Exhibiting the Friendship of Peoples
Curatorial Imaginations and Practices in Late Soviet Georgia

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In 1972, the Museum of Peoples' Friendship (colloquially called the ›Druzhba‹) was founded in Tbilisi, Georgia, under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Registered as one of its branches, the Druzhba was housed in the largest museum in the country, which was then known as the Academician Simon Janashia Georgian State Museum (also referred to as the Georgian History Museum) and is today known as the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia.[1] Following what was perceived by the hosts as an imposed and rather odd merger of the two institutions, which were different in both profile and orientation, the director of the Druzhba was appointed Vice Director of the Georgian State Museum and became a member of its scientific council. The intention behind the appointment was to quickly enhance the prestige of the new museum and facilitate the transfer of space, objects and expertise to the Druzhba from the Department of the History of Material Culture of the Bourgeois Period, the Department of the History of Soviet-Period Georgia and the Department of Ethnography at the History Museum. Staff members later recalled with amusement how the director of the Druzhba would position himself at the main entrance shared by the two museums' separate exhibitions in an attempt to divert visiting crowds towards the exhibition he'd curated. His plans for the future of the new museum were, however, much more ambitious than organising thematic expositions in the space he'd secured through his personal con-

1 The Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia is part of the larger museum union called the Georgian National Museum, which was founded in 2004 and unites a number of museums and scientific research centres.

nections with party authorities.[2] Soon he started appealing to the central committee, asking for political and financial support to ensure a separate infrastructure for what he envisaged as a full-fledged research centre, which he officially obtained in 1982.[3] The declared ideological direction was to focus on the idea of friendship, mostly among Soviet nations, but nevertheless with the understanding that this notion could potentially extend to the peoples of the entire socialist block. In fact, the precise limits of who would eventually count as a friend – that is, who would actually be included in the various collecting and study programmes – were never clearly delineated in the plans for the museum.

In keeping with depictions of Russia as a ›big brother‹, and alongside the necessary touches of Leninist internationalism, the museum concept revolved around the axis of Georgian-Russian historical connections. On top of that, the historiographical references to the shared past were elevated to higher frequencies of comradeship and affection. Across the socialist block, this was the first example of the museumisation of friendship; it was a response to growing ethnic tensions inside the country as well as to Moscow's tightening grip over the southern periphery, which was engulfed in endemic corruption. For this reason, the museum project can also be interpreted as a compensatory show-off measure. On the level of the Georgian SSR itself, this created a kind of substitute for the role the Soviet centre had claimed as a guarantor and symbol of friendship among the peoples of the multinational empire. Some examples of this are the opening of a branch of the museum in Moscow[4] and a number of scientific missions undertaken by enthusiastic curators to retrieve private archives from the Soviet capital and Leningrad, as well as multiple collecting expeditions to other republics and

2 Teimuraz Badurashvili was friends with the then first Secretary of the Communist Party of the Georgian SSR, Eduard Shevardnadze, who is often mentioned in various oral and written sources next to Badurashvili as initiator of the museum project at a higher political level.

3 See the Administrative Archives of the Georgian National Museum Tbilisi [AAGNM], Permanent Records, Opis 1, file 284, Decree # 427 g of the Council of Ministers of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (05.04.1982), p. 54.

4 See Otar Keinashvili: *Museum of Peoples' Friendship – Hearth of Patriotic and International Upbringing*, Tbilisi: Society ›Tsodna‹ of Georgian SSR 1981, p. 31; ოთარ ყეინაშვილი: ხალხთა მეგობრობის მუზეუმი - *პატრიოტული და ინტერნაციონალური აღზრდის კერა*, საზოგადოება ›ცოდნა‹, საქ. სსრ, თბილისი, 1981, გვ. 31.

the autonomous republics within Georgia and the neighbouring North Caucasus. While the adjustments to the centrally endorsed Soviet models were not exclusive to Georgia, the scale and intensity of the engagement of local actors in turning emotions into specific knowledge and vice versa deserves greater attention. It should be also noted that Georgia's particular form of comradeship stems from deep-rooted traditions:

> Personal bonds formed at school or at university could last a lifetime and were often of more consequence than ties of kinship or clan which were at the heart of other Soviet national societies, or than the patron-client networks that were so pervasive elsewhere in the Soviet Union.[5]

The Druzhba endowed this comradeship with taxonomic hierarchisation and intense visuality. The personal aspirations of Teimuraz Badurashvili, the founder and first director of the museum and formerly the youngest secretary of the district party committee (Raikom) of the provincial town of Telavi, just a couple of hours east of Tbilisi, were crucial in the new foundation. The museum was his brainchild and eventually served as a platform from which he was able to successfully ascend to the rank of Minister of Culture of the Georgian SSR, after having encountered some complications in his earlier pursuit of a political career. A social climber from the Nomenklatura circle, Badurashvili navigated the space between the Kremlin and Tbilisi while pushing the nationalist agenda; this was a necessary manoeuvre, as he sought to accumulate social capital in post-Stalinist Georgia. He must have thought a museum would be a suitable venue to achieve this aim. In their respective works, Blauvelt,[6] Smith[7] and Kaiser[8] describe how Georgians

5 Timothy K. Blauvelt/Jeremy Smith (eds.): *Georgia after Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power,* London/New York: Routledge 2016, p. 7.

6 See Timothy K. Blauvelt: »March of the Chekists: Beria's Secret Police Patronage Network and Soviet Crypto-Politics«, in: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* XXX (2011), pp. 1-16, http://eprints.iliauni.edu.ge/1159/1/March%20of%20the%20chekists.pdf [accessed: 24.11.2023].

7 See Blauvelt/Smith: *Georgia after Stalin* (footnote 5).

8 See Claire P. Kaiser: *Georgian and Soviet: Entitled Nationhood and the Specter of Stalin in the Caucasus*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 2022.

with a once »privileged position under Stalin's and Beria's protection«[9] had to confront new insecurities in the post-Stalin chapter of politics and everyday life. Khrushchev's famous denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality in February 1956 set the stage for the tragic outcome of the commemorative events that took place in Georgia in March of the same year, when Soviet forces violently dispersed pro-Stalinist demonstrations, a move perceived locally as an orchestrated anti-Georgian offensive by the new Soviet leadership.[10] As a result, »the accommodation of Soviet power that had taken decades to establish was shaken«.[11] Moscow's direct accusations with regard to the overexploitation of Union resources would follow within a decade.

Under these circumstances, the Druzhba was intended to stand as a palpable expression of ideological commitment to the Kremlin. The very first of its kind, it was an unusual creation in several regards. By that time, debates on new museology had permeated transnational socialist contexts. In 1977 in Yugoslavia, the anthropologist and explorer Tibor Sekelj introduced a new method of exhibiting that he termed the »museum without showcases«.[12] Sekelj imagined a new type of museum that »would not rely exclusively on objects, use traditional techniques of separation between visitors and museum exhibits or follow the standard taxonomy of cultures«.[13] Instead, it would yield the space to shared elements of nonaligned modernisms.[14] Sekelj's project of promoting nonaligned cultures through experiments with museumised forms of »cultural performances, cooking, storytelling«[15] was inscribed at the same time into the Marxist critique of the Western version of history.[16] Several years before Sekelj, Badurashvili had realised a similar

9 Ronald Grigor Suny: »Foreword«, in: Timothy K. Blauvelt/Jeremy Smith (eds.): *Georgia after Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power,* London/New York: Routledge 2016, pp. xi–xii, see p. xii.

10 Giorgi Kldiashvili: »Nationalism after the March 1956 Events and the Origins of the National-Independence Movement in Georgia«, in: Timothy K. Blauvelt/Jeremy Smith (eds.): *Georgia after Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power,* London/New York: Routledge 2016, pp. 77–90, see p. 78.

11 Suny: »Foreword« (footnote 9), p. xii.

12 Bojana Videkanic: *Nonaligned Modernism, Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985*, Montreal/Kingston/London/Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press 2019, p. 112.

13 Ibid.

14 See ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 See ibid., p. 114.

project by significantly recasting the exhibition space. Although a graduate in philosophy, Badurashvili was often described by his fellow colleagues as less of a theoretician and more of a practical person gifted with a sharp managerial vision and a passion to oversee things. Ironically, as he was aiming to transform the exhibition hall into a dramatically performative space, he ended up simultaneously questioning mainstream Soviet historiography.

Figures such as Badurashvili, who functioned at the edge of the empire and the entire museum project he deployed, make it possible for us to grasp the simple dichotomy between centre and periphery with greater complexity. Using oral history interviews alongside scarcely available documentation about museum collections, texts and visual sources, I attempt in this paper to decipher how the frictions between Moscow and Tbilisi throughout the 1970s and early 1980s were dealt with by Georgian museum curators. While frictions in a more figurative sense suggest discord, disunity and even antagonism, what I'm more interested in here are the ways in which tensions between different, seemingly asymmetric poles of power were dealt with so that they could coexist and not completely slip away from one another. As contested and uneven spaces, museums can provide instructive cases in this regard. Subject to political pressure from above, contemporary museums are devised to show things, which means that they are also defined by the members of the public who visit them.[17] This raises the question of curatorial agency and prompts us to reconsider our emphasis on the role of structural conditions in exhibitions.[18] Anne Hasselmann recently analysed this question using the example of central and provincial museums in Stalinist Russia and Belarus, whereby she challenged the understanding of a one-sided power relationship between the socio-cultural actors and the Soviet state at the time.[19] In line with her arguments, the case of the Druzhba serves to illus-

17 See Tony Bennett: »The Exhibitionary Complex«, in: *new formations* 4 (1988), pp. 73-102, http://seymourpolat.in/rp/texts/Tony%20Bennett%20-%20The%20Exhibitionary%20Complex.pdf [accessed: 24.11.2023].

18 See also the concept of *Eigensinn* that is central to the German school of everyday history (›Alltagsgeschichte‹); see Alf Luedtke: *Alltagsgeschichte. Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (1989), engl.: *The History of Everyday Life. Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, translated by William Templer, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995.

19 See Anne E. Hasselmann: *Wie Krieg ins Museum kam: Akteure der Erinnerung in Moskau, Minsk und Tscheljabinsk: 1941-1956*, Bielefeld: transcript 2022.

trate how developments in the museum scene in late Soviet Georgia co-defined the parameters of Georgian nationalism in their own unique way. In other words, it shows how Soviet museum landscapes negotiated the ideas of local nationalism.

Peoples' Friendship: The Soviet Nationality Matrix and Its Historical Evolution

From the 1930s on, the rotating »ideas of friendship and (big) brotherhood«[20] served as both a vehicle for and an expression of Soviet citizenship, the emotional expansion of which has reached even beyond the historical period of the Soviet state. It was Joseph Stalin himself who initiated the political framework of peoples' friendship, which would go on to be actively employed as a propaganda tool to mobilise the population against internal and external enemies. The concept took shape against the backdrop of the ambitious modernisation program of the 1930s and »the looming Nazi threat«.[21]

Jeff Sahadeo demonstrates the key role played by emotions in the process of instilling patriotism in new Soviet citizens, the ultimate aim of which was to foster a multi-national community codified by the new Stalinist constitution.[22] The press actively spotlighted the achievements of Soviet men and women in building a common future under socialism.[23] At the same time, these achievements were widely animated in the context of carnivalesque special days and weeks, as well as the so-called ›Dekady‹. All of these together constituted a tradition inaugurated in the 1930s that involved one-day, one-week and ten-day festivals showcasing the national cultures of Soviet republics.[24] The two Russian cities of Leningrad and Moscow – which represented the cultural and political core of the Soviet state – hosted these festivities and were positioned as »centres of emotional life«.[25]

20 Jeff Sahadeo: *Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 2019, p. 42.

21 See ibid., p. 38.

22 See ibid.

23 See ibid., p. 39.

24 Ibid., p. 46.

25 Ibid., p. 39.

In the 1940s, with war still raging on Soviet soil, the commemoration culture associated with the Great Patriotic War was already taking shape. This simultaneously traumatic and triumphant experience provided some concrete examples of unity, solidarity and shared sacrifice, thereby contributing to the foundational myth of the October Revolution. Friendship and brotherhood on the war front »epitomized the common history and destiny«[26] of the ›Union unbreakable‹.[27] National histories were rewritten accordingly, foregrounding the centuries-old ties between Soviet peoples and emphasising Russia's leading role.[28] However, it was in the late 1960s and 1970s that the cult of victory, capitalising on earlier grass-roots practices of commemoration,[29] became very much entrenched in the monuments, state and regional museums and celebratory processions that flooded Soviet cities and towns. The mushrooming ›museums of military glory‹ usually had special corners that showcased the subject of camaraderie in war. The conservative return to ethicised feasts à la Stalin was also characteristic of the era; festivals of art and culture that propagated the Soviet state as the guarantor of the cultural uniqueness of each nation in the Soviet family can be seen as one of the most widespread manifestations of the friendship of peoples at the time.[30]

The role of cultural expression in conveying the philosophy of Soviet unity has been emphasised, but the ways that the curatorial practices of non-Slavic nations in the Soviet Union locally calibrated this unity during the late Soviet period have been overlooked to date. This is almost entirely due to the difficulty of gaining access to museum archives and collections, which are increasingly closed to researchers, especially those working outside the museum context and outside the museum's limited funding schemes.[31]

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26 Ibid., p. 40.

27 Alexander Vasilyevich Alexandrov was the composer and Sergei Mikhalkov and El-Registan were the lyricists of *The State Anthem of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, which was initially adopted in 1944.

28 See Sahadeo: *Voices from the Soviet Edge* (footnote 20), p. 41.

29 See Mischa Gabowitsch: »Victory Day before the Cult: War Commemoration in the USSR, 1945-1965«, in: David L. Hoffmann (ed.): *The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, London/New York: Routledge 2022, pp. 64-79.

30 See Sahadeo: *Voices from the Soviet Edge* (footnote 20), p. 49.

31 Moreover, the recurrent inventorisation campaigns at these institutions, which inherit rich imperial and Soviet collections, involve the arduous process of identifying and registering undocumented and missing objects. Fear of political punishment from above and

The 1960s and 1970s marked an upsurge in complex and systematic expeditions in the five-year plans set up by museums. Not only did these expeditions become longer-term and interdisciplinary endeavours, they also increasingly involved local communities. Special circles in the local history museums, village councils and schools helped to examine and compile objects of nature and artefacts judged suitable for preservation and display.[32] All of these factors demonstrate the extent to which museums themselves are worthy objects of research, particularly in their role as collection centres with ties to local communities. An examination of printed sources also reveals that this period was rich in printed material, such as textbooks in museology. Seen in this light, the exhibitions organised at the Druzhba present us with cases that are illustrative of the gap between the theoretical tenets elaborated in conformity with the state canon and their subsequent translation for the purposes of public consumption.

From Historical Evidence to Affectionate Stories

It took almost three years after the 1972 establishment of the Druzhba on paper[33] for the concept of its first permanent exhibition to crystallise. Opened on 9 May 1975, the exhibition was dedicated to the Soviet victory and more specifically to the military friendship during the Great Patriotic War.[34]

The final plan for the exhibition was officially adopted jointly by the Communist Party Central Committee Secretariat and the Presidium of the Acad-

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the overall struggle of the underpaid administration provokes general distress towards the outsiders.

32 Donovan refers to the development as the revived trend of *Kraevedenie* and counts it as part of the regime's effort to safeguard popular support »during the second phase of de-Stalinisation«; *Kraevedenie* itself could be described as an interdisciplinary activist and intellectual movement in regional studies that engages scientists, curators and local laymen with the goal of collecting, processing and promoting local history, economy and geology, as well as arts and crafts that are allegedly typical of the region. Its aim is to carve out a specific profile for the administrative, historical or geographic area. See Victoria Donovan: »How well do you know your *Krai*? The *Kraevedenie* Revival and Patriotic Politics in Late Khrushchev Era Russia«, in: *Slavic Review* 74 (2015) 3, pp. 464-483, see p. 464.

33 See Keinashvili: *Museum of Peoples' Friendship* (footnote 4), p. 6.

34 See ibid.

emy of Sciences of the Georgian SSR,[35] since the museum was part of the Academy system. The earlier history of the Georgian-Russian friendship was omitted from the story,[36] supposedly to avoid depicting Georgia as a protégée of Russia. This was justified by pointing to the issue of limited space.[37] Priority was given to celebrating the military friendship between the peoples of the Soviet Union: primarily Georgians and Russians.

For the parallel exhibition at the State Museum, which covered the entire Soviet period, discussions relating to the exhibition layout touch upon the linkage between late modern history, the so-called bourgeois period and Sovietisation.[38] At issue in the exhibition was an attempt to accentuate the progressive influence of Russian intellectual spaces in inspiring and empowering the political consciousness in Georgia during Tsarism – a political consciousness that purportedly paved the way for the establishment of Soviet power. A large part of the Soviet section was devoted to depicting the Georgian SSR during the war. As one of its most remarkable exhibition pieces, it displayed a pistol belonging to Vasil Mzhavanadze, who was the former First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Georgian SSR[39] from 1953 to 1972.[40]

In contrast, the focus of the military friendship exhibition at the Druzhba was the story of shared sacrifice as told through photographs, bodies moving through the space and emotional experiences amplified by sound effects as well as lighting, all of which created an aura of authentic history conveyed by war participants and their close relatives. The female guides, always exquisitely dressed and with perfect make-up,[41] functioned not merely as transmitters of the story, but also as integral parts of it. This marked a shift from the ›argumentative mode‹ of informing visitors to the ›storytell-

35 See ibid.

36 See interview with Elene Kiasashvili, conducted by Ana Lolua on 06.03.2022.

37 See Ana Lolua: Notes of the recollections of the museum archivist during the ethnographic observation, 02.06.2021.

38 See AAGNM, opis 1, file 2545, Protocol #3 of the session of the scientific council of Simon Janashia Georgian State Museum (27.06.1966), pp. 79-80.

39 The Druzhba leadership dissociated itself from Mzhavanadze's legacy, which was tainted by corruption scandals.

40 See Ana Lolua: Notes (footnote 37).

41 See interview with Gunda Kartsivadze, conducted by Ana Lolua on 05.06.2021.

ing mode‹.[42] Objects were presented here not as material evidence of some historical truth – so typical for the representational grammar of the State Museum – but rather as vehicles of a deeply emotionalising performance. In this respect, they should be viewed as specific ways of being in the museum space, rather than as media of representation, which is the perception that is so prevalent in modern museum studies.

Badurashvili's approach was similar to that of Sekelj, who sought to renounce the »traditional fetishization of objects in display cases and advocated the use of new technologies for creating a more immersive visitor experience«.[43] The difference between the two, however, was significant: While Sekelj was invested in contemplating the theoretical tenets of new museology and sought to use the latest transdisciplinary forms of exhibition to erase the boundaries between cultures,[44] Badurashvili's aim in this new exhibition spectacle was to demonstrate Georgia's outstanding contribution to the fight against Nazism and its leading role as a supporter of brotherhood between peoples.

The overarching linear story of military friendship from the fascist invasion of the Soviet Union to the victory of the Red Army was broken down into shorter stories that former employees still refer to as legends. My respondents use the term »legend« – instead of »story« or »myth«[45] – with an ironic twist to it, thereby implying that one doesn't have to believe every single part of it to be moved by it.[46] Legends have plots, of course, but at the same time they carry another fundamental layer: they are emotionally intense and meaningful, more sublime than the factual truth. »›You have to make visitors cry, I need tears‹, Teimuraz Badurashvili used to tell us«.[47] Legends create bonds of kinship that are experienced and passed on from one body to another through ritualised practices and a spontaneous release of feelings. Irony serves here as a conduit between the »normalized«[48] and the informal.

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42 See Andrea Kramper: *Storytelling für Museen. Herausforderungen und Chancen*, Bielefeld: transcipt 2017, pp. 41-44.

43 Videkanic: *Nonaligned Modernism* (footnote 12), p. 112.

44 See ibid., p. 174.

45 Myth often has a negative connotation in the Georgian context and often denotes something fictitious or rather fake.

46 See interview with Gunda Kartsivadze (footnote 41).

47 Ibid.

48 Alexei Yurchak: *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More, The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005, pp. 54-57.

A former guide, Gunda Kartsivadze, remarks that Teimuraz Badurashvili had a great sense of humour: »He liked exaggeration. We did not always take this friendship thing seriously, just like the fact that we had to fish around for the traces of friendship everywhere«.[49] At the same time, as Dimitri Shvelidze recounts: »Visitors liked the friendly atmosphere of the exhibition. It was nice. It was all about kindness among the people«.[50] From time to time, the exhibition hosted young pioneer recruits for their first oath-taking ceremony,[51] during which, as was the case with veteran visits and highly performative guided tours, human bodies were transformed into living artefacts.

The discomfort associated with Stalin's underwhelming presence at the exhibition was an issue that had to be addressed by the main curator and director of the museum, Badurashvili. There was no bust, let alone a statue of the generalissimo, nor was there any grandiose portrait that could function as the object of veneration – such objects usually took up a central place in the exhibition space and confronted visitors immediately upon entering. Stalin, a revolutionary who defeated both the Tsarist colonisers and later the Nazis, was a source of national pride for his fellow Georgians.[52] In their minds, he was now being unfairly thrown into the dustbin of history by his uncanny successor, comrade Khrushchev. As a result, Stalin turned into a symbol of triumphant victimhood.

In the visual poetics of the Druzhba, Stalin's presence was substituted by large and gloomy images of grieving mothers displayed in the so-called hall of *Mourning Mothers*,[53] which was weakly lit by a red light. Although not the concluding part, this section is where the narrative in fact reached its apex, which was designed to allow the visitors to finally release the tension they might be feeling. In this case, the mother was a more complex archetype than just a substitute for a missing father. The exhibition organisers drew on

49 Interview with Gunda Kartsivadze (footnote 41).

50 Interview with Dimitri Shvelidze, conducted by Ana Lolua on 07.06.2021.

51 See Keinashvili: *Museum of Peoples' Friendship* (footnote 4), p. 29.

52 Lasha Bakradze: »Georgia and Stalin, Still Living With the Great Son of the Nation«, in: Maria Lipman/Lev Gudkov/Lasha Bakradze/Thomas de Waal (ed.): *The Stalin Puzzle, Deciphering Post-Soviet Public Opinion*, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2013, pp. 47-54, see pp. 47-49.

53 Spartak Rekhviashvili: *The Hearth of the International Upbringing and Brotherhood*, Tbilisi: Ganatleba Publishing 1984, p. 4; სპარტაკ რეხვიაშვილი: ინტერნაციონალური აღზრდისა და ძმობის კერა, თბილისი: გამომცემლობა ›განათლება‹ 1984, გვ. 4.

the post-war Soviet repertoire in which sunny Georgia figured as a cradle of hospitality, thus transforming the ›grieving mother‹ into a Georgian mother whose loving arms were open to all.

The space depicted twelve women in grief. In a way, the entire hall recreated a shrine and invited visitors to engage in a metaphysical experience of worship. The door frame was low, which meant that when entering the space, visitors would need to bow their heads down and pay respect to the images spread across the walls like icons on an altar. Helmets, bullets and shells mounted on a low platform alluded to the ancient grave of a hero warrior laid to rest with his army inventory in hand as an expression of his dignity. The installation of a traditional hearth, symbolising the eternal value of national martyrdom and the need for its regeneration, served as a connecting element between the walls covered with photographs of grieving mothers.[54] These were, in principle, women of different nationalities,[55] spanning the spectrum from a Georgian mother to a mother of Slavic origin or an Abkhazian mother, though the *Georgianness* of the heroic grief was highlighted through the exhibition scenography.[56] The curators engaged with different media, such as national chants and the slideshow of images on the front wall, including the projection of a sculpture called *Should they grow again*. The motif of the sculpture was taken from Georgian folk poetry.[57]

This exhibition corner, in my opinion, contributed most to shifting the Soviet frame of history into an increasingly nationalist one: telling a Georgian story through the provincialisation of the Soviet centre.

54 See ibid.

55 One of the images featured the Dutch woman Cornelia Boon-Verberg, referred to as the ›mother of Georgians‹ for helping Georgians who were participating in the uprising on Texel in 1945. See Rekhviashvili: *The Hearth of the International Upbringing* (footnote 53), p. 169.

56 See Ana Lolua: *Representation of Women in the Exhibitions Dedicated to the Great Patriotic War, the Late Socialist Period in Georgia*, Tbilisi: Heinrich Boell Foundation 2020, p. 22.

57 See ibid., p. 23.

From the Repositories to the Exhibition: Collecting, Imagining and Exposing

Just as exhibitions represent another stage for the communication and production of history,[58] stories are also created, conveyed and embodied in collections, which in turn often form the basis for exhibitions. The collecting efforts of the Druzhba concentrated not just on the topic of military history, but also on cultural, scientific and literary exchanges between Georgia, Russia and the wider socialist bloc. Museum workers with backgrounds mostly in the humanities – literary scholars, historians and linguists – travelled abroad to collect available information about ›creative intelligentsia‹ who were related to Georgia and who, consequently, were placed under the spotlight. Some authors whose private archives the museum tried to acquire were still censored in Moscow and Leningrad.

For example, Elene Kiasashvili, a former senior researcher and head of the exhibition department, recalls her experience of acquiring, together with her colleague Maria Filina, Boris Pasternak's archive in Moscow. Pasternak was a Nobel Prize-winning Russian author, best known for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, but an outsider to the Soviet mainstream. Because he was demonised both for his antisocial writing and for his ties to the Western publishing industry, the KGB actively pursued his literary legacy even after Stalin's death.

As Elene Kiasashvili noted: »The Museum had connections with Pasternak's mistress and when we learned she was selling it, we immediately set off to seize the opportunity«.[59] Kiasashvili's background in literary studies allowed her to analyse all four phases of the Russian author's translation of Georgian poetry: the original text, word for word prosaic translations provided to Pasternak by his Georgian colleagues, the first poetic draft by Pasternak and, lastly, the final version. The museum soon became a kind of counter-archive and counter-space, as its young and energetic staff lived the experience of Russian and European modernism, which was slowly emerging on the horizon in the form of an experience limited to a relatively small number of people and spread mainly through informal networks.

58 See Ekaterina Makhotina: *Erinnerungen and den Krieg – Krieg der Erinnerungen: Litauen und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2016, p. 22.

59 Interview with Elene Kiasashvili, conducted by Ana Lolua on 06.03.2022.

When historiographical orthodoxies began to rearrange themselves during perestroika, the oppressed writers emerged as one of the first and most prominent victim groups. The Druzhba was the first institution to museumise the suffering of the literary vanguard, packaged subtly in a two-layered wrapper of Soviet multi-nationalism and Georgian nationalism. The early 1980s inclusion of Boris Pasternak in the memorial museum devoted to his close friend, Georgian writer Titsian Tabidze,[60] a victim of the Great Terror, is equally symptomatic in this regard. The memorial museum of Titsian Tabidze constituted one of the Druzhba branches.

Museum workers at the Druzhba, together with their colleagues from the State Museum, were diligently collecting print material and objects relating to the topic of pre-revolutionary comradeship. However, the act of organising a permanent exhibition focussing on the Russian-Georgian brotherhood from an historical perspective became rather uncomfortable for the staff, as nationalist unrest gained momentum, affecting the centre-periphery dynamics between the Kremlin and Tbilisi, as well as between Tbilisi and the regions.

While the deeper history of Georgian-Russian relations was left out, the revolutionary period was finally incorporated only in 1987 into the permanent exhibition dedicated to the 70th anniversary of October Revolution.[61] However, the topic had been subtly thematised in earlier temporary exhibitions organised by the Druzhba in the 1970s, mostly outside Tbilisi. Dimitri Shvelidze recalls:

> I was looking for relevant material to illustrate friendly relations of Georgians with their neighbours, mostly the revolutionaries, *narodniki*, the revolutionary democrats, etc. […] As a student I had accidentally discovered Varlam Cherkezishvili, a remarkable man, a world-famous leader of the anarchist movement, thank God that I am the one who introduced him into our national memory. […] I knew that he had published a book in Geneva, which was kept at the museum of ancient books in Moscow. […] These were times when, even for a single photo, we, the museum staff, were sent to Moscow. […]

60 See the Georgian Public Broadcasting Archive [GPBA], Memorial House-Museum of Titsian Tabidze, montage material (date unknown), cassette # F6-304, timecode 00.03.07.

61 See the Administrative Archives of the Georgian National Museum Tbilisi [AAGNM], Opis 1, file 5217, Explanatory note of the commission appointed by the decree # 2 of the director of the Georgian State Museum (date unknown), p. 63.

> There was money, so I made up a reason and eventually discovered a unique photo taken in Geneva. He is posing with the founders of the federalist party in this photo. This was the first time they made it to the exhibition wall. You may ask: How did an anarchist appear next to Bolsheviks? I told Teimuraz Badurashvili, showing him the photocopy of the relevant parts from Stalin's work ›Anarchism or Socialism?‹: »Look, we must show the guy Stalin had arguments with«. Hesitating initially, he then agreed, and I managed to display the photograph. […] This is how we fed our patriotic egos, through popularising historical figures hitherto unknown to the society.[62]

Due to the lack of original objects, most expositions predominantly relied on photographs as key artefacts to convey the story, serving here as witnesses to historical events. The rationale behind this approach was not always a deliberate curatorial decision, however. Instead, the photographs could have been used as key elements within the exhibition narrative in order to maintain its consistency and credibility.

Shvelidze's memories also testify to the fact that the exhibits, in this case photographs as objects, were closely linked to the curators' professional backgrounds as well as to their personal pursuit of wonder, pride and creativity. Armed with institutional resources, these individuals navigated their peripheral position by employing diverse strategies of resilience and survival in their collecting and exhibiting efforts, which were also shaped by the existing historical context. This approach then made it possible for individuals to follow their own unique paths. Exhibitions, in this case, propel us to shift our focus from ideas to practices guided by the complex entanglements of individual motivations, professional trajectories and materials. In this sense, the examples discussed above modestly attempt to show how frictions arising on uneven terrain were exploited and flattened by historical actors on the ground, who in the process regained agency and engaged meaningfully with socio-political agendas at the level of the Soviet Union as well as at the local level of the Georgian SSR.

62 Interview with Dimitri Shvelidze (footnote 50).