

**SCTCMG 2021**  
**International Scientific Conference "Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of**  
**Modern Globalism"**

## **CONSTRUCTING HISTORICAL MEMORY OF POST-SOVIET CONFLICTS: THE ROLE OF GEORGIAN LITERARY SOURCES**

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### **Abstract**

The current state of relations between Russia and Georgia partly explains why the Russian-language studies have little or no presence of literary sources in the historical memory of the post-Soviet conflicts. Despite the permanent ambivalence of Russian-Georgian relations, the article attempts to identify how literature has reflected the realities of post-Soviet conflicts and wars, and what the historical value of literature is in wartime. The article relies on a selection of key literary works by Georgian authors (in Russian) relating to the post-Soviet period of relations between Russia and Georgia. The method of content analysis allowed overcoming not only fragmentation, but also subjectivity in the interpretation and reflection of private stories of literary characters, as well as revealing the position of Georgian authors and their attitude towards armed conflicts, the enemy, the state, etc. The Georgian post-Soviet literature definitely brings the need to understand the wounds caused by the interethnic conflicts. This direction is developed in the works of the 2000s which focus on the fates of ordinary people separated from each other. Notably, the image of the enemy is described without clear outlines: both Georgians, Abkhaz and Ossetians are generally seen as victims. The study of Georgian literary sources in the construction of historical memory of the post-Soviet conflicts, on the one hand, involves distorting reality by providing mythologized events, while on the other hand, it can contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-political and socio-psychological problems that accompany both sides of the conflict.

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*Keywords:* Conflict, Georgia, historical memory, literary sources



## **1. Introduction**

In the last few years, Russian readers have once again had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with Georgian prose of the post-Soviet period. One such book was the study "Russia-Georgia after the Empire" (Lekke & Chkhaidze, 2018) in 2018. Its section entitled "Instead of Friendship" focused on how literature reflected the realities of post-Soviet conflicts and wars and what the historical value of literature was in war situations (this was revealed to a greater extent by Zaza Abzianidze, discussed later in the article).

The book prompted the author to examine the role of literary works in the construction of historical memory about the post-Soviet conflicts, using Georgian prose as an example. This is due to the unstable dialogue between Russia and Georgia and the absence of diplomatic relations between them since 2008, which makes it very difficult to collect oral testimony from participants and eyewitnesses in a number of wars and conflicts in the post-Soviet period involving the Georgian population.

However, relations between Russia and Georgia have always been ambivalent throughout their common history. Russia, playing the role of "saviour from Muslims", not only suppressed the outskirts of the empire (Urushadze, 2015), but also provided Georgian elites with new opportunities for self-reflection through the Russian system of education and literary communication. Georgia, on the one hand, resisted Russification to preserve its national identity and, on the other hand, was a haven for the Russian intellectuals who saw it as a country of freedom.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The current state of relations between Russia and Georgia partly explains why the Russian-language studies have little or no presence of literary sources in the historical memory of the post-Soviet conflicts. One exception is the work "Literature as an alternative history: post-Soviet conflicts in Georgian prose" of Zaza Abzianidze, PhD in Philology (2018), where the author analyses the works of Georgian authors Otar Chkheidze, Otar Chiladze, Guram Odisharia, Nughzar Shataidze, Gela Chkvanava, Guram Megrelishvili and Tamta Melashvili.

## **3. Research Questions**

The article relies on a selection of key literary works by Georgian authors (in Russian) relating to the post-Soviet period of relations between Russia and Georgia. The task is to determine how literature has reflected the realities of post-Soviet conflicts and wars, and what the historical value of literature was in war situations.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose is to undertake an analytical review of the most relevant literary works in Georgian prose dealing with the post-Soviet armed conflicts, the private lives and stories of those who passed through wartime and had to leave the conflict territory and/or fight. The purpose of the article is to

identify the role of Georgian literary sources in the construction of the memory of the post-Soviet period conflicts.

## 5. Research Methods

The article relies on a selection of key literary works by Georgian authors (in Russian) relating to the post-Soviet period of relations between Russia and Georgia. The method of content analysis will allow overcoming not only fragmentation, but also subjectivity in the interpretation and reflection of private stories of literary characters, as well as revealing the position of Georgian authors and their attitude towards armed conflicts, the enemy, the state, etc.

## 6. Findings

As editor-in-chief of the gradually fading Literary Georgia magazine, Abzianidze made numerous attempts to revive it, but the same thing happened to it as to many journals of the former Soviet republics in the 1990s. Attempts to relaunch the magazine at the end of this period forced the editor-in-chief to address directly both the old readers, who still remembered the magazine from its heyday and the new ones, already accustomed to different content and style. Formerly Literary Georgia was one of the most authoritative magazines of the Thaw period, conceived as a Soviet monthly literary-artistic and socio-political magazine. "Its appearance signified that the non-Georgian reader would henceforth be aware of the living literary process, familiar with new achievements of Georgian art and humanitarian science, as well as with selected samples from the classical heritage of Georgian literature" (Abzianidze, 2008, p. 102).

According to Russian philologist Snigireva, the magazine aimed to represent "Georgia's past and present culture (the function of preservation, popularization and cultural bearer function) and to place Georgian literature in a pan-Russian and global context (the function of increasing the cultural awareness of the nation)" (Snigireva & Podchinenov, 2016, p. 85). The representation of the past has also been particularly relevant to post-Soviet conflicts, which have become a key subject of analysis for many specialists: "Resistance to Russian domination, which was a central problem in Georgian culture during the last two centuries, has gained new ground in the post-Soviet period" (Jamagidze & Amiranashvili, 2016, p. 103).

In the 1990s, there was an obvious increase in the politicization of Literary Georgia, as evidenced by the appearance of columns of openly social nature or calculated on the personal responsibility of the writer: "Tragic Events of April 9th in Tbilisi", "In Memory of Victims of April 9th", "Writer's Tribune," "Person and Time," "Writer and History," "Ecological Problems," "Editor's Column," "Point of View", "Letter to the Editor", "From the Journalist's Notebook", "Pages of History", "Culture, Morality, Politics", "Replica", "We Discuss Acute Problems" and others (Snigireva & Podchinenov, 2016). Along with the emergence of such columns comes a change in the magazine's founders. In the post-perestroika period, the Union of Writers of Georgia, the Institute of Georgian Literature named after Sh. Rustaveli and the publishing house Literary Georgia experienced such changes.

Gaining a challenging experience as editor of *Literary Georgia*, Zaza Abzianidze's 2018 work "Literature as Alternative History: Post-Soviet Conflicts in Georgian Prose" separates academic studies, lacking the ability to recreate psychological portraits, from literary sources, which instead feature a wide range of emotional characteristics typical for political figures of the post-Soviet era. In literary works, the author identifies the imperial discourse and its symbols, the documentary narrative, the war as a spiritual catharsis, autobiographical material reflecting the everyday lives of people forced to cross the Chuber Pass (in particular, the work of Odisharia "Return to Sukhumi" (Odisharia, 2016)), the mutual assistance of Abkhaz and Georgians (Odisharia "Nephew" (Odisharia, 2016)), the exchange of prisoners and the bodies (Elbakidze), the urban landscape of the Abkhaz town of Tkvarcheli (Shataidze, 2014), the everyday life of refugees, etc. Such details are ways of fully recreating military everyday life. However, along with the lack of fundamental research on post-Soviet wars and conflicts, it is also especially important to provide an artistic reflection on events that have gone far beyond the local Georgian conflict.

In his book *Return to Sukhumi*, Guram Odisharia writes: "We were lied to with their rallies and shouts" (Odisharia, 2016). The writer left Sukhumi on 27 September 1993 and walked with others through the Kodori Gorge, which was later called "The Road to Golgotha". Guram Odisharia believes that during the war many Georgians and Abkhazians suppressed the "image of the enemy" in themselves. The hero of the story "The Nephew" is the thirty-year-old Valera, who has never held a gun in his hands. However, the war left him no choice: "...he saw tortured corpses with their ears and noses cut off, bodies were torn apart by Grad, people were beaten to death, headless corpses, corpses of soldiers burnt in BMPs and tanks, charred down to the size of boots..." (Odisharia, 2016, p. 33).

Certainly, it is difficult to demand that a man of war shows high morality (which is often mythologized in wars of earlier periods), but Valera still retains the essential quality – humanity. During one of the skirmishes, all of Valera's comrades are killed. He barely manages to escape from the burning Abkhaz house and rescue the two-year-old child. That same evening the Abkhaz take Valera, hiding in the forest, as a prisoner. They accuse Valera of killing the child's own family and want to shoot him. However, an Abkhaz soldier recognises the child as his nephew and decides to take Valera to the family of the child's father. Then it turns out that the child's family is alive, and Valera becomes a respected guest of the family who bandages his wounds and feeds him. Early in the morning, Givi and Adgur see Valera off in peace, show him the way to the Georgian positions, say goodbye, thank him again for saving the child and even exchange assault rifles: "...let's exchange weapons, I'll keep your gun and you can have mine. Let's part today as brothers, but if we meet again tomorrow in battle, we will do all we have to do..." says Givi (Odisharia, 2016, p. 36). Valera says goodbye with the hope: "It will be over and we'll meet again, then we'll talk about everything" (Odisharia, 2016, p. 41).

From the context of studying the imagological stereotype of the enemy in the narrative of contemporary Georgian and Abkhaz writers, Doctor of Philological Sciences Miresashvili concludes that "when studying the works created by Georgian authors on the subject of the war in Abkhazia, it is clearly seen that Georgian writers do not speak about the Abkhaz "in hate speech", they do not create an enemy image of the Abkhaz, they appreciate the human behaviour they showed during the war, etc." (Miresashvili, 2018).

Elena Chkhaidze addressed the issue of relationships between ordinary people in the war in the context of the interethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Her work "Thematic Fractures: New Trends in Russian and Georgian Literature in the Post-Soviet Period" analyses changes in the thematic paradigm of Russia-Georgia in both kinds of literature. However, the most comprehensive and poignant is Elena Chkhaidze's correspondence report at the Geftter Conference on Nations and Nationalism in 2016. (Chkhaidze, 2016). She notes: "In post-Soviet Georgian literature, the events of the 1990s came to the fore. It would be wrong to say that only that period saw the emergence of nationalist sentiments, as they also appeared in earlier works throughout the last two centuries: for example, in the texts of Ilya Chavchavadze and Alexander Kazbegi, and later in the novels of the Soviet and post-Soviet period, such as those by Otar Chiladze (the Soviet novel *The Man Walked along the Road* (Tibotkin, 2013) and the post-Soviet novel *Godori*)" (Chkhaidze, 2016).

Notably, Chkhaidze emphasizes the role of Georgian literature as a way of reflecting the complex process of Georgia's "gaining independence and maintaining national identity" (Chkhaidze, 2016). Chkhaidze's first novel describes the events of 1991–1992, against the backdrop of which two protagonists appear as protagonists: "one politician – Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the other was an actor Luo (Luorsab), a Georgian citizen who was in the thick of the social and political events of those years" (Chkhaidze, 2016, p. 56). The social and political life of the time prompted the politician to take up the craft of acting, while the actor, on the other hand, took the place of the spectator. "The rhetoric of the main 'actor' Zviad Gamsakhurdia was all about liberating the homeland from the bondage of Russia and thus preserving the self-identity of his people, the Georgian language and gaining independence" (Chkhaidze, 2016, p. 34).

One of the main tools for acquiring a new Georgian identity, based on a proclaimed free and democratic state, was the Rose Revolution in November 2003. Jamagidze and Amiranashvili of Ilya Chavchavadze State University rightly point out that "the Rose Revolution is first and foremost a social movement. Therefore, post-Soviet Georgian literature has not been at the centre of political developments. However, the revolutionary process was supported by young Georgian writers who profess a predominantly postmodern style and thus share the ideas of pluralism and westernization in their texts" (Jamagidze & Amiranashvili, 2016). The revolution as a socio-political event had a significant impact on the development of Georgian post-Soviet literature. The creation of functioning state institutions, increased domestic security, increased social responsibility and an attempt to integrate elements of Western culture into the fabric of South Caucasian society have all given a new impetus to Georgian literature.

Georgian literature from the 2000s is still shaping its contribution to the narrative of liberalization and rehabilitation in the face of historical wounds. However, the elitism of Georgian literature still persists. On the one hand, post-Soviet literature is incapable of having a significant impact on the whole of Georgian society. A part of it has retained its ambivalent and dualistic view of the past and future of the Georgian nation. This is particularly evident in the reflection of the Soviet past and the successive armed conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: "In addition to the wounds of the Soviet past, there was a traumatic worldview in post-Soviet Georgia caused by the civil war of the 1990s, followed by the war in Abkhazia. Literature of the 1990s and post-Soviet culture refused to reflect these facts as this would have

meant destroying the hyperbolized myths about identity established in the Soviet period" (Jamagidze & Amiranashvili, 2016).

## 7. Conclusion

Thus, the Georgian post-Soviet literature brings the need to understand the wounds caused by the interethnic conflicts. This direction is developed in the works of the 2000s which focus on the fates of ordinary people separated from each other. Notably, the image of the enemy is described without clear outlines: both Georgians, Abkhaz and Ossetians are generally seen as victims, while there are literary allusions to Russia's provocative role.

The study of Georgian literary sources in the construction of historical memory of the post-Soviet conflicts, on the one hand, involves distorting reality by providing mythologized events, while on the other hand, it can contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-political and socio-psychological problems that accompany both sides of the conflict. Methodologically, the literary text fulfils the function of a bearer of profound historical knowledge, but "the vast majority of cases do not reflect the fact of this knowledge anywhere. And in this sense, literary-historical analysis treats both the literary work and the historical process roughly as a psychoanalyst treats his patient" (Sobolev, 2013, p. 66).

## Acknowledgments

The publication was prepared as a part of the implementation of the RNF grant No. 1718-01411.

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