

Removal of ‘Non-Persons’ from Literary Texts.

A Few (Soviet) Georgian Illustrations from My Personal Archive

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From the creation of the USSR, it was common to find references to the founding fathers of communist ideology (Marx, Engels, Lenin) in a variety of publications in order either to reinforce the ideological legitimacy of the regime or to underline the author’s/authors’ commitment to it (or for both these reasons). Once Stalin’s position at the helm of government in the Kremlin was secure, he too came to figure in the named list of the founding fathers. And so, for example, we can take the opening page in the Introduction of a volume of articles to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the scholarly activity of the Georgian-Scottish linguist, Nikolaj (Nik’o) Marr, which was published, entirely in Georgian, in 1934. The title was *marksist’uli enatmetsniereba* ‘Marxist Linguistics’¹. As seen in Scan 1, the Introduction begins with the word ‘Marxist’ in the phrase *marksist’uli enatmetsnierebisatvis* ‘for Marxist linguistics’. The penultimate sentence of the second paragraph then presents the coupling ‘Lenin-Stalin’ when readers are informed: ‘As a result of the realisation of Lenin-Stalin’s national[ist] policy, 160 languages are possessed of their own writing-system(s), their own literature’. Engels makes his first appearance in the quadripartite pantheon only on p. 2 of the Introduction.

As Stalin’s position became ever stronger, a cult of personality arose and eventually grew to absurd levels of obsequiousness. The cult was established by the time ‘The Great Terror’ was at its height in 1937, when it had become normal to refer to Stalin as the State’s *beladi* ‘(supreme) leader’. But, mass-slaughter and despatch to the gulag across the Soviet Union apart, 1937 was the year when the Union (and Georgia in particular) celebrated the 750th anniversary of the birth of Shota Rust(a)veli, author of Georgia’s national epic ‘The Man in the Panther-skin’. This monumental poem had first been luxuriously printed in 1712 under the supervision of King Vakht’ang VI on

¹ Marr had developed a theory of the stadial development of language(s), which he saw as a parallel to Marx’s view of the role of the class-struggle in the development of societies. For this reason Marr was lauded as the leading Soviet linguist of his day, and other linguists were expected to work within the framework of his theory. Since this theory was to be rejected as baseless and unscholarly, one might say that Marr was lucky to die a natural death, which occurred in the very year this anniversary-volume came out!

his newly founded printing-press. It was, therefore, wholly appropriate that a high point in the year's celebrations should be a facsimile of Vakht'ang's glorious first edition²; the print-run was 3,200. It was duly prepared, with additions and elucidations, under the editorship of Ak'ak'i Shanidze (1887-1987)³. Page 1 of his 2-page Foreward is reproduced in Scan 2. The second paragraph reads as follows:

The Communist Party and I. Stalin, the great (supreme) leader of the peoples, pay the highest attention to this monument of rare value. An expression of this is the jubilee-celebration which this year is being organised on a grand scale and with great solicitude on the initiative of Com[rade]. L. Beria.

At this point, Stalin's chief lieutenant in Soviet Georgia was its Party Boss, the Mingrelian Lavrent'i Beria, and so it was perhaps entirely natural that he should rate a mention alongside that of the State's *beladi* in this Georgian publication.

The third paragraph begins with another reference to Stalin:

The powerful drive of the Stalinist epoch in the realm of the life of our country delineates for us several problems in the sphere of culture.

With this, due homage (without any reference to Lenin, be it noted) was deemed to have been paid, and Shanidze could proceed to concentrate on purely scholarly matters.

In 1975 a photographic reprint of the 1937-edition was issued (with an envisaged print-run of 20,000), and Shanidze added a new, single-page Foreward. The original Foreward was retained but with essential changes, given that at that time even the name of Stalin rarely appeared in print, and that of Beria was simply unmentionable (in print or speech!). Scan 3 reveals the differences. In place of 'I. Stalin, the great (supreme) leader of the peoples', we read simply 'the Soviet government'. There was no need to allude to the source of the initiative that led to the organisation of the 1937-celebrations, and in the third paragraph 'Stalin's epoch' was re-characterised as 'the Soviet epoch'.

King Vakht'ang's edition of the epic (of which the print-run was 10,000) was not the only version to come out in 1937. Tbilisi State University produced its own lavish,

² It is ironic that such exquisite books were being published (in Tbilisi at least) during these years of mass-murder and universal dread, and this facsimile-edition is certainly the finest in my collection.

³ A truly outstanding scholar who laid the foundations of the modern study of Georgian (both Old and New) and was one of the founders of Tbilisi State University in 1918.

large-format version with illustrations by Irak'li Toidze. The editorial college consisted of: I. Abuladze, E. Burch'uladze, P'. Ingoroq'va, K'. K'ek'elidze, G. K'ik'nadze, and K'. Chark'viani, but it was Ingoroq'va who penned the Introduction, the first page of which is presented as Scan 4. Here there is in the second paragraph a passing allusion to Marx's view of Homer, whilst the third paragraph speaks of the Soviet Union's triumphant people constructing a socialist society 'under the supervision of the peoples' (supreme) leader, the home-gown, great **STALIN**'. However, it is Comrade Lavrent'i Beria who is source for the quotation that constitutes the final paragraph:

Only in the conditions of Soviet power, in the conditions of the forceful rise of the people's creativity and culture has it become possible to mark the 750th anniversary of the writing of the poem by the Georgian poet of genius, Shota Rustaveli. Only in the conditions of the steadfast Stalinist friendship has that intimate cultural relationship of the Soviet Union's peoples become possible, when the best monuments of the culture of the individual peoples become the possession of the entire Soviet people, when with equal love in the Soviet Union's different republics, regions and districts are preparations underway to mark the 750th anniversary of the immortal Rustaveli' (L. Beria "Pravda", 1937, 7 November).

A large-format collection of articles (exclusively in Georgian) on Rust(a)veli also saw the light of day in 1937; the print-run was 4,000. No main editor is named, but the editorial board consisted of the triumvirate K'andid Chark'viani, P'avle Ingoroq'va, and Simon Chikovani. Scan 5 shews the second (and final) page of the Introduction, where the obligatory encomia are inserted. The second paragraph asserts that: 'Soviet poets sing of Stalin's genius with glorious enthusiasm', whilst the 3rd paragraph is a slightly shorter version of Beria's already cited words from *Pravda*. The final paragraph's first sentence reads:

Among the literary materials included in the collection Soviet writers express love and fidelity towards the homeland, enlightened by Stalin's Constitution'⁴.

It seems reasonable to conclude that Ingoroq'va will have composed the Introduction.

In 1938 Beria was transferred to Moscow, where he replaced Nikolaj Yezhov as Head of the NKVD at a time when The Great Terror, having run its course, was being brought to an end. Though perhaps not as a direct result of this rise in status (since the text quoted immediately below was handed over for printing on 7 June 1938, even if there is a hint in the text of a change to come), one can find such personally directed

⁴ This Constitution had been promulgated in 1936, the year The Great Terror was getting underway!

compliments as that seen in Scan 6, which comes from the 1939 *svanuri p'oezia* 'Svan Poetry 1'. The bilingual (Svan-Georgian) verse lauds Beria (alongside Lenin and Stalin), at lines 77-80, which read as follows:

Great Stalin's pupil,
Our Lavrent'i Beria,
Svaneti(a) up until today had as aide,
And hereafter as aide will continue to have.

Paeans of praise continued to appear more or less until the deaths of Stalin and Beria in 1953, though, in the case of Beria himself, it is likely that a thorough investigation would reveal that, when Stalin started to become suspicious of him and instigated the so-called 'Mingrelian Affair' in 1951/2 to undermine him by attacking his (often Mingrelian) acolytes, public sychophancy towards him will have been curtailed. However, once Stalin had died and Beria executed (both events occurring in 1953), it was Beria (rather than Stalin) towards whom all the loathing resulting from the horrors that the State had inflicted upon the Soviet people over the previous 15 or so years came to be directed. That this focus was officially sanctioned is obvious from the fact that subscribers to the Soviet Encyclopaedia were advised to remove the pages in the 5th volume which carried an article about Beria and to substitute the replacement-sheets they were sent that were mainly devoted to the Bering Sea. But this 'literary excision' was not the end of it.

Whether by instruction from above or through individual awareness, conditioned by years of learning how to survive the Soviet system, that prudence dictated action once someone had suddenly become a 'non-person' so as not to give even a hint of there being any lingering support or sympathy for the said 'non-person', owners of books in which Beria's name appeared started to erase it. The volume of Svan poetry from which Scan 6 was taken had probably lain untouched in the exchange-fund of the Linguistics' Institute in Tbilisi since publication until its presentation to me in 1976. In this way the page in question managed to escape disfigurement, but the only other copy of the book that I have held in my hands simply had a hole where the one-time owner had probably taken a razor-blade to it to eradicate the offending moniker! But not all assaults on the name were so extreme. More common was simply the inking over of the sequence of letters concerned.

Marr's theory was officially debunked in (*inter alia*) a little Russian volume with a projected print-run of 50,000 that appeared in 1950 under the authorship of one Joseph Stalin⁵. The Georgian version of the text came out the same year in a 36-page booklet (and no doubt elsewhere too), with separate pamphlets giving the '(supreme) leader's' answers to various questions posed by certain named commentators. These items were printed at a printing combine on Lenin Street in Tbilisi which happened to be named after Beria. The copies of the three that are in my possession illustrate the one-time owner's use of the pen, as can be seen in Scan 7.

A further example of inking over comes from volume XXIV of the 'Works of the Abkhazian Institute of Language, Literature and History' in Russian and Georgian (1951)⁶. Scan 8 shows the first page of Shalva Inal-Ipa's article 'On the new way of life in the Abkhazian village', where the bracketed sequence refers to a kolkhoz named after L.P'. Beria. The attempt here to obscure the name is done with some insouciance, though the obscuring is effected more determinedly in the book's list of contents at the end!

However, apart from the case of Beria to Bering Sea described earlier, the most radical example of excision I know comes from a pocket-sized but bulky volume entitled *xalxuri p'oezia* 'Folk Poetry' from 1950. The first 29 contributions, which take the reader to p. 47 (out of 575), shower ritualistic praise on the usual recipients, the last of whom is Beria. As is clear from the Index, the verse began on p. 45 and concluded on p. 47, leaving space for title and four lines of the following contribution. Scan 9 reveals how the one-time owner achieved his goal with minimal loss. Page 46 was cut in half, the bottom part discarded, and the top half pasted on to p. 47. This left the last six lines of the offending verse visible. Even though Beria's surname appears there, they were merely pencilled (and not inked) over, with the result that they are (almost) entirely legible. The translation will be:

The children of labour rejoice,

⁵ In fact, rumour long held that the true authorship belonged to the Mingrelian Arnold Chikobava (1898-1985), though he always denied it. Chikobava's followers largely made up the investigators of the various Caucasian languages working at the Linguistics' Institute in Tbilisi, where linguists from all over the Caucasus regularly received their training.

⁶ Incidentally, this journal begins with another outing for the Georgian version of Stalin's debunking of Marr's theory.

Whilst the enviers are dead.

For the work of Lenin and Stalin,

O dedicated Beria,

Across the whole of humanity there will remain

Your many achievements.

Given what seemed, on the basis of the examples adduced above, the widespread (?universal) practice of erasing the name of Beria from wherever it appeared in written texts, I was astonished when the handsomely produced volume *st'alini kartul xalxur p'oeziashi* 'Stalin in Georgian Folk Poetry' of 1949 came into my hands. The reason is that there was not a single defacement or excision disfiguring the book, despite the fact that Beria is named alongside Stalin in the verse on p. 123 (Scan 10), and was the lone addressee of the verses on p. 124 (Scan 11) and p. 125 (Scan 12). Also, to cap it all, the verse on p. 122 (Scan 13) was addressed to the (by 1949) long dead Sergo Ordzhonik'idze, Stalin's one-time Georgian colleague, for whose suicide possible reasons are mooted in the poem! One can hardly help but wonder what the consequences would have been for this volume's owner, had it been discovered in pristine condition in his possession...

It would be interesting to know how extensive the practice described above was, not only in (Soviet) Georgia but across the USSR (or indeed the whole Soviet block) in general, and thus how many books came to be defaced as a consequence.