

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Joseph Battat
Mary Lynne Bird
Steven Butler
William F. Foote
Kitty Hempstone
Pramila Jayapal
Peter Bird Martin
Ann Mische
Dasa Obereigner
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
Chandler Rosenberger
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

GF-17
EUROPE/RUSSIA

Gregory Feifer is an Institute Donors' Fellow studying the current political and cultural reshaping of Russia.

Georgia's Rock and Hard Place

By Gregory Feifer

MAY 2001

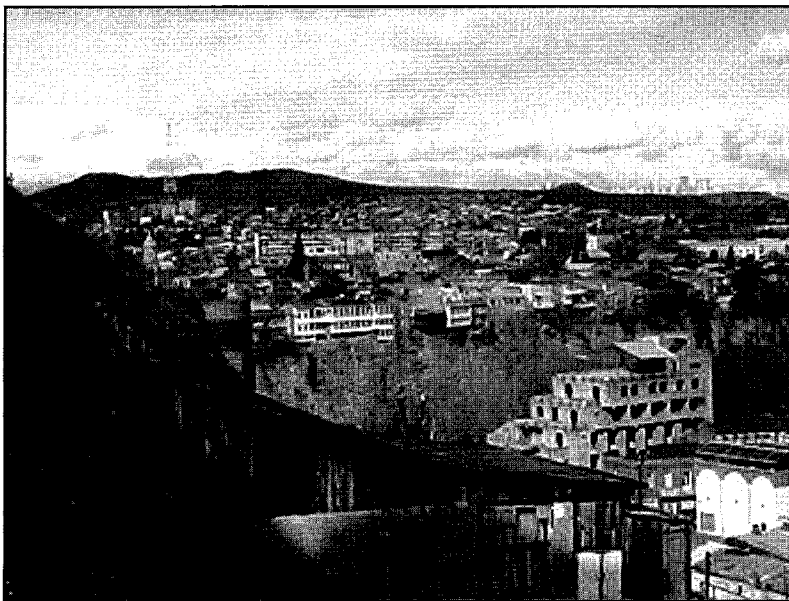
TBILISI, Georgia—I have found over the past two or so years that Russian airports often provide a general indicator of the country's relations with other states. When tensions between Moscow and Washington increase, for example, foreigners on flights from the United States find themselves waiting longer than usual to pass through customs in the dingy halls of Moscow's hated Sheremetyevo airport. (Instead of the three or four open passport control windows, passengers face queuing up at only one or two).

So there can be no mistaking how the Kremlin feels about Georgia, the former Soviet republic and Russia's neighbor to the south. Arriving in Moscow at the ancient, Stalin-era Vnukovo airport—little changed since its heyday, with communist slogans on its walls and no place to sit in its dingy main halls—Georgian men are separated from women and children and forced to stand in a separate line. Most new arrivals are cowed by this new gender-cleansing policy, proof of its effectiveness in delivering its message of total contempt. Those bold enough to ask why, or go so far as to protest are silenced by stern customs officials menacing the travelers with outright barred entry. "Aren't I speaking Russian?!" barked one customs official, a young woman, at an elderly man who tenaciously remained in line with his frail wife and toddler granddaughter. "Don't you understand I told you to stand in that line and shut up?!" she said, pointing to the much slower-moving line for men. (The fact that Georgians—who have their own language that uses an entirely different script—are expected to understand Russian, which of course they do, is a not-so-subtle constant reminder of status.)

Ukraine enjoys much better relations with Russia. When planes arrive from Kiev, those Georgians unlucky enough to still be waiting at passport control must stand back while the new passengers move into line ahead of them. Ukrainians aren't separated by sex and even get expedited service (not out of courtesy, I suspect, but in a further snub to Georgian onlookers.)

Such harassment—which, needless to say, affects only innocent citizens and not policy-makers—is in line with a new Russian visa requirement for Georgians. Both are part of the Kremlin's effort to show its displeasure that a former subject state has entertained notions of befriending the West at the expense of its ties to Russia. Moscow is especially angry that Tbilisi refused to allow Russian soldiers fighting in the Chechen campaign onto Georgian soil (after the Russian government claimed Georgia was aiding the separatist rebels on its northern border with the breakaway Russian republic).

This displeasure serves as a pretext for realizing larger goals. Even under the Yeltsin regime, Russia aimed to sow instability within its southern neighbor. Acting as a kind of benevolent gendarme, the reasoning went, Moscow could re-assert some of the influence it lost after the Soviet collapse. The ruse worked, and pressure exerted under Putin is continuing to help increase Moscow's leverage in the Southern Caucasus. It is also proving ruinous for Georgia and—some say—threatens to turn the festering campaign in Chechnya into a larger, region-wide conflict that might engulf Georgia. Under the circumstances, Georgia is hobbling along, kept afloat by western aid and vague promises of sup-



Old town Tbilisi from the site of the Narikala fortress ruins

port. On the homefront, the country's 1991 short-lived civil war has developed into an uneasy standoff between Tbilisi and two Moscow-backed Georgian breakaway regions. As a whole, Georgia, once a vibrant state—the most affluent of the Soviet republics in its day—is now suffering humiliation and decay.

It seems there's little Georgia can do to change the situation. Moscow's menace hampers the country from courting the West for protection and investment, and forces Tbilisi into an uneasy relationship with its northern neighbor. The country's increasingly desperate geopolitical dilemma seems especially tragic to the visitor. The Southern Caucasus country is ruggedly beautiful and its warm climate Mediterranean-like. Georgian food, with eggplant and kebabs and pungent sauces, is unique and delectable. Georgians are also known for their fierce sense of independence, and legendary hospitality. (A Geor-

gian dinner party lasts many hours and comprises novel-length toasts, liters of wine and heaping plates of food.) Despite the country's isolation, crumbling Tbilisi also shows hints of cosmopolitanism. While men generally wear mafia-style black trousers and black leather jackets, women dress stylishly. That's no mean feat in a country in which the average monthly wage comes to a little over \$35. Despite its crushing woes, Georgia remains lively and vital. The yawning gap between its seeming potential and the sad reality that things are bad and getting worse makes the country's trouble appear more all the more tragic and senseless.

Tbilisi

Georgia's Russian dilemma is by no means new. The country has had close ties with Russia for centuries, not least because both share Orthodox Christianity as dominant religions. (To this day, Georgians remain proud of having adopted Christianity almost 700 years before their Slav neighbors). Russia and Georgia also cooperated against attacks from the Ottoman Empire and other strategic rivals such as Persia.

Nestled between Russia to the north, Turkey to the south, the Black Sea to the west and Armenia and Azerbaijan to the east, Georgia, with a population of about five million, stands on the southern edge of the Caucasus Mountains—a geological, cultural and political fault line separating Asia and Europe. The main glacier-capped ridge rises to over 5,000 meters. Further south, foothills and alpine meadows give way to a central lowland stretching to lush subtropical forests in West Georgia. The region's largest river, the Mtkvari, flows through Tbilisi and into the Caspian Sea beyond Azerbaijan to the west. The country's position at the center of the Caucasus has always ensured it regional importance. It's no accident Tbilisi has been sacked around 30 times in the past 1,500 years and has been home to Persians, Turks, Mongols and Russians.

Despite the capital's desperate poverty, the city is doing its best to put on a brave face. Its newly renovated airport may not boast marble or western amenities. The green-plastic molded counters hint at a desire to move beyond the country's recent history. One needn't look far for that. The airport's outer façade is unfriendly, grim-looking

and Stalinist. Driving into the city, it's also clear the airport interior's nod to efficiency is an anomaly. Cows and sheep often cross the road, forcing the trickle of traffic to stop—but it's hard to think it as anything but charming. The sight is picturesque, set amid fields with flowering trees and stunning steep hills that surround Tbilisi. The capital, lying just below the snow-capped Caucasus Mountains, exudes an air of southern ease.

My sense of serenity was abruptly ended by the sight of a towering, Soviet-obelisk-like structure: the unmistakable handiwork of native son Zurab Tseretelli, the sculptor and painter whose works now clutter the most prominent of Moscow's public spaces. A number of Tseretelli's earlier works also scar the Georgian capital. (Public opinion in Tbilisi is divided—some hate him, others just don't care much about art of any kind one way or the other.)

Closer to the city stand the requisite Soviet concrete-slab slums. Only these are *really* run down, more so than



Hills rising above the streets of downtown Tbilisi

usual. The water-stained concrete is crumbling and laundry hangs everywhere. The state of disrepair is due to Georgia's poverty, of course, but I surmise it also reflects a way of life. In the frigid Russian winter, the concrete slabs must remain in minimal working order to shelter their occupants from the elements. Perhaps Georgians can afford to let their variety decay more because of their kinder climate.

As I reach the city center, driving down the left (north) bank of the Mtkvari River before crossing a bridge to the city center, the architecture changes to wooden-framed

houses with large, covered porticos and latticework. The structures resemble those of Istanbul's old city. Some of the houses jut out over a length of cliffs along the river, forming a Tbilisi landmark. The city's heart lies across the water, nestled peacefully in a gorge whose looming greenness contrasts almost too quaintly with terracotta tiled roofs.

In the center of town you come upon Freedom Square, where a statue of Lenin once graced a patch of scrubby grass in the middle of a large traffic roundabout. The square is now empty. Long, squat neoclassical three-story buildings dominate here. On one side stands the town hall. On another, new buildings are slowly replacing those bombed in 1991. The men hanging out—as I noted, almost exclusively in leather jackets—give a slightly menacing air, but the atmosphere is generally relaxed.

I'm starving and the concierge in the tiny hotel in which I'm staying leads me across several narrow, ancient meandering alleys and courtyards and through the back entrance of a dank-smelling Soviet-era food shop to show me a place to eat. "It's faster this way," she explains, excusing the informality. (Walking down the much-more-manicured street would have taken at least an extra two minutes). We pass a courtyard with a middle-aged woman beating a carpet and loudly chiding a small group of sheepish-looking teenaged boys. I'm struck by the seeming difference between the stubborn, impoverished nobility of Tbilisi's old streets, the majesty of the city's surrounds and the dark shadow of poverty and isolation.

I eschew the brand-new, neon-and-glass-fronted res-

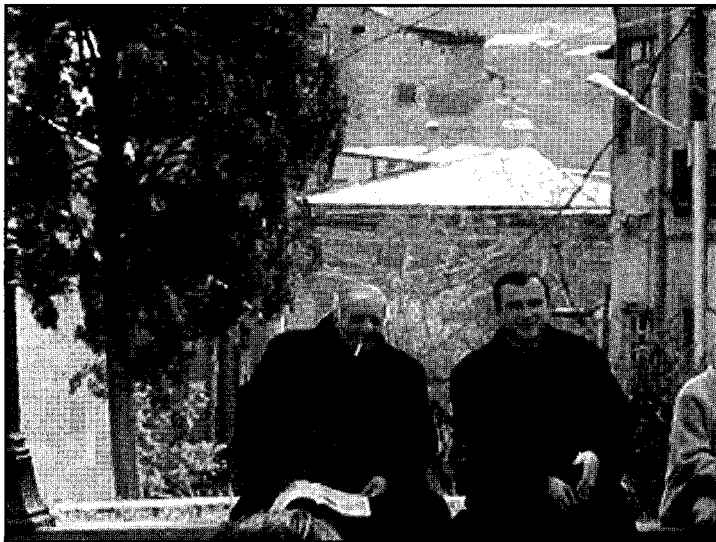


One of many shack abodes cobbled together by Tbilisi residents

taurant she's recommended and walk instead into an empty, cold, cellar restaurant. The food here is worth the trip alone. I order *khachapuri* (unleavened bread baked with tart cheese inside), lamb kebab, and red *lobio* (kidney-bean sauce). Together with a dirt-cheap bottle of red Mukuzani wine—which is oaky and takes some getting used to—it's absolutely delicious. The ingredients are simple but spicy and pungent and expertly prepared. They seem similar to Turkish and other Mediterranean fare, but Georgian food is unique.

I take the long route back to my hotel, through a mixture of neoclassical, baroque and Turkish-looking architecture. Tbilisi's biggest main streets boast the requisite western boutiques and western-style stores, but the city chiefly consists of run-down buildings. Whole sections of beautifully ornate old town buildings are crumbling. Children run around most sunlit streets. A number of structures—especially on the southern side, where the city climbs up and then tapers off into a long hill—are little more than shantytown shacks, with bits of tin and plywood plugging holes of old stone and wooden houses. Even some of the roads themselves consist half of crumbling asphalt, half of dirt. Small parts of downtown still show signs of the gunfighting that took place here only ten years ago. I'm reminded of the precariousness of the situation when I hear two gunshots the following day.

In the late afternoon, the capital's main streets fill with strollers walking in and out of shops and restaurants. One evening, groups of people, mostly children, piled pieces of wood in the middle of streets all over town and lit small bonfires. The younger children jumped over the flames gleefully while older generations stood around watching. It was part of an annual springtime pagan ritual meant to chase away evil spirits. The fact that Georgians are fiercely



A typical sight: an easy moment on the capital's main street, Rustaveli Avenue

proud of their Christianity doesn't preclude them from celebrating old Zoroastrian-influenced (fire-worshipping) and other pagan rituals. New customs have also arisen. When the lights go suddenly on after electricity is restored, Tbilisi residents cheer and applaud. (That once happened inside a small, shabby shop one afternoon when I was trying to make out the name on a tube of toothpaste. I felt triumphant when I could read it.)

Ancient History

Part of Georgia's massive appeal is its history and mythology. Indeed, several Greek myths are set in the Georgian Caucasus. Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods, was chained to Mt. Kazbek, where an eagle tore out his liver every day for eternity. Jason and the Argonauts searched for the Golden Fleece in the land of Colchis, now Kolkheti, in West Georgia.

Long before the birth of Christ, the region was torn apart by Assyrian, Macedonian, Parthian, Byzantine and Arab empires. Ottomans, Persians and Russians have butted heads here for centuries. Russians first invaded the South Caucasus in the 18th century, calling the lands Zakavkazye (Transcaucasia), literally "beyond the Caucasus." Amid the fighting, however, independent kingdoms and autonomous principalities rose and flourished and laid the foundations for modern Georgia.

The first proto-Georgian tribes were descended from Indo-Europeans who migrated through the region from the steppes north of the Caucasus. Assyrian chronicles first mention the tribes, who were also known to ancient Greeks colonizing the Black Sea coast in the eighth to sixth centuries BC. After domination by Symmerian and Scythian tribes of horsemen and then Achaemenid Persians, Georgia's two largest kingdoms, Iberia and Colchis, were united in the third century BC under King Parnavaz, supposedly a descendant of Kartlos, the legendary progenitor of the Georgian people.

The Romans dominated the area in the last century BC. Iberia converted to Christianity in the first century AD, before falling under Persian control. (The western-lying Colchis, meanwhile, remained tied to Constantinople.) In 888, Adanese IV, a descendant of Ashot Bagrationi, an Armenian prince, became king of the Iberian Kartli province, establishing the Bagratid dynasty that dominated Georgia for centuries. His descendant Bagrat III united the principalities of eastern and western Georgia, and under Bagrat IV, Georgia became one of the major powers of the Caucasus, managing to fight off attacks by the Seljuk Turks, who came out of Central Asia and took over Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia.

Georgian art and literature and architecture flourished in the 12th century, after the Bagratid King David II finally defeated the Seljuks in 1121 and recaptured Tbilisi from Arab invaders. The Georgian State Art Museum provides testament to the region's cultural wealth of the time, with

robes, icons, chalices, ornate altar crosses and other objects clearly showing Byzantine, Turkish and Persian influences (most striking are carpet-like designs of semi-precious stones laid into icon frames).

Georgian culture reached its peak under David's great-granddaughter, Queen Tamar. Then followed attacks by Mongol horsemen in the 1220s and '30s. Later, the fall of Constantinople in 1453 marked the rise of the Ottoman Empire, which fought the Persian Safavid dynasty for control over the Southern Caucasus. It was this strategic conflict that later pushed Georgians toward the Russian Empire, which extended its grip south of the Caucasus in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1783, to help fend off Persian and Ottoman rule, Georgia's Erkele II signed the Treaty of Gorgevsk, which accepted Russian suzerainty over Georgia in return for protection.

The Russians failed to keep their end of the bargain. Rebellion in Chechnya in 1785 forced Catherine II to pull troops out of the area, and Tbilisi was sacked by the Persian army of Shah Agha Mohammed Khan in 1795. But Russian foot soldiers soon returned—and again broke the agreement with Georgia, this time by taking control outright. In 1801, Russia abolished the Bagratid monarchy and annexed the Georgian principalities one by one. Nineteenth-century treaties with the Persian Empire ceded Georgia to Russia, creating the divisions that exist to this day.

Despite having swallowed Georgia, Russia couldn't pacify the Caucasus until late in the 19th century, and then only through barbaric policies of felling forests, burning crops, destroying villages and deporting locals. That repression left a legacy of hatreds that are still remembered today. In the interim, Georgia experienced a few fleeting moments of independence.

That occurred after the Russian Revolution of 1917, which led to a scramble for power. The Federal republic of Transcaucasia (led by members of Georgia's Menshevik Party from its capital in Tbilisi, together with Armenia's nationalist Dashnak movement and the Azeri Musavat Party) declared independence in April 1918. Five weeks later, the federation split into the three separate republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Azeri capital of Baku remained in Bolshevik hands, however, and by 1922, the three republics were once again subjugated and incorporated into the so-called Transcaucasian Soviet Federalist Republic.

The large, artificial state didn't last long. Stalin's policy of divide-and-rule resulted in yet more artificial regions that were given autonomy (and helped create ethnic tensions that are playing out today, such as the Armenian and Azeri conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.) In the coming years, Georgia suffered heavily under Stalin, despite the fact that many high-ranking Communists were Georgian—including Stalin himself (born Ordzhonikidze) and the feared secret police chief Lavrenty Beria. In 1924, an insurrection was ferociously put down and some 5,000 people were executed.



A cross and flowers by a monument in front of the Georgian parliament building, where, on April 9, 1989, a number of demonstrators were massacred by Soviet soldiers.

During later purges, over 100,000 Georgians were exiled to Siberia.

Despite its fate at the hands of the Bolsheviks, Georgia became a prosperous republic by Soviet standards. Georgians were on the whole wealthier than their fellow comrades, and under the more sedate years of Brezhnev's rule, the republic became a favored holiday spot with its lush orchards, snow-capped mountains, Black Sea beaches—and of course the famous Georgian food and wine. Georgia also profited because it was one of the few Soviet producers of wine, brandy, and fruit. A ban on travel beyond the Soviet Union's borders also meant that Georgia attracted a steady stream of Soviet tourists.

Ironically, Georgia's favored conditions helped set the country up for hard times with the Soviet demise. Forced isolation in the shoddy Soviet economy meant that by the late 1980s, Georgian products were hopelessly uncompetitive on world markets. Even more disastrous have been the moral and cultural effects of Soviet rule. Georgian products were prized on the Soviet black market, which grew enormously during the Brezhnev years. Combined with local traditions of defiant individualism and contempt of state authority, these factors allowed Georgians to play a leading part in the criminal economy. Under Soviet rule, that contributed to the Georgians' high living standards. But the cynicism bred by Communist laws and rules also helped feed contempt for officialdom that blossomed under independence.

In recent years, corruption has become a way of life. The population fails to turn to the state for services or law enforcement. In turn, Georgians

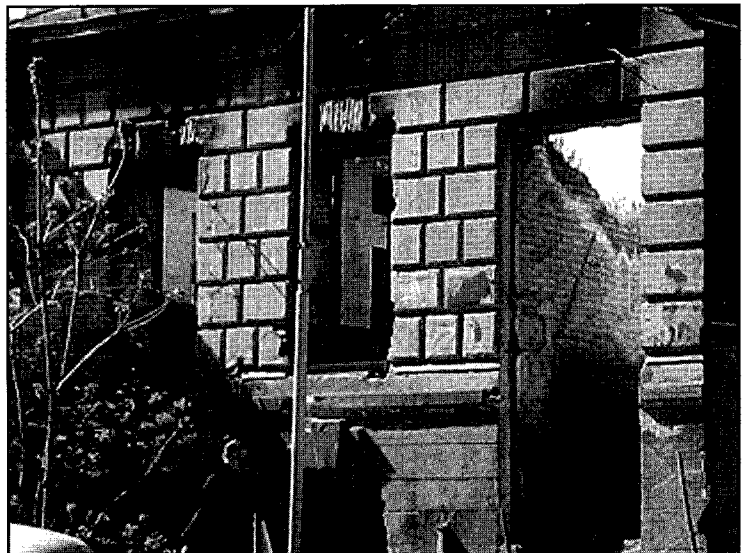
avoid paying taxes when they can. Under the resulting feudalistic system, strength—financial and physical—or protection of some kind is a necessary element of survival.

Tenacious Independence

Georgia gained independence with the Soviet collapse in 1991. Of all the regions in the ruined U.S.S.R., it was expected that Georgia would flourish most. But Tbilisi's celebrations of statehood were drowned out by the sounds of heavy street fighting that began in December 1991, when rebel national guards and other paramilitary forces battled in the city center to throw out President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. A military council succeeded in taking power and Gamsakhurdia fled to

Chechnya. The new authorities soon ceded power to a civil state council, which former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze agreed to head. Shevardnadze had once led Georgia as First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party until Mikhail Gorbachev made him Soviet foreign minister in 1985. He earned high international standing as a proponent of Gorbachev's liberal policies of perestroika and glasnost, and managed to use his status to bring a measure of respectability to the new Georgian government. Shevardnadze was soon popularly elected chairman of parliament and head of state, officially ending Gamsakhurdia's rule.

Tensions did not abate. During the four years after the military coup in 1991, armed bands roamed the countryside. Tbilisi itself became dominated by rival mafia groups.

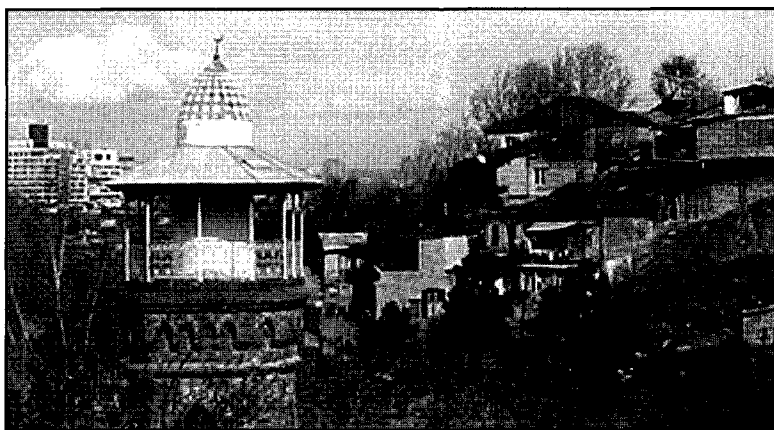


1991's legacy: a bombed-out building directly behind the parliament in the heart of downtown.

Many feared the country would disintegrate into small fiefdoms. At the same time, fighting also escalated between Georgians and Ossetians, who occupied one of Georgia's northern regions, South Ossetia. In 1992, even more serious fighting erupted in the northwestern region of Abkhazia.

In September 1993, Georgia suffered a comprehensive defeat in Abkhazia. It was then that Gamsakhurdia staged a bid to come back to power. Using Abkhazia as a base, his motley troops pushed toward Georgia's western second city of Kutaisi. Georgia's army had all but disintegrated by then and Shevardnadze faced a bitter prospect. He had little option but to call on Moscow for help, even though Russian troops were already stationed in Abkhazia, and had fought on the side of the Abkhaz. In return, Shevardnadze was obliged to commit Georgia to joining the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the loose confederation of former Soviet states essentially headed by Russia. Shevardnadze also agreed that Russia could maintain military bases in Georgia. At the time, many Georgians saw the moves as tantamount to placing the country back in Moscow's heavy-handed sphere of influence.

Gamsakhurdia died in December 1993 under mysterious circumstances, and the part of the civil war for which he was responsible sputtered out. A "low-intensity" conflict with Abkhazia still continues, however. The war has also produced another acute problem. Over 250,000 Georgians (plus several thousand Armenians, Russians, Greeks and others) fled Abkhazia, many of them to other regions in Georgia, creating a large economic burden in a country already on the verge of collapse. Abkhazia still remains shut off from the rest of Georgia, a situation exacerbated by Russian actions. When Moscow imposed its visa regime on Georgia this year, for example, it exempted the regions

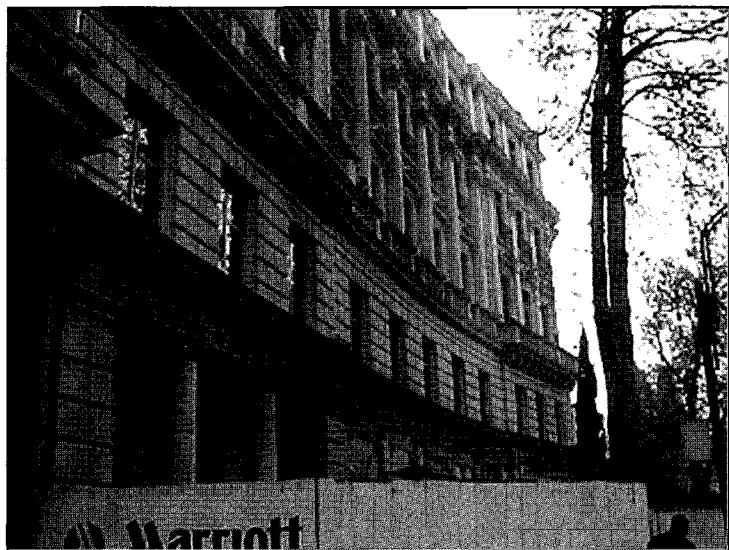


A 19th-century Sunni mosque, the only remaining one in Tbilisi

of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in a transparent bid to force the country apart.

Tbilisi's authority is barely felt in other parts of the country. One of these is the so-called autonomous republic of Ajaria, ruled by local strongman Aslan Abashidze. (It was telling that when the region kicked off its "Ajarian Autonomous Republic Days of Culture"—which lasted two days in mid-May this year—organizers held a Moscow news conference at no less validating a venue than the Russian government's culture committee.) The mountainous region of Svanetia is another "autonomous" area; and the Armenian-populated district of Akhalkalaki (also home to a Russian base) yet another.

Reminders of Georgia's separatist tendencies are hard to miss. The decrepit Iveria Hotel, looming over Tbilisi's main street, Rustaveli Boulevard (named after the poet), was never pretty. But the Soviet-era concrete-block eyesore of an Intourist hotel is now downright repulsive. Home to some of the thousands of refugees from Abkhazia now living in Tbilisi, its once-uniform balconies are now filled with plywood partitions and drying laundry.



The old Hotel Tbilisi, built in 1915 and ruined in 1991. Located on Rustaveli Avenue, it's now being rebuilt.

The 25-year-old maid at my tiny hotel is one of the refugees from Abkhazia. In a not uncommon tale reflecting Soviet demographic policy, her Estonian parents returned to their native country shortly after the Soviet collapse. Their daughter remained in Abkhazia, where she had lived most of her life. Eventually forced to flee to Tbilisi, she remains here, living as a second-class citizen snubbed by locals. Desperate to leave, she often breaks down in tears in front of the hotel's guests. One visitor told me that she had pleaded with him for \$200 to travel to Estonia with her young daughter. He gave it to her, but doubted her assurance that it would be enough to make the trip.

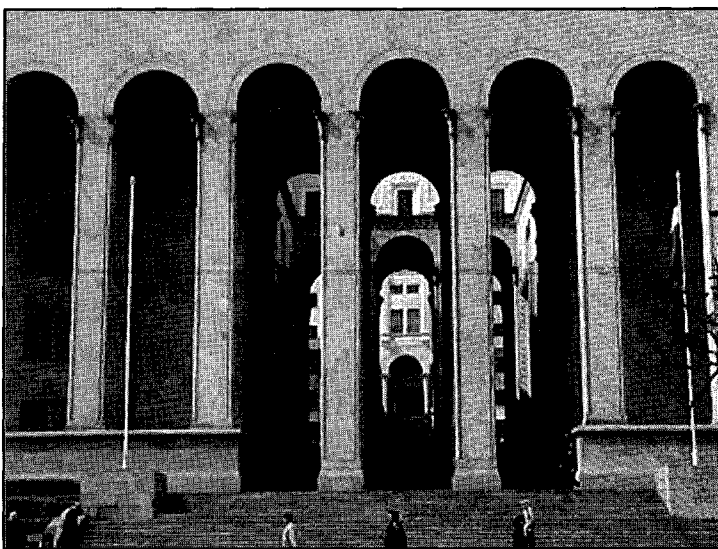
Looking West

Despite the refugees' plight in Tbilisi, Georgians pride themselves on their acceptance of others. It's not an unpragmatic policy. This is a frontier land

lodged between more powerful centers of power and has seen many different cultures vying for control. "Sure we like Russia," one Tbilisi native, a 45 year-old shopkeeper, told me. "There's a saying: a good neighbor is sometimes more important than a relative." (His words also help reveal the significance of kinship ties here.) "When I hear people saying disparaging things about Armenians and Azeris, I think of my Armenian and Azeri friends. There's no reason to be nationalistic. A neighbor can see what's going on and give help," the shopkeeper added, by way of conclusion.

In fact, Georgia's neighbors today are doing precious little to help. The country's production has come to a virtual standstill. The introduction of a new currency, the lari, was seriously mishandled, and when the country defaulted on its natural-gas bill to Turkmenistan in 1994, Tbilisi residents awoke one morning to find their gas switched off. That coincided with severe electricity cuts caused by a shortage of fuel resources and crumbling infrastructure.

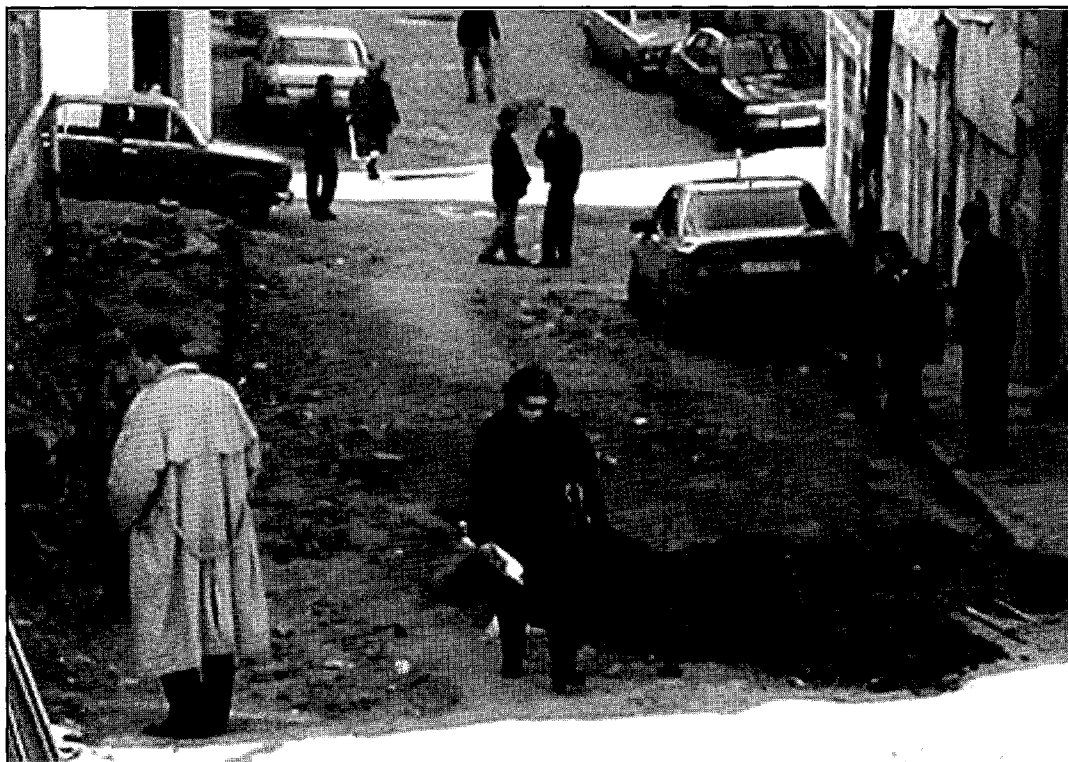
By 1995, however, Georgia saw an upturn in its miserable fortunes. That coincided with cooperation not with neighbors, but with more distant western countries. Shevardnadze had been working since 1992 to establish state institutions and integrate the country into the international community. In 1992, Georgia joined the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), became a member of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations. In later years, foreign embassies began to open in Tbilisi, and increasing num-



The grimly austere columns of the parliament building, completed in 1953. Former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia holed up here for two weeks until fleeing in early 1992.

bers of international flights began operating into and out of the capital.

The West, and especially the United States, has provided large sums of financial aid to Georgia, partly because of hostility to Russian attempts at broadening its hegemony, and partly because of continued gratitude to Shevardnadze for his role in helping end Soviet control over Eastern Europe in 1989-90. In recent years, Georgia has been the third largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world in per-capita terms. Much of the aid appears to have been stolen or otherwise



A gutted-looking old town street

squandered by the Georgian ruling elites, however.

At the same time, Russia's 1996 defeat in the first Chechen War and spiraling economic decline seemed to give Georgia a new chance to escape from Moscow's clutches. Simultaneously, U.S. interest in the Caucasus and western commitment to supporting Georgia and Azerbaijan against Russia increased. Georgia took advantage by distancing itself from Moscow and attempting to align itself with the West. Tbilisi reduced co-operation with the CIS to a minimum while helping establish a U.S.-sponsored counter-organization, the "GUUAM" (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Armenia and Moldova) group of former Soviet states. Georgia also participated in NATO's Partnership for Peace Program and proclaimed a desire to join NATO outright. At the same time, Tbilisi took steps to support the U.S. in the long-term battle for control of Caspian Sea oil by strongly endorsing a U.S.-backed plan to build a pipeline from Baku to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. That move particularly riled Moscow.

By 1995, despite ongoing assassinations, internal security had also slowly improved. In August that year, an assassination attempt against Shevardnadze almost succeeded when a car bomb exploded in the parliamentary yard. The notoriously corrupt chief of the Georgian Security Service, Igor Giorgadze, was blamed and fled to Russia. Soon after, Shevardnadze engineered the arrest of the two men accused of leading Tbilisi's criminal bands.

During parliamentary and presidential elections in November 1995, Shevardnadze landed the restored post of president. Despite some major setbacks—including another attempt on Shevardnadze's life in February 1998 and a flare-up of fighting in Abkhazia later in May—Georgia has since seen increased political stability, if not economic prosperity.

November 1995 saw the adoption of the country's constitution, which calls for a two-chamber parliament. (The upper house does not yet exist and will form only if Georgia's territorial integrity is restored.) The lower house of parliament is currently dominated by the Citizens' Union of Georgia, a reformist party that won an absolute majority in elections in October 1999. The so-called Zviadists, nationalist supporters of the late president Gamsakhurdia, still organize vocal street protests, but are a negligible force in formal politics.

Shevardnadze

Shevardnadze was re-elected president in April 2000. Western observers were dismayed by the evident massive

rigging of the elections, in which Shevardnadze officially received 79.8 percent of the vote on a 75.8 percent turnout. But despite such corruption, western countries, as well as most Georgians, feel Shevardnadze is the only credible alternative.

The 73-year-old president refused to take my telephone calls. But he did recently grant an interview to *The Washington Post*, saying he regretted nothing he did as Soviet foreign minister and partner to Mikhail Gorbachev. He said he also remains deeply concerned about Georgia's fate. "It is hard to believe that no guarantees for Georgia's security have been put in place this long after the Cold War ended," he told the *Post*. His caution when dealing with and speaking about Russia may reflect that concern. In the face of Putin's recent harsh economic and political pressure,



Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main boulevard, laid out in the 19th century.

Shevardnadze has avoided confrontation. "There is a nostalgia to rebuild the Soviet Union for some people in Russia," he allowed. "That creates problems."

Meanwhile, Shevardnadze maintains Georgia's right to join any alliance it wants—namely NATO. But his words betray a sense of helplessness. "The main question today is how the U.S.-Russia relationship will develop," Shevardnadze told the *Post*, adding that he had recently received a letter from U.S. President George Bush that had lifted his spirits. "The Bush letter contained a sort of a guarantee for us. It contained a reiteration of American commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity."

Georgian intellectuals understand Shevardnadze's tough position. "I like Shevvy," a canny television producer working for a western news agency told me, speaking of the president. She quickly added—speaking on condition of anonymity—that she respects Zurab Zhvania, the Georgian parliamentary speaker, even more. "But I'm in the mi-



The Hotel Iveria, Tbilisi's central eyesore, overrun by refugees

nority five percent," she said. "Most people don't like him because he's gay. He can't be a candidate."

"Georgians are very individualistic," the producer added. "They have to have a charismatic leader to unite them. And Shevardnadze is still that charismatic leader. He's the only Georgian politician who has some kind of status in the West."

Sadly, the producer's opinions seem to be the exception. Most of those to whom I spoke seem to have little care for the larger causes of their woes and the state of political affairs in general. (Georgia is certainly not alone among former Soviet states in that.) Poverty is usually attributed solely to a lack of will on the part of the government. "I liked Gamsakhurdia," one young woman told me. In the next breath, however, she cursed the Abkhaz civil war he exacerbated. "We can't continue to live like this."

Importance of Customs

Georgia's relatively exalted status under the Soviet Union adds a dimension to the psychological trauma today. "It used to be that if we went to Moscow, for example, we'd pay the restaurant bills and wave down taxis," said Badri Mikutadze, a well-dressed, middle-aged man who wouldn't elaborate on his profession further than saying he

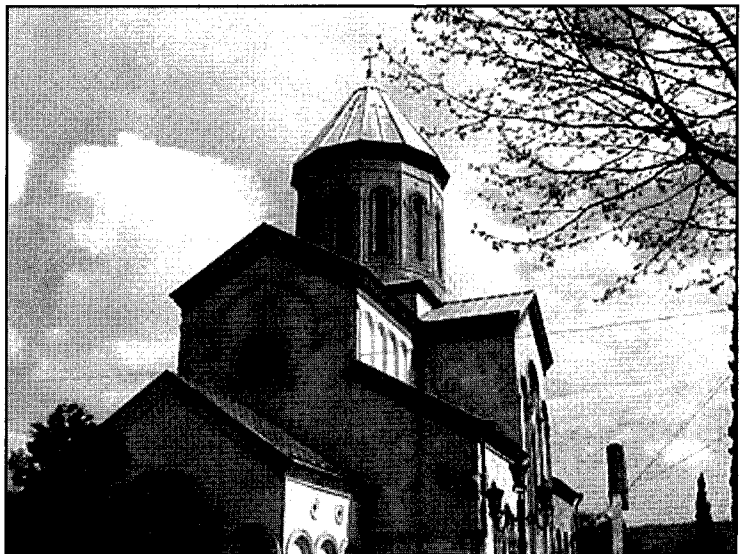
was a "businessman." ("You know you're dealing with a real Georgian if you haven't the faintest idea what he really does," a Moscow friend once told me.) "Now look at us," Mikutadze said. "No one ever used to take public transportation in Tbilisi. Everyone rode in taxis. We're unused to being poor and that change hurts us probably most of all."

Mikutadze remains optimistic. "Things have become better over the last few years, even though it's hard for most of the population to feel it," he said, continuing to avoid commenting on his own affairs. "At least we're still self-assured enough not to stoop to nationalism." Customs, he said, play a big role in maintaining a sense of equilibrium. Indeed, I found out myself that one often has to hunt for excuses to escape one of those customs—Georgian friendliness. Locals pride themselves deeply about their hospitality. Kinship ties are especially important, especially today. The television producer to whom I spoke told me she supports seven people, including her son, mother, father, grandmother, and nieces. "Extended families allow Georgians to survive by helping one another," she said. "I'm certainly no exception. One person finds a job and supports many others. A number of people find work abroad, some in Russia."

It is a number of these networks that the new Russian visa regime will hurt most. "It's going to have serious effects in a couple of months," the producer said. "It will stop a large flow of income." When I asked her whether Georgia's economic situation seemed to be improving, she disagreed with Mikutadze. "Corruption is the main problem," she said, adding that a new government anti-corruption council will most likely have no impact.

Russia's Long Reach

Some regional observers argue that Georgia is now



The Kashveti Church on Rustaveli Avenue, designed in 1910, on the spot where pagan rituals are said to have taken place.

mired in its worst crisis since the end of the civil war of the early 1990s.¹ They cite the fact that the country's internal-reform process started by Shevardnadze has ground to a halt, chiefly because of massive corruption and organized criminal activity the government is powerless to prevent. That situation, in turn, is preventing the economy from re-orienting itself toward the West, leaving Georgia dependent on Russian markets for export of goods and labor.

At the same time, Russia is boosting its meddling role in Georgian affairs, as I've indicated. The presence of Chechen refugees in Georgia and the incursions of Chechen rebels into Georgian territory have given Moscow the biggest pretext for its actions. The Kremlin has also accused Georgia of knowingly harboring Islamic rebels in the Pankisi Gorge near the Chechen border in Georgia's eastern mountains. Chechen refugees have made the area entirely unsafe for Georgia's security forces, and it has become a base for kidnapping and other criminal activities.

There are some positive signs, however. Moscow met a deadline in December last year to close down two of its bases under an accord signed during an OSCE summit in late 1999. The fate of two other Russian bases—in Batumi and Akhalkalaki in the south of Georgia—is scheduled for resolution by the end of this year.

Russia has contributed significantly to Georgian destabilization, but the issue is far from black-and-white. The Georgian government, backed by the West, is calling for Russia to pull out permanently, but a growing number of



The walls of the Narikala Fortress overlooking the old town. The structure dates from the 4th century, when it was a Persian citadel. An explosion in Russian munitions stored there ruined most of the fortress in 1827. Its church has been recently rebuilt.

voices in Tbilisi say Moscow's abandonment of Abkhazia would threaten the separatists' sense of independence and most likely incite them to further aggression. Most agree that if Russian troops were to leave Abkhazia, a power vacuum would threaten a new civil war. Despite Abkhaz resistance to Russia's departure and Russia's traditional self-interested support for the Abkhaz, Moscow's presence is now therefore actually part of the equation for Georgia's precarious stability. The issue's delicacy speaks to the depth of Georgia's geopolitical quagmire.

"Attitudes to Russia vary from person to person," the television producer to whom I spoke said. "There is a minority of die-hard anti-Russians, but no one really knows in what direction the country is moving—to Russia, or toward the West." Georgia's best hope, she said, is to find some sort of compromise. "Let the Russian forces stay here in return for guarantees for our territorial integrity."

Moscow's Economic Pressure

The bad news is that Moscow seems to be moving away from compromise. The Kremlin has repeatedly interrupted supplies of natural gas to



Worth the trip alone. The author digging in at a restaurant at the site of a remote ethnographic museum overlooking Tbilisi from the south.

¹ One of these is Anatol Lieven, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. In an article in *Eurasia Insight* ("Georgia: A Failing State?," Feb. 5, 2001), Lieven argues, as I do, that Russia plays a major role in perpetuating Georgia's immediate geopolitical problems. However, he conveniently forgets such blame elsewhere. In a diatribe in the Spring 2001 issue of *World Policy Journal*, Lieven heaps scorn on western journalists for what he calls hypocrisy in accusing Russia of repressive actions while failing to place those actions in a context of global colonialism and post-colonialism. I argued against such caveats in *The Moscow Times* (March 2, 2001).

Georgia, citing Georgia's \$180 million debt. That has had a major direct effect on the country's population, since Russia now provides 90 percent of Georgia's gas supply.

With Russia's reassertion of its traditionally dominant role, Georgia's hopes of direct western military support and ultimate NATO membership are sinking. Georgia's own army is reported to be in dismal condition. (One is forced to wonder how it could ever become part of the western military alliance.) More important, there is yet no natural-gas supply that could replace Russia's, which the Georgian economy is utterly dependent.

As Putin's energy policy becomes more coherent and transparent, Russia is using Georgia's plight to its own advantage and showing that it is increasingly willing to use its natural resources to further its geopolitical goals. Russia has recently strengthened its position in the Caspian region. The country's number one oil producer, LUKoil, struck an oil and gas field in the Caspian last year while Azerbaijan's oil reserves, developed with the help of western companies, have so far proved much smaller than hoped. Western oil companies are also wary of investing money in the politically sensitive Baku-Ceyhan pipeline across Georgia, and the U.S. government seems unable to drum up financing.

Last winter, widespread blackouts led thousands of Tbilisi citizens to take to the streets in sometimes-violent protest. In January of this year, Russia cut off gas supplies once again for three days because of tensions over

Chechnya. AES—an American company supplying all of Tbilisi's power from Georgia's largest thermal-power generating plant—had to shut off power to the capital once again. Putin relented only after Shevardnadze begged him to reverse his decision.

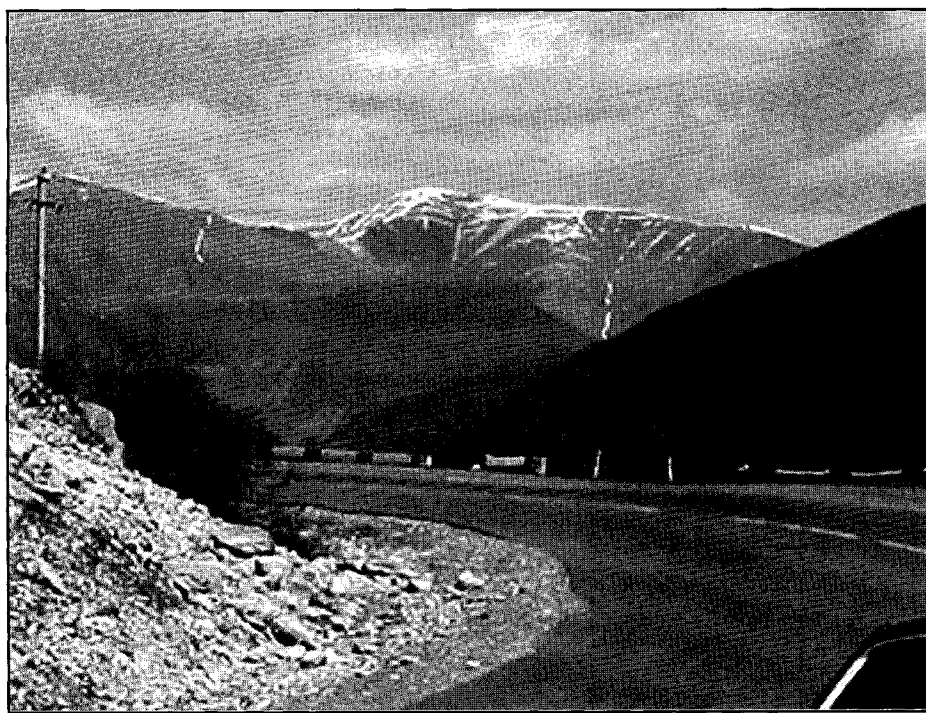
The introduction of Russia's visa regime signaled more than anything else the Kremlin's new hard-line attitude. Remittances from Georgian workers in Russia—who are estimated to number around 850,000—provide a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of families. This crucial source of income, which some estimates put at around a third of the republic's Gross National Product—is now under grave threat.²

Into the Caucasus

I woke up one morning—my bed-and-breakfast was located just off central Freedom Square—to the sound of roosters crowing, vendors hawking milk and other products and the wail of car alarms. It was April 14, the day before Easter Sunday, which happened to coincide with Catholic and Protestant celebrations this year. I'd planned to get an early jump on a drive into the Caucasus north of Tbilisi. However, the streets were jammed with shoppers flocking to markets to begin preparations for the next day's feast, and I made a late start. I drove out of the city and onto the Georgian Military Highway, an ancient route through the Caucasus celebrated by many poets and writers. Most famously, Alexander Pushkin, Lev Tolstoy, and Mikhail Lermontov sang praises of its beauty and laments

over the treachery it's witnessed. The road follows the Mtkvari, Aragvi, and Tergi rivers, and has been one of the main routes from the north Caucasus to the south for millennia, starting life as a single-file path. Alans, Khazars, Kipchaks and other north Caucasus peoples tried to enter Georgia along the route. On the way lies Mtskheta, the old Iberian capital, just north of Tbilisi. The "highway" first became a true road in the 19th century, after the ruthless Caucasus pacifier, Russian General Alexei Yermolov, began construction in 1803.

The military highway is now a dilapidated, two-lane, asphalted affair. Just out of Tbilisi, it passes several factories, including one that once produced asphalt and concrete. They are all completely abandoned, although the small, similar-looking, tin-roofed houses surrounding the plants still pro-



Snow-capped Caucasus mountains along the celebrated Georgian Military Highway

² Reuters, March 21, 2001.

vide shelter, and are occupied mostly by the elderly who don't have the strength or will to move. The only people around—chiefly driving horse carts and walking along the side of the road—were those preparing, like everyone else, for Easter.

One would expect, after reading Pushkin and Lermontov's impassioned paeans to the beauty and tragedy and general romance of the Caucasus, to be disappointed by the real thing. Far from it. The Aragvi River, waiting for the spring mountain thaw, was just a pathetic trickle passing through a wide, dry riverbed. But the mountains themselves, barely green after a long winter, were stunningly beautiful. Into the foothills and further up the mountains, the Caucasus seems increasingly fantastic. The highest peaks are snow-covered, but the scrubby vegetation lower down was already displaying the reds and yellows of spring flowers. The sheer size of the space—the long gorges between jagged peaks—was breathtaking.

I stopped in the isolated village of Ananuri, the site of a 16th-century fortress built by the dukes of Aragvi who once ruled the land. The fortress chapel roof, like most Georgian Orthodox (and, incidentally, Armenian) churches, is a round, tin, peaked affair, simple and triangular in profile. The earth-tone color of the church blends in with the landscape. The site, high above the Aragvi and isolated by the mountains, evoked the air of days past—especially because there was hardly a scrap of physical evidence that anything had changed in the last 300 years.

Back toward Tbilisi, I stopped in the old Iberian capital of Mtskheta, which sits at the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers. Mtskheta is home to the atypically large and fairly ornate Sveti-Tskhoveli cathedral. It's Georgia's most sacred church, where Christ's robe is said to be buried.³ The first Christian church in Georgia was built on the site in the fourth century after a young woman, Nino (later St. Nino), arrived to preach the new religion. The family of King Mirian converted and in 337, Christianity was declared the religion of Iberia.

The most spectacular sight, however, is that of the Jvari



Shavtelsi Street, Tbilisi's most important street in medieval times. It leads into the old town center. The steeple belongs to the Anchiskhati basilica, Tbilisi's oldest church, built in the 6th century.

chapel, perched on a hill overlooking Mtskheta, and dominating the view. Built in the sixth century, the tetraconch-design church is one of the best examples of early Byzantine-influenced Christian Georgian architecture.

Unclear Future

As I headed back into Tbilisi, I rued yet again the fact that Georgia's own current capacity for a renaissance appears exceedingly small. Russia will no doubt continue to pressure its southern neighbor. From the start of the second Chechen war, it has pushed Georgia to allow its troops to operate on Georgian soil against the Chechen rebels. Allowing Moscow such leeway, many say, would badly damage Georgian sovereignty and risk spreading the war into Georgia itself. Meanwhile, the Bush administration's policy remains unclear. At the very least, it seems the United States—caught in a Cold-War-ish standoff with the Kremlin—isn't likely to increase its commitment to the point where it could transform Georgia's geopolitical position, let alone its economy or system of government.

On May 26, shortly after my visit to Tbilisi, President Shevardnadze kicked off Georgia's Independence Day—this one marking a decade of post-Soviet exist-

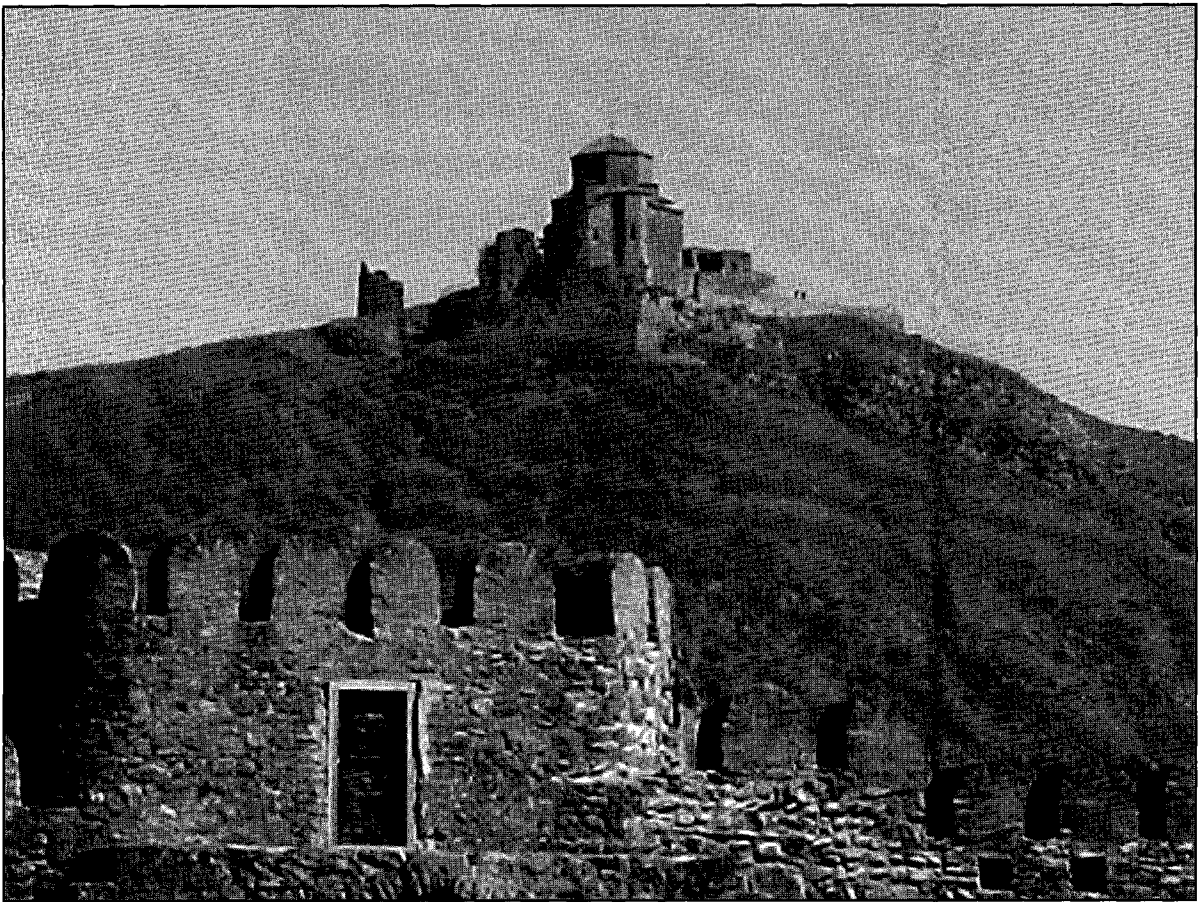
³ Elio, a Georgian Jew, is said to have been in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion and returned with the robe to Mtskheta. His sister took it from him and immediately died. The robe couldn't be removed from her grasp, so it was buried with her. Over the grave grew a tree that proved impervious to the axes of the builders who erected the first church on the site. Much as they tried, they couldn't cut it down (which of course begs the unanswered question of how the church was built at all).

ence—by visiting a hilltop monument to Georgian writers. A parade was called off, apparently because of lack of funds. Shevardnadze also met students and athletes at the government headquarters. “In our country, not all is as it should be,” he said in remarks reported by Reuters. “We have suffered chaos and civil war. But I promise, you will live in a flourishing country with territorial integrity.”

Hours later, Shevardnadze found himself talking armed national guardsmen into abandoning a threatened mutiny after 400 soldiers had demanded 14 months of back wages. The president succeeded, only to be faced with another crisis. In echoes of past chaos, Zviadist protesters clashed with police in Tbilisi hours

after Shevardnadze defused the army mutiny.

The road is rocky indeed. Publicly, at least, Shevardnadze is maintaining his pro-western stance, continuing to proclaim Georgia’s—aspirations to join NATO and to close the Russian bases. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell met Georgian Foreign Minister Irakly Menagarishvili in March and said the United States had raised the issue of Russian pressure on Georgia directly with Moscow. But much more support will be needed. In May, the International Monetary Fund withheld a loan for lack of visible reform. That only reinforces the most likely scenario for Georgia in the foreseeable future: that it will remain mired in its current and unenviable position. That’s a terrible shame for this vital and beautiful country. □



The 6th-century Ivori church, a classic example of Byzantine influence and a revered symbol of Georgia.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • AUSTRALIA

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • MEXICO

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • ARGENTINA

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecker McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • RUSSIA

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • EAST TIMOR

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • CHILE

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • PAKISTAN

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4273**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548 E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599 Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

© 2001 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation.

The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.

Author: Feifer, Gregory

Title: ICWA Letters -
Europe/Russia

ISSN: 1083-4273

Imprint: Institute of Current World
Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia;
Mideast/North Africa; The
Americas; Sub-Saharan Africa

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.