives of WWII, and how can one position the Georgian perspective concerning them. While liberal pro-western Georgians try to construct a war narrative which fits into the "western" paradigm, the issue is too complex for that; the Georgian experience, hence its perspective, inevitably differs.

I would argue that apart from the two "master narratives" of WWII – western European and Soviet/Russian – there is also a third, that of the former "captive nations" that had been subordinated to Soviet rule in the course of and after WWII. I have already briefly mentioned the core idea of the Soviet/Russian narrative. By having played a central role in defeating the absolute evil of Nazism/Fascism, WWII constituted vindication of the Soviet Union as a force for good. It also led to the historical summit point of Russia's imperial aggrandisement; Moscow's control extended to Berlin, it constituted one of two principal poles of power on the global level. In its neighbourhood, Putin's Russia instrumentalises this memory not so much to justify the Soviet Communist system on ideological grounds, but primarily to legitimise the unity of the Soviet nations led by Russia; the memory

realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ARI110-2018-MilosevichJuaristi-Immortal-Regiment-pride-prejudice-Russia.

²³ "Dronebit gadavarebt Tbiliss Georgievskis droshas – "ukvdavi polkis" gegmebi 9 maisistvis" [We'll use drones to take St. George ribbons over Tbilisi] – Publika.ge, 05.09.2020, <https://publika.ge/dronebit-gadavarebt-tbiliss-georgievskis-droshas-ukvdavi-polkis-gegmebi-9-maisistvis/>.

²⁴ Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgia's World War II commemoration becomes ideological battlefield", EurasiaNet 09.05.2019, <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-world-war-ii-commemoration-becomes-ideological-battlefield>.

of common sacrifice is supposed to create the sacred bond which is still valid.

In the western narrative, the post-WWII period represents a new beginning whereby a new international order based on democratic peace and liberal values was launched. The European Union is its best incarnation. Entrenching the legitimacy of this order requires an alternative image, a negative reference of absolute evil, and the Nazi/Fascist regimes and ideology serve as an embodiment of that. This negative point of reference is used not only in relation to the actual war but is carried over to the post-war order. The goodness of western liberal democratic institutions is usually not perceived in absolute terms (democracies love self-criticism that sometimes develops into self-denigration), but holding it in contrast to Nazism/Fascism helps maintain its credibility. Almost any threats to the liberal order, on the international scale or within individual nation-states, are readily branded as reincarnations of fascism. Today, there is a strong (albeit somewhat misleading) trend to portray the wave of nationalist populism in western countries as a new version of “fascism”.

This binary view of the world, (Liberal) Democracy vs Fascism, has come to define the moral framework on which the post-WWII order is supposed to be based. But how can the image of other evils, like the evil of Communism, fit into it? The latter is certainly contrary to the western understanding of liberty and democracy, and during the Cold War, it also constituted a major security threat. However, on a moral level, condemnation of Communism has never been as strong and unanimous as that of Nazism/Fascism.

This may be considered paradoxical. When it comes to enumerating actual evil deeds, such as the number of innocent people murdered, Communism was not behind; the count is in the millions in both cases.²⁵ Despite this, in the West, especially in the intellectual circles of western Europe, claiming moral equivalence between the evil of Communism with that of Fascism was considered “right-wing” and in a bad taste.²⁶ The reasons for this are too complex to discuss sufficiently here. The very fact that during the war (or most of the war, to be precise), western democracies allied with the Soviet Union,

²⁵ Stéphan Courtois and others, *Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999); Timothy Snyder, “Hitler vs. Stalin: Who Was Worse?”, *The New York Review of Books*, 27 January 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2011/01/27/hitler-vs-stalin-who-was-worse/>.

²⁶ François Furet and Ernst Nolte, *Fascism and Communism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

helped embedding in mass consciousness the perception that even if Communism was evil, it was a much lesser one. If the Cold War dented this image, it did so only slightly. To be sure, the experience of the *Cold War*, with its imagined threats, cannot compare with that of the real war, where loved ones were killed. The fact that most of the western intellectual class was, and still is, on the left or left-leaning, also played an important role; even those leftist intellectuals who were highly critical of Stalin's crimes, appreciated the "progressive" core of the Communist ideology. Fascism was pure, unadulterated evil, while Soviet Communism was a well-intentioned project that went terribly wrong. For some people, it was not that terrible at all – just somewhat imperfectly implemented.²⁷

It was presumed that after 1989, this worldview would extend to post-Communist Europe as well. For the countries that shed their communist selves, Europeanness became some kind of a new civil religion. It expressed itself in an eagerness to join NATO and the European Union, and – at least for the first fifteen years or so – obediently following almost all recommendations coming from Brussels or Washington. It was natural to expect that the new Europeans would also accept the moral mapping produced by WWII and its results.

However, these countries had radically different experiences of WWII and its aftermath compared to people living in the West; this has affected their moral mapping as well. They could not uncritically share a clear-cut binary view of the war (whether the western or Russian versions) as that between good (even though not fully perfect) and absolutely evil guys. Those who had had to deal with both the German Nazis and Communist Russians, as the two chief antagonists in the war, could not be but rather ambivalent about this "moral clarity". It was more natural for them to see both regimes as two versions of evil, with no straightforward way to define which of them was the lesser one.

The fact of the matter was that the war made them "captive nations" of Soviet Communism. The outcome of WWII marked not a new beginning of liberty and prosperity, but a new captivity. It is 1989 or 1991 that constitutes the new beginning when, supposedly,

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, "The Two Totalitarianisms", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 27, No. 6, 17 March 2005; Christofer Szabo, "Why are we so understanding towards the crimes of Communism?", *Intellectual Takeout*, 23.07.2015, <https://www.intellectualtakeout.org/blog/why-are-we-so-understanding-towards-crimes-communism/>.

the area of liberal political and international order was extended to the eastern part of Europe. In that sense, for the “captive nations” of Eastern and Central Europe, 1989 is an equivalent of what 1945 was for the West; it was a *liberation*, but from Communism, not Fascism.

As previously said, Georgia became a “captive nation” in 1921 and it could not blame WWII for acquiring that status. This makes its perception of the war rather different from that of the Baltic nations, Poles, or others whose national territories constituted the theatre of the war – the Georgian case can be compared to those of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. But a specifically Georgian narrative of its participation in WWII, as an alternative to the Russian one of “the Great Patriotic War”, essentially follows the “captive nation” model that is based on the assumption of an essential moral equivalence between Nazi Germany and Communist Russia as the two major evils of the 20th century. If a choice between them had to be made, it had to be based on pragmatic rather than moral considerations.

It is not easy to find Georgian texts where this approach is articulated in a direct and comprehensive way; but it may be reconstructed, for instance, from the way the choices of Georgians who fought “on the other side” in the war are assessed today.

GEORGIANS “ON THE OTHER SIDE”

Historians assess that twenty or thirty thousand people constituted several Georgian military units that became part of the German army. These included Georgian émigrés who left Georgia before or after Georgia was invaded by Bolshevik Russia in 1921, those Georgians who had defected from the Soviet Union before the war or switched sides during the war, and ethnic Georgian POWs who started as Soviet soldiers, were taken captive by German troops, and later were recruited to national Georgian military units from German POW camps. Admittedly, the last category constituted the majority of Georgians who fought on the German side in this war.

On the political side, the Georgian National Committee and some other Georgian organisations or individuals who came from the émigré community closely cooperated with the Nazi authorities in the hope that after the Nazi troops occupied the South Caucasus, Georgia would receive some kind of self-governing status under Nazi supervision.²⁸

²⁸ The Georgian émigré community in the West was mostly based on the people who fled the 1921 Bolshevik invasion and was divided into socialist and nationalist factions. The

In particular, they expected that the independent states of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and North Caucasus would be created, though of course, they would be satellites of the German Reich. Therefore, Georgians who cooperated with the Nazis and fought in the Georgian units on the side of the Wehrmacht considered themselves liberators of their country from the Russian Bolshevik Empire.

This was the primary motive that unified them all. Some of them might also have identified with Hitler's Nazi ideology, but the majority probably considered the alliance with the Nazis as a purely pragmatic choice: It was Germany, not anybody else, who was fighting Communist Russia at the time, and at least some German leaders gave them hope that a German victory would indeed imply a restoration of Georgian statehood.

How realistic were their hopes – provided Germany would win? Hitler never clearly formulated specific plans of how to deal with the Caucasus, and there were different opinions in his entourage. There was a rivalry between the two ministries that developed their plans regarding the future status of the Caucasus nations; these were the ministry for the occupied eastern territories headed by Alfred Rosenberg, and the ministry of foreign affairs under Joachim von Ribbentrop. Irrespective of these rivalries, the fact is that the influential people responsible for developing those plans in both ministries supported more or less significant level of self-government for Georgia and the other nations of the Caucasus. Georgian émigré leaders and organisations were in close contact with them and could – or hoped to – influence their thinking. Therefore, Georgians could reasonably believe that their expectations were not groundless.

While more than half of the Georgians who fought in the Red Army returned home, the vast majority of those who fought on the other side were less lucky. Many of them perished in the war, but most of those who survived ended up in Soviet captivity, and, with very few exceptions, were shot for treason. Only a fraction was lucky to survive by finding ways to stay in the West.²⁹

former tended to be strongly anti-Nazi and supportive of the Allies' efforts in the war, while many on the nationalist side saw a chance for aligning with the Nazis against the Bolshevik regime.

²⁹ The most comprehensive research on the Georgian participation in the military effort of the German Reich was conducted by Georges Mamoulia in his mentioned book, Георгий Мамулиа, «Грузинский легион в борьбе за свободу и независимость Грузии...». See also Эндрю Андерсен, *Грузины «по ту сторону»: 1941–1945*. Unpublished paper available at <http://www.conflicts.rem33.com/images/Georgia/GEORG%20LEGION.htm>.

One might imagine that the fact their compatriots fought on both sides of the great divide would cause intense discussion in today's Georgia. Who was right and who was wrong? How could one justify Georgians fighting for the Nazis – or for the Communists?

However, so far this issue has never become a matter for significant debate. During the Soviet period, Georgians who fought for the Wehrmacht were considered traitors and the memory of them was purged; few people were even aware of Georgian units fighting “on the other side”. Even if people knew, it was better not to mention it. After de-Sovietisation, a small group of professional historians emerged who were interested in the issue (most of them are quoted in this paper), but it is rarely discussed outside this circle.

This lack of public discussion may in itself be an interesting issue to delve into. My interpretation is this: There is a tacit consensus that we cannot judge Georgians who fought on either side in WWII, but because the issue is controversial, it may be better not to talk about it too much.

Such a withdrawal of judgement does not imply vindication of Nazism. While there are small groups of Georgian neo-Nazis who have recently emerged, almost nobody else questions the assessment of Nazism as an unquestionable evil. As in many other places, the word “fascist” is used as a generic term denoting any horrendous person or ideology. However, it is assumed that the Georgians who sided with the Germans during WWII did so because they saw this as the only way to liberate their country (not counting the opportunists who just went with the flow). After the independent Georgian republic fell to the Russian Bolshevik invasion in 1921, there was no hope in sight. Georgian émigrés in Europe could not find any allies who took the idea of an independent Georgia seriously. As there emerged a country that attacked Bolshevik Russia and some chance (even a shaky one) of the restoration of Georgia's independence unfolded, it was only natural that some Georgians decided to take advantage of this. One might consider them naïve, but this does not make them evil. Presumably, they were well-meaning Georgian patriots who blundered onto the wrong side of history.

It is understood that collaboration with the Nazis contains a moral stigma. Notably, however, the image of Nazism as an exceptional kind of evil that sets it aside from other bloodthirsty political systems is largely determined by the fact of the Holocaust, a project of the extermination of a whole people based on their racial identity (as

defined by the Nazis). While this does indeed make the Nazi regime exceptionally evil, Georgian historians like to note that the Georgians' pragmatic alliance with Nazis did not imply sharing their anti-Semitic obsessions. On the contrary, Georgian pro-Nazi émigrés in Europe took efforts, sometimes successfully, to shield Jewish members of the Georgian émigré community from Nazi persecution by presenting them as ethnic Georgians. In the words of one Georgian historian, Mikheil Kedia, one of the key figures involved in the cooperation of the Georgian émigré community with Nazi authorities, could be called a "Georgian Schindler" because of that.³⁰

It is hard to doubt that had the Germans taken control of the South Caucasus, some Georgians who had cooperated with the Germans and might then have taken part in a new Nazi administration in Georgia, would also have become complicit in its crimes, including the persecution of Georgia's Jewish community. However, this did not happen, and people cannot be judged for hypothetical deeds. In this sense, they were in some way "luckier" than the Georgian communists responsible for the hideous crimes of the Stalinist regime.

What about those who fought in the Soviet army? As previously said, from the Georgian perspective, the Red Army was an army of foreign occupiers and had deprived Georgia of its independence in 1921. Could one claim that it was morally wrong to fight in the Soviet army?

Even the most ardent Georgian nationalists do not say that. It is well understood that in 1941, following long years of repressions against any kind of dissent, it would have been futile for any Georgian to stand up to orders coming from Moscow. Moreover, as Nazism is universally considered evil, fighting it was justified, even in the Soviet army.

How can one summarise all this? For Georgians, like other representatives of small and weak "captive nations" in Central and Eastern Europe, dealing with the Russians and Germans during WWII could not be based on any kind of moral clarity. Rather, this is an area of moral ambivalence, where small nations had to navigate their path to survival between two aggressive totalitarian empires. Therefore, when contemporary Georgians take account of the fact that their compatriots were fighting on both sides in the war, they do

³⁰ Niko Javakhishvili, "Kartul-ebrauli megobrobis istoriis brtskinvale purtseli" [A brilliant page in the history of Georgian-Jewish friendship], *Menora* Independent Jewish Newspaper in Georgia No. 3 (426), March 2017.

not judge them for choosing one or the other (that is, when it was up to them to choose). As Lasha Bakradze, a liberal-minded historian and public intellectual, put it, “those [Georgians] who fought for each of the opposing parties deserve equal respect and commemoration”.³¹ This attitude has become typical for all recent Georgian publications mentioning Georgians who fought on either side in WWII, including the history textbooks used in Georgian schools.

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³¹ Lasha Bakradze, “*Kartvelebi germanelebis mkhareze meore msoplio omshi*” [Georgians on the German side in WWII], an unpublished transcript of a lecture given in May 2009 at Goethe-Institut in Tbilisi, Georgia, available at <https://matiane.wordpress.com/2009/08/31/bakradze-georgians-on-german-side-ww2/>.

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