

ONE HISTORICAL-DOCUMENTARY AMERICAN NOVEL ABOUT GEORGIA

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Abstract: Different interesting people have visited Georgia at different times. Among various honorary guests, a well-known American writer Robert David Kaplan visited our country in the 90s of the last centuries. Except Georgia he also traveled in Balkan Countries, the Near East and Caucasus and the experienced impressions from this journey were interestingly described in the novel – „Eastward to Tartary“. With the description of the situation in the above-mentioned countries, the novel also provides us with the significant information about the history of Georgia and the situation of the 90s. Even though, a historical state and the actual reality are basically accurately described in the American writer’s novel, it is also worth noting that the author describes certain points on one side. During the imagination of the situation in Georgia, such kind of omissions should be considered, as some non-Georgian readers might receive information according to which they’ll have an incorrect idea about the past and modern life of our country.

Key words: Georgia; USA; History; Politics.

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Introduction: Our country has been visited by many remarkable individuals. These visits became even more frequent after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Georgia’s subsequent restoration of independence. One such notable figure was the renowned American journalist and analyst Robert D. Kaplan, who visited our country in the late 1990s.

Research methods: This study primarily employs the methodological principles of historicism and comparative analysis.

Discussion/Results: In Robert Kaplan’s book „Eastward to Tartary“, the author recounts his impressions from travels through the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Among many other topics, the work also briefly touches upon the major events of Georgian history. The opinions expressed in the book reveal both widely accepted and more controversial views. For instance, regarding the geographical location and the very name of our country, the author writes:

„Georgia is a small country by American standards. With 5.6 million people, it is comparable in size to West Virginia... The Georgian capital, Tbilisi, has been destroyed twenty-nine times. It was on „Mount Caucasus“ in Georgia that Prometheus was supposedly chained to a rock, an eagle continually pecking at his liver when he was punished by Zeus...

In ancient times, eastern Georgia, known to Georgians as Kartli, was named Iberia by outsiders, leading to a confusion with Spain that persists to this day. One theory holds that the word Georgia comes from the Greek word *geo* (“earth”), for when the ancient Greeks first came to Georgia, they were struck by the many people working the land“ (Kaplan, 2000; 228).

In my view, several of the author’s observations are open to debate and call for further clarification, particularly those concerning the capital city of Georgia. The characterization of Tbilisi’s historical

location as being situated on „Mount Caucasus“ appears to be inaccurate; moreover, the city’s history bears little substantive relation to the legendary myth of Prometheus. It would also be necessary to specify the sources on which the author bases the assertion that „The Georgian capital, Tbilisi, has been destroyed twenty-nine times“.

Equally noteworthy are the author’s reflections in the novel regarding the Georgian language and its script. For the sake of greater clarity, I shall quote the relevant passage from the book:

„Though comprising only one one-thousandth of humanity, the Georgians created one of the world’s fourteen alphabets. Its crescent shaped symbols emerged around the fifth century B.C., possibly from Aramaic, the Semitic dialect spoken by Jesus...“

Though there is one Kartvelian alphabet, there are three Kartvelian languages: Georgian; Mingrelian, in western Georgia; and Svan, in the mountainous north. Historic Georgia also included speakers of Abkhaz, a Caucasian language, in the northwest; Ossetian, an Iranian language, in the north; and Armenian and Turkic speakers in the south“ (Kaplan, 2000; 228, 229).

In the cited passage, alongside widely acknowledged historical facts, the author presents several contentious assessments. For example, the views expressed concerning the origins of the Georgian language and script constitute a topic requiring further scholarly clarification. Equally problematic is the assertion that speakers of Abkhaz or Ossetian languages resided exclusively within the boundaries of historical Georgia. Despite the country’s ongoing unresolved territorial issues, both Abkhazia and the so-called „South Ossetia“ remain, under international law, integral parts of Georgia’s jurisdiction, and a substantial portion of the contemporary population in these regions continues to use the aforementioned languages.

The author also offers a series of noteworthy, yet somewhat disputable, reflections on the period of Tsarist Russian rule in Georgia. According to an evaluation that is not entirely accurate, Russian governance – unlike Turkish or Iranian domination – allegedly placed the country on a path toward modernization, accompanied by a marked increase in population. Among the destructive consequences, or the price Georgia was compelled to pay as a result, the author mentions only the abolition of the Church’s autocephaly and the suppression of peasant uprisings. In reality, however, Georgia lost all the essential national markers of statehood that even a non-sovereign polity should retain. Foremost among these was the prohibition of instruction and liturgical practice in the native language.

To provide a more precise understanding of the author’s position regarding these matters, the relevant passage from the novel is cited below: „... In 1801, Czar Alexander I forcibly incorporated Georgia into the Russian empire... The nineteenth-century Russian czars quickly put Georgia on the road to modernity. Doubts about the benefits of czarist rule – compared with that of the Turks and Iranians – are put to rest when one notes that the population of Georgia rose from 500,000 to 2.5 million in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were costs, however. The Georgian church and nobility became subservient to Russian institutions, and Russian absolutism sparked peasant revolts“ (Kaplan, 2000; 230)“.

D. Kaplan offers particularly insightful evaluations and comparisons regarding Zviad Gamsakhurdia. It can be stated without exaggeration that the majority of the facts presented in the novel concerning the issues discussed are predominantly negative, both in terms of the first president’s personal character and his governance more broadly. Furthermore, in certain instances, the novel’s author does not hesitate to employ derogatory epithets when characterizing members of the first president’s inner circle. To substantiate the foregoing, the following passage from the book is provided:

„Zviad Gamsakhurdia was the son of the great twentieth-century Georgian writer Konstantine Gamsakhurdia. In the 1970s, the younger Gamsakhurdia, a lecturer in American literature at Tbilisi State University, led a protest movement against Soviet oppression that resulted in prison and exile. But his dissent was a matter of radical nationalism, not moral opposition to communism... His jealous wife, Manana – described as „a low-class, awful, unattractive woman“ – who dominated Zviad much as his father had, was enraged by this.“

... Gamsakhurdia rose to power when the Soviet Union began to collapse, which was, popular memory in the West aside, before the Berlin Wall fell, not a consequence of its fall. It was in the Caucasus, not Eastern Europe, that anti-Soviet protests began in unstoppable earnest... A massacre of Georgian protesters by Soviet troops in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989, led to Gamsakhurdia's nationalists taking local power away from the Kremlin. In 1990, Gamsakhurdia defeated the Communists in parliamentary elections, and the following year he was elected president. Surrounded by bodyguards and vicious dogs, having imprisoned his erstwhile nationalist allies while stoking the fires of ethnic hatred and increasingly relying on arson, mafiosi, and his wife, Gamsakhurdia had become Macbeth. By late 1991, a few months after Gamsakhurdia's election, Georgia was engulfed in a civil war that destroyed the nation's cities, made internal travel impossible, and ruined the economy, such as it was (Kaplan, 2000; 233-234).

It is noteworthy that, unlike when dealing with ancient periods, in discussing the recent history of our country, D. Kaplan relied not only on specific sources and literature but also on the insights of experts who were present in Georgia at the time, as well as on the perspectives of individuals who were directly at the epicenter of the events. For instance, Kaplan met with and interviewed Levan Aleksidze, Alexander Rondel, and other contemporary figures. In addition to the aforementioned individuals, Kaplan's interpreter, Eka Khvedelidze, also provided him with historical context regarding certain people and events. Importantly, the views expressed by these individuals did not go unnoticed by the author and occupy a significant place in the book, even being cited directly. As evidence, in this instance, I will verify only two relevant passages from the novel that concern assessments of the personality of Georgia's first president.

For example, according to Eka Khvedelidze, Robert Kaplan's translator and guide in Georgia, „Zviad was like a rock star. You can almost see the psychological scars on the faces of his female followers. By their expressions, you know that these women are physically ruined, as though they were his concubines. Most are single or have unhappy marriages. They now expect Zviad to come back from the grave on a white horse. I'm not kidding.

Although many of the previously cited opinions are controversial or unacceptable positions, they have done a great deal for the author of the novel, he „was reminded of the story of the Romanian fascist leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, whose return on a magnificent horse the peasants expected, even after he was killed in 1938 by King Carol II“ (Kaplan, 2000; 232).

Contrary to the above-mentioned comment, Levan Aleksidze's evaluation focuses on the political dimension of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's activity and his role as the leader of the national movement. This assessment is also cited in the novel with precise references. Aleksidze provides insightful reflections on the civil war that erupted in Georgia and on its underlying causes. For the sake of clarity and accuracy, the relevant quotation is presented below:

„... Gamsakhurdia destroyed the Soviet spirit more than anyone, but in Georgia, a civil war was necessary because of the kind of people we are. The real cause of the war is our medievalness...“ (Kaplan, 2000; 235).

It is particularly interesting to consider the authorial evaluation presented in the novel regarding the Civil War and the subsequent developments. Notably, Kaplan once again does not express any favorable disposition toward Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whereas he regards Eduard Shevardnadze's return to Georgia and the commencement of his activities as marking a positive phase in the country's development. In my view, it is also highly significant that Kaplan does not articulate either indignation at the facts or sympathy and regret for the first president, even when discussing his expulsion from Georgia. To substantiate all of the above, I will provide a citation from the book:

„In January 1992, a military council ousted Gamsakhurdia, who fled to nearby Chechnya... From his exile in Chechnya, Gamsakhurdia maintained links with Zviadist troops in western Georgia. He also fell under the influence of the Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev, another deranged warlord, who in 1994 led Chechnya into a war with Russia that ended two years later with forty thousand dead, among

them Dudayev himself. Step by step, the increasingly desperate Gamsakhurdia, the rabid, ethnocentric nationalist of the 1970s and 1980s, was allying himself with Georgia's historic rivals: Moslem Chechnya, Abashidze's Ajaria, and even Abkhazia, where a Russian-backed separatist rebellion caused ten thousand deaths and the cleansing of two hundred thousand ethnic Georgians from Abkhaz territory. Because Gamsakhurdia's forces blocked the main road out of Abkhazia into Georgia proper, half the refugees – Gamsakhurdia's own Georgians – had to detour through the mountains, where many died of starvation and exposure... But Abkhazia's wasn't the only separatist rebellion that led to ethnic cleansing in Georgia: At roughly the same time, South Ossetians were cleansing their region of thousands of ethnic Georgians" (Kaplan, 2000; 234-236).

Although the excerpt cited above largely reflects historical realities, it is my contention that attributing particular events or developments exclusively to a single individual or political actor risks producing a partial and potentially biased interpretation. With regard to Eduard Shevardnadze's return to Georgia, as previously noted, D. Kaplan characterizes this event in unequivocally positive terms, regarding it as a milestone of critical significance in the country's recent history. For the sake of accuracy and clarity, I will verify the original quotation directly.

In parallel with the above events, „Concurrently, Kitovani and Ioseliani had invited Eduard Shevardnadze back to Georgia from Moscow to provide international legitimacy for their hydra-headed gangland regime. Shevardnadze accepted. But... this former head of the secret police in Georgia played Kitovani, Ioseliani, and their associates off against each other until all were in jail. Then Shevardnadze brought reformers into government...

By the end of 1993, Shevardnadze had surrounded the Zviadists' last stronghold in western Georgia in the town of Zugdidi, to which Gamsakhurdia had returned from Chechnya for a last stand. There, in late December, the fifty-eight-year-old Gamsakhurdia died. Either he committed suicide or was murdered; his death remains a mystery" (Kaplan, 2000; 236).

Conclusion. Ultimately, it can be asserted, without exaggeration, that notwithstanding the presence of numerous contested or relatively subjective evaluations of various events, the perspectives on Georgian history articulated in this novel warrant serious scholarly consideration. This conclusion is substantiated by the observation that individuals with an interest in Georgia frequently derive significant information from such works authored by prominent visitors. In this context, it is imperative to provide information that adheres closely to objectivity and factual accuracy, while simultaneously safeguarding the international reputation of the country.

References:

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