

A Tale of Two Mosques

Iryna Humenyuk

One morning in 2017, Tamar Gelashvili, a documentary filmmaker by training, travelled to Tbilisi, in Georgia, to meet with the Turkish embassy. Gelashvili was unhappy. The mosque near her hometown, a village in Samtskhe-Javakheti, had fallen into disrepair. “I am not a religious person,” Gelashvili told me over the phone, “But I believe that cultural value is very important. I want to make sure that this mosque, and others like it, can physically survive as artefacts.” Architectural advocacy had proven difficult for Gelashvili. Georgia, a small country of three-and-half million bounded between the Caucasus Mountain ranges, is predominantly Orthodox Christian and politically conservative. Many of its citizens frown upon any promotion of multiculturalism. Still, Gelashvili persisted. If not preserved for religious use she thought the mosques could be converted into museums, community centres.

She was wrong. “I never should have spoken to him, I never should have listened,” she told me, tearful. After she finished meeting with the minister, she headed home by foot, towards the subway. Outside the station, a tall man with dark hair grabbed her arm. “My heart stopped,” she said. “I guessed immediately who he was.” For several weeks, Gelashvili had harboured the unnerving suspicion that she was being followed. He beckoned up the street—his car was parked in front of a McDonalds—and told her he needed to speak to her. Too stunned to say or do otherwise, Gelashvili followed him.

As Gelashvili recalls the incident, over a call one Sunday morning in September, I hear an infant’s cry over the call. Gelashvili stops, exchanges a few pointed phrases in Georgian with my translator, and disappears. I hear chiding, a child’s voice. Next to me, George my Georgian translator, starts to chuckle. “She apologizes. Her daughter has always been a fussy sleeper. She needs a moment to sing to her.” It was the birth of this child, Gelashvili would later tell me, that compelled Gelashvili to stop her advocacy altogether.

Once in the car, the stranger locked the car doors and pulled a gun from the glove compartment. “I understood that he was doing this to break my nerves, and it worked,” she told me. For the next three hours, the man drilled her. He claimed that he was from SUSI, a contemporary version of the Georgian KGB. For the last few months, the organization had been following her, tracking her Islamic architecture advocacy. He had good news, he told her. SUSI had monitored Gelashvili’s calls and online messages and they knew that she was ultimately a

“good” person; she would never do anything to harm the Georgian state. He asked her to join them. She could become a spy for Georgia and protect the country from Turkish exploitation.

The stranger made an ultimatum. Should Gelashvili choose to join him, she would earn immense privileges. If she had bank loans, SUSI would cancel them; if she had friends or family in prison, they would free them; if she performed dutifully as informant, they would make her a minister. Decline, however, and punishment was severe. “He told me that if I failed to cooperate with him he would destroy all the mosques I wanted preserved. He promised that I would never work again,” Gelashvili told me. “And this is exactly what is going to happen.”

After three hours of interrogation Gelashvili caved. “The way I saw it, I really thought I could do something for these mosques,” she told me. Gelashvili also worried that she had no real other choice. “He gave me a pen and paper, and told me exactly what to write.” She promised to work for SUSI, to tell no one of her contact with the organization—and signed her name.

The history of what we consider modern-day Georgia is, similar to many of its Soviet brothers, a history of forced occupation. The Hittites, the Scythians, the Persians, and the Romans all played their hand at conquering Georgia. But perhaps the most beautiful relationship in this history—if we can ever call occupation such—is that of the Greeks to the Georgian landscape: chaining their heroes to the peaks of the Caucasian mountains to pass the most difficult of their tests; sending Jason and his Argonauts to weather the storms of the Black Sea in order to court Medea of Colchis, and retrieve the Golden Fleece.

Paganism came to an end in Georgia sometime in the fourth century, writes Cornelia B. Horns in *Medieval Encounters*, in the form of a woman, Saint Nino (Saint Nina, in some accounts). In a country that remains as relatively sexist as Georgia, it seems almost impossible to believe: the mythological birth of Georgia as a so-called Christian state is credited to a woman in the fourth century—actually, two. Queen Nana, ill, confined to bed, summoned Saint Nino to cure her. When Nino did—allegedly, through the power of prayer alone—Queen Nana, impressed with Nino’s God, asked her husband to convert his kingdom to Christianity. He obliged.

For the next few hundred years, southwest Georgia was occupied by various Persian, Turkish, and Mongol tribes, writes Julie A. George in *The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in*

Russia and Georgia. With their reign came their religious influence—Islam included. Then in the 17th century, arguably the most impactful colonial reign settled, one that would be weaponized by the Georgian state 400 years later. The Ottomans came to the lands of Adjara and Samtskhe-Javakheti, and stayed for three hundred years. The most powerful Georgians in Adjara—*beys* (governors) and *aghas* (rich landowners)—converted to Islam during this time out of economic necessity, claims Mathijs Pelkmans in *Defending the Border*. Gradually, the provincial people of Adjara followed suite.

By 1788, King Erekle of Georgia's far East had grown exhausted. Georgia could not seem to stave off its biggest enemies—the Turkish and Persian empires. Reeling over the deaths of another Georgian ruler, King Solomon, Erekle turned to Russia for help. In exchange for protecting his land from the Persian arm he promised Russia sovereignty over foreign affairs. Russia accepted Erekle's conditions. And then when Erekle died a few years later—Russia betrayed him. They demanded that Erekle's people swear allegiance to the tsar and forcibly reunited the rest of Georgia.

King Erekle's dream of saving Georgia from the Turks and Persians had been realized, only to have his country now ruled as an arm of the Russian Empire. Briefly, Georgian briefly became an independent, self-governing nation for a few years in the early 20th century, before being absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1921.

Proponents of Georgian nationalism—who tend to be proponents of Christian Orthodoxy—like to point to Nino when telling the story of Georgianness to its people. This stress on the creation of a national identity, writes Pelkmans, is a response to the “ideological vacuum” that the Soviet Union left behind in 1991. In the last few decades, many post-socialist states have chased a perceived return to pre-Soviet identities as a form of nation-making. In Georgia, this kind of mythologizing claimed that Adjarians have never “really” been Muslim, but—at least on some subconscious level—have always considered themselves Georgian, and therefore Christian.

Turkish scholars Bayram Balci and Raoul Motika, in *Islam in post-Soviet Georgia*, argue that most Georgian nationalists are unaware of the true origins of Islam in Georgia, that it dates back as far as the Arab conquest of the 7th century. Christianity wasn't yet a majority religion. And even then, Balci and Motika claim, most Georgians resisted converting to Christianity until King David II conquered Tbilisi in 1122, making it the capital of his Christian state. It's a

compelling suggestion. What if Islam wasn't the colonizing religion—but Christianity was? It would turn the entire idea of Georgian state formation on its head.

One of the biggest controversies, perhaps, that exists between academics studying the effects of Soviet rule in the Caucasus runs as such: sociologist Manuel Castells believes that the “Soviet experience is a testimony to the perdurability of nations beyond, and despite, the state.” He uses Adjara to back his claim. He writes that the fact that the Adjarian people did not attempt to separate from Georgia at the dissolution of the USSR proved their allegiance to Georgian national identity.

Pelkmans disagrees with this interpretation. During the course of 70 years of Soviet rule, the Adjarians underwent complete ideological reconstruction. They were simultaneously seen as a threat to and an instrument of Soviet authorities. In short, the Soviets feared the Adjarians, because so many worshipped Islam and, at the time, considered themselves closer to Turkey than Georgia—but they wanted Adjara's geographically important port territory, and needed to court the Adjarians to secure it. By removing religion from the Soviet sphere the Soviet state removed the single most distinguishing feature between the two peoples, and gradually started their process of assimilation.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining border province of Samtskhe-Javakheti, where once there too existed a large Muslim population—the Meskhetians, considered an ethnic minority—Stalin chose to deport the Muslims en masse instead of trying to assimilate them. Unlike Adjara, Stalin already had control of Samtskhe-Javakheti as a province; it was easier to get rid of the Muslims there than convert them to Christianity. He loaded nearly 300,000 people onto trains, and shipped many of them to Central Asia, never to return.

Within two generations, the Muslims deported from southern Georgia lost their Georgian language, their Georgian traditions completely. And in the wake of their departure they left behind dozens of empty villages—and their mosques.

The first boy I ever tried to impress was Nazariy, a small child with translucent skin in my Ukrainian class at school. He was a Ukrainian immigrant, like me, like all the kids at my Canadian elementary school—which, at the time, was not strange, but I would later grow to learn was strange. The second boy I ever tried to impress was my father.

My father, who has a great, big belly laugh, is passionate, stubborn, doting. Sometimes, severe. He hates noise pollution, Costco, the Russian language; he loves his native Ukraine. I don't remember when our relationship settled into one of defiance—in the same way you don't notice the day-to-day changing of leaves suddenly slipping into winter. But I remember one distinct quarrel. In general, my father didn't approve of my choice of friends—they were too gay and too male. He, a traditional Soviet man, thought I was confusing my dating prospects. That day, I happened to be meeting a new classmate who was very straight, very female. And also Ukrainian. She came from a family of Russian-speaking immigrants. My father was against the principle of the thing: a true patriot, he believed, would have raised his children in Ukrainian. I was angry. So nothing I did was good enough!

My wonderful, exasperating father. What was he trying, but failing, to say in his blindly chauvinistic way? Probably, I love you and wish you every happiness. And also: I am the last of the Soviets, and I still remember Russian oppression. When my father was growing up, the USSR forced Ukrainian schoolchildren to learn Russian in school, not Ukrainian. They read Russian books, sang Russian songs—and some Ukrainians thought Russian thoughts. In 2014, when pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's far eastern *oblasts* helped the Russian military take control of the East, my father blamed the legacy of the USSR, the Russian language. Like many in western Ukraine, he believed in Ukraine's sovereignty; and to him, that meant believing in a defining language for Ukraine. Did he believe that you could be a democracy-loving Ukrainian and speak Russian in your home, at work? He did not. He feared Russian propaganda would eventually creep into the language itself, warping the mind.

I have flipped this question to Russian-speaking Ukrainians, and I have seen them bristle at the thought. As if it's my choice that I grew up in Russian and not Ukrainian, some of them have told me. The USSR gave us no choice.

I thought about this when I landed in Tbilisi, walked by beautiful heritage buildings scrawled in anti-Russian graffiti: "Are you a good Russian? Leave Georgia," said one. "Fuck Russia," said another. The Georgians are not that different from the Ukrainians, I thought, when I sat down at a restaurant and read a note under the salad section: "Russia occupies 20 percent of our country, so we don't speak their language here."

Like my father, many Georgians feared that speaking Russian would encourage pro-Russian sentiment. Some Georgians—associating the politics of the Russian people with the

Russian state—feared that if they made Georgia too linguistically accommodating, it would even encourage Russian immigration. But perhaps because the Georgians had also experienced, long ago, the occupation of their country by the Ottomans, some also felt that to worship Islam was to ally oneself with a different enemy, with Turkey. As my father thought that no Ukrainian should speak Russian, the Georgian state has sometimes believed that no Georgian should worship Allah.

Gelashvili has spent her entire life living in the Republic of Georgia. She was six years old when the Soviet Union collapsed, in 1991, and 19 when she entered the Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film University in Tbilisi, a cinema major. In 2004 she switched programs and began studying documentary filmmaking. A child of the Soviet Union, Gelashvili grew up with a grandmother that kneaded *khinkali* dough at the kitchen counter, telling stories of Stalin's rule. Almost always these were tales of oppression. Religious devotees thrown in jail for practicing Christianity. Mothers stricken with such poverty that they crawled in the dirt, prying raw potatoes from the earth with their fingers to gift to their children—lest they go desperate and eat them instead. And in the forties, an event so mysterious that Gelashvili would recall it years later, choosing to make it the focus of her graduate thesis: an entire community of Muslims disappeared by Stalin in a matter of weeks.

With emotive, brown eyes that tend to get even wider in passionate jests, Gelashvili explained that Samtskhe-Javakheti was a different place before the Soviet Union. In a time where borders were unpatrolled, fluid, the Orthodox people of Georgia and the Muslims of neighbouring Turkey would intersperse and live in tandem. “A man could wake up in Turkey, walk across the valley, and be at his brother's house in Georgia for lunch,” Gelashvili explained. When Georgia was ushered into the USSR in 1917, it was the first time the country experienced a hard demarcation of land. Them, versus us. Borders, with guards patrolling them, appeared almost overnight. “Brothers became trapped on either side of the Turkish-Georgian border, some never to see one another again,” she said. At the start of the Soviet era, some 300,000 Turkish Meskhetians occupied the Georgian-Turkish frontier. By 1944, Stalin, paranoid and xenophobic, deported the Meskhetians en masse to the far reaches of the Soviet Union. He was convinced most Meskhetians were spying on the Soviet Union for Turkey. Some Turkish Meskhetians

managed to escape Stalin's wrath—but the majority were loaded into trains and shipped to Central Asia, never to return.

“In two generations, those Muslims who were deported from southern Georgian to Central Asia lost their knowledge of the Georgian language, lost their traditions completely,” Gelashvili told me. There was, however, one part of Meskhetian culture that still remained. In Berlin, while completing a fellowship at the Goethe Institute, a Turkish correspondent in Kazakhstan sent her a photo. There was a note attached: *My family, standing inside their village mosque in Sakuneti*. “I was born in a village just outside of Sakuneti,” Gelashvili told me. “And I had never, ever heard about the existence of this mosque.” She travelled back to Samtskhe-Javakheti, rented a car, and drove until she saw it: a small, plainly bricked house on a hill.

It was late spring. Gelashvili ran up the hill, snow crunching beneath her feet, and threw open the front door. Inside the mosque, bricks had fallen to the wayside. Dust and debris littered the interior. Part of the roof had caved in, and snow had collected in clumps on the ground. It was melting. “I just thought to myself, ‘This beautiful mosque is in pain. It’s crying.’”

When Taniel Nakaidze was growing up in the mountain village of Mekeidze, no one practiced Islam. Or Christianity, for that matter. Or Judaism—the Soviet Union forbade it. At school during Easter, teachers would check their students’ hands for signs of egg dye. During Ramadan, Muslim families would pin up dark cloth over their windows and eat quietly, by candlelight. Once, in the dead of night in the border town of Sarpi—during Leninist times, according to Pelkmans—a Muslim father lit a lamp over his crying child’s cradle. The KGB stormed into his home, and shot him.

After completing his studies in Ankara, Turkey—there wasn’t any universities that taught Islam in Georgia—Nakaidze moved to Batumi, in 2001, to work at the state university. He was 25 years old. He told me he decided to dedicate himself to the protection of human rights, founding the Union of Georgian Muslims. Today, about one-third of the population of Batumi identifies as Muslim, making this Georgia’s largest Islamic enclave. In 2003, when he announced that he identified as both a Georgian and Muslim, he was ridiculed. Some claimed that the two were mutually exclusive.

“Maybe,” Salome Gorgiladze, a lifelong Batumi resident, told me, “it is the fault of our history.” Growing up, Gorgiladze remembered all her schoolbooks had said one and the same thing: that the Georgians were forced to run from the Ottomans, who had destroyed their churches. When Nakaidze first announced he was trying to build a second mosque in Batumi, in the 2010s, rumors abounded. Some said that it was the Turkish consulate that had donated money, bought a plot of land, then refused to consider building a second mosque anywhere else. Other said that it wasn’t ethnic Georgians that were going to use this new mosque, but Turkish migrants, who were overwhelming the local Georgian population. “At least,” Gorgiladze remembered one saying, “Russia has the same face as us.”

For decades, Batumi’s large Muslim population have all worshipped at a single mosque. Orta Jami, built in the 19th century, regularly see its Muslim worshippers spill out onto the streets, knees separated by cobblestones only through the thin wool of their prayer rugs. The Muslim congregation has been going back and forth with the authorities for years asking for permission to build a second, larger mosque but to little avail.

In 2016, Nakaidze led a coalition that collected more than 12,000 signatures on a petition addressed to Batumi City Hall. The group’s request—permission to build a second mosque in Batumi—was met with silence. Then, in 2017, the same group appealed to City Hall with a second petition. Ignored again, they established themselves as an NGO, the Fund for the Construction of a New Mosque in Batumi; Nakaidze was elected as chair. Together, the group purchased a plot of land and applied for a building permit. They were rejected.

For seventy years, Nakaidze told me over coffee, the Georgian state spewed propaganda: that to be Georgian meant to be Christian. It was their main philosophy that other religions are that of the enemy. “That’s why we want to build this mosque,” he said. “To overcome this obsolete idea of what it means to be Georgian.” He said the Muslim community was “not in a hurry.” They will appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in France if they cannot win their building permit from within the Georgian legal system. He also said that the Muslims of Batumi are not alone. Other religious minorities face the same problem that the Muslims face. This procedure would not only help the Muslims—it would help all other religious minorities in Georgia actualize.

In 2023, Nakaidze’s case travelled to the Supreme Court of Batumi where it finally received a ruling: “The Court of Appeals establishes that the refusal of Batumi City Hall to

authorize the construction of a new mosque in Batumi to be illegal and discriminatory against the applicants on the grounds of religion,” reads the final document. Still, the court did not issue permission to build the mosque, claiming that it violated local zoning regulations. “It was a very sad practice in Georgia that not a single mosque has officially been allowed to be built, except for a mosque in the village of Mokhe,” said Nakaidze.

How different are the Muslims in Adjara and Samtskhe-Javakheti from the Orthodox, really? Some would say extraordinarily so. They worship different Gods, celebrate different holidays, and read from different holy books. One half of Adjarian villages ring their bells once a week, on a Sunday, and the other, five times a day, to signal the call to prayer. One community eats pork while the other forbids it. One believes that humans are born a clean slate—and the other, that every child is born with original sin.

Despite these differences, in Adjara, there are Muslims who still christen their children with godmothers and fathers, like in the Orthodox tradition. Come Easter time, some Muslim women still decorate their loaves with crosses. Others still thread crosses into their linens. When asked why, one woman said, “Our ancestors were baking the bread this way ... The cross means that we are Georgian.” In Adjara, the line between Islam and Christianity is privy to becoming faint—sometimes imperceptible.

“You know that 20 years ago, if you had asked me what I think of the building of a second mosque in Batumi I would have said that you were crazy. We are an Orthodox country, how would we get a second mosque?” Ruslan Baramidze, senior researcher of Islam and Muslim studies in Georgia at Shota Rustaveli State University told me. “Now, if you had asked me this ten years ago I would have told you yes, of course, build this mosque. I would also tell you that I am not sure who would support this initiative. Now, we are speaking about options how to construct it.”

Why, then, with all the similarities that the Muslim and Orthodox in Georgia share, does the government persist in targeting the Muslims? I posed this question to Eka Chitanava, Director of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute in Georgia. Perceived threat from Turkey is a leading reason, she said. The government uses religion as a way of strengthening its authority. “What they do is they securitize religions, especially those close to neighboring countries like

Azerbaijan and Turkey,” said Chitanava. “Of course, we don't have anything against national security, but what they do is not strengthening security—but vice versa. It's against national security when you are ostracizing your local population, and seeing them in the context of the enemy.” Then, there's post 9/11 Islamophobia and the European migrant crisis of the mid-2010s that are to blame—many of whom were migrants from Muslim countries. This feeds into negative stereotypes about Muslims in general, said Chitanava.

Historian Davit Jishkariani says that Islamic subjugation in Georgia is in large part a product of post-Soviet nation building. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Yeltsin needed some kind of memory culture, Davit told me, to remind his people of Russia's grandeur. He chose Imperial Russia, a part of Russian history where there used to be French salons, poetry, Europeans. But when Putin rose to power he wanted a memory culture that would capture his ambitions to control the entire post-Soviet world again. He chose the second World War. “This gave a chance to keep memory influence on fifteen republics around the Soviet Union, because everyone was part of this one big victory,” said Jishkariani. Georgia's Muslims, in this narrative, were left behind.

Two weeks before her 32nd birthday, Gelashvili broke down in front of a friend, sobbing. “I had depression, I was thinking of killing myself,” she told me recently. “I was feeling that I am garbage. I had the feeling I was making my friends dirty.” She had spent the last three months being followed by SUSI—every text she wrote, every call she made, monitored by the state. “My friends helped me to run from them,” she continued. “And it was that day that I was born again.” Gelashvili, who does not want to give many details about her severance from SUSI—“in order to protect my friends”—simply tells me that she called her SUSI contact over the phone, and broke things off with him. A few days later, on her birthday, he showed up at her salon. She refused to speak to him.

After the appointment she walked home. Outside her house, three strange men loitered around her door. They started verbally accosting her, swearing. She ignored them and left for the market with her father. Two hours later, they returned. The three men had multiplied to a group of over 20. “It's very easy to understand when someone is following you in the street or the café. In Georgia it's very, very easy—every SUSI man has the same face,” said Gelashvili.

By the time Gelashvili was approached by the Georgian KGB, in 2017, she had become something of a leading historian on mosques in Georgia. Gelashvili had co-established an NGO, The Georgian Islamic Research and Conservation Fund, and developed an active Facebook page of the same name. Television crews from Tbilisi regularly reached out to the fund for help coordinating mosque visits. Gelashvili herself coined the term “*Georgian mosque*”, using it for the first on public media in Georgian history. “It was very strange for everybody to hear something Muslim and Georgian together. We have a cliché that Georgians can be only Orthodox Christian,” said Gelashvili. And then, when she noticed that many of the mosques she had begun documenting for her Facebook page were falling into disrepair, she started crowdsourcing restorations funds. She had become, in other words, a kind of patron saint of Georgian Islamic architecture.

A few days after her birthday, SUSI called again. “I’m sorry, we made a mistake, let’s try again. Let’s meet and speak. And work together,” the man told Gelashvili. “I told him, ‘I can work for the Ministry of Culture, but I will never again work for SUSI.’”

Publicly, it may not seem obvious at first glance why Gelashvili qualifies as a political refugee. She posts regularly on social media, mostly limiting her content to selfies, pictures of her daughter, and, of course, the incredible architectural log she’s accumulated. And yet, here she is: a woman that’s been threatened by the Soviet-style secret police, held at gunpoint, fighting to save the architectural vestiges of a religion that isn’t even her own. Unless, that is, Gelashvili fights because she recognizes the plight of Georgia’s Muslims for what it is: the story of Georgia at large. Both country and the Islamic people of Georgia tell the tale of a rich culture with ancient roots, somehow largely forgotten by the West; a state and people both simultaneously craving legitimacy from larger society.

Today Gelashvili lives with her young family in her grandmother’s village in south Georgia. She still fights for her beloved mosques, as much as she can. She is worried about their conservation. Many mosques, because of their remote locations in now-forgotten rural areas prevent them from receiving attention from skilled conservationists. Other mosques have been converted into storage areas—a reflex carried-over from Soviet times, when practicing religion was forbidden—and in the process, many unique architectural elements have often been destroyed in part or whole. When she visits her mosques, Gelashvili sometimes finds the buildings locked, the doors chained by the hand of what she believes to be the secret police.

Gelashvili knows Nakaidze well and regularly advocates for his mosque-building in Batumi. They hope to take their case to the European Court of Human Rights in France if they cannot win their building permit from within the Georgian legal system.

“The main thing you need to remember to save yourself from the KGB-style system—to speak about it loudly. Speak about what happened to you on social media, on TV, in magazines.” Gelashvili told me in our final conversations together. “If you save the secrets of the KGB, you will never be able to run from them.”