

# Void Pasts and Marginal Presents: On Nostalgia and Obsolete Futures in the Republic of Georgia

**Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen**

For some—they are in [the] minority, including in Georgia—the Soviet Union may still be the homeland. . . . The major difference between our and their dreams is that their dream is oriented towards the past, to something which will never be restored, and our dream is a desire of having something, which we never had before—[a] very successful democracy. We are adjusted to the future and they are oriented towards the past—the future will always prevail over the past. Good is on the future's side and evil on the side of the past.

—Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgian President, May 2011

They said that it was not Stalin's time any more. . . . I hate them. [. . .] Soon they will ban speaking Georgian. . . . I love my country and town so much; Stalin too. In my house, Stalin is considered as God. I wish that monument could be put up again and that Stalin's name was as clean as he deserved. I wish that this government did even half of the things that he did. Stalin loved hard-working and educated people and encouraged them to improve their knowledge. [. . .] My dream is that a Georgian man could be leader in my country.

—Nuno, Gori resident, August 2011

## Introduction: Contested Times

May 9 has, since 1945, been celebrated in the Soviet Union and, after its collapse, most of its former republics as Victory Day, commemorating the end of World War II in Europe. In Gori, Georgia, in May 2011, this celebration turned into a small battle of interpretations of the past. The town hosted two celebrations that day. The first, the official event sponsored by local authorities, seemed detached from its origins. Images of Georgian nationality, culture, and heroism were vividly invoked through traditional poetry, dancing, and singing. But the historical context for the victory being celebrated was firmly left out of the event, and the Soviet Union was mentioned in neither positive nor negative terms—it wasn't mentioned at all. Paradoxically, it seemed that a part of the past was being erased through the very process of commemorating it. The second celebration was arranged by the local branch of the Georgian Communist Party and the Stalin Society. About twenty people were gathered in front of the house in which Iosif Stalin was born, and a small group was holding a painting of Stalin and a banner reading "I. V. Stalin's monument will be standing at the museum." This referred to a six-meter-high monument of Stalin on a nine-meter pedestal that had been removed from the town square by the authorities in June 2010. At this small event, speeches hailed the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, and the chairman of the Communist Party regretted that, "unfortunately, the government likes all kinds of winnings and the results of these triumphs, but it does not assess the people who brought about *this* victory." The official celebration inscribed Victory Day into Georgian heroism and triumph in a broader, and non-Soviet, context. Within

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this small gathering, however, victory was Soviet and highly connected with and symbolized by the figure of Stalin.

Defining, and redefining, the past is a significant part of constructing political identities and of shaping and visualizing their proper future.<sup>1</sup> This has been particularly evident in the context of the former Soviet Union and post-socialist eastern Europe, where nationalist projects in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR have, more often than not, been expressed as a “national awakening,” a return to pre-Soviet identities.<sup>2</sup> In short, as Katherine Verdery argues, the transformations of this region have entailed “powerful pressures to create political identities based expressly on *rejecting* the immediate past.”<sup>3</sup> This, too, has to no lesser extent been the case for the Republic of Georgia. Since Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the distant national past, as well as the more immediate Soviet past, has been employed and (re-)represented in order to create new political identities and in envisioning future political developments.<sup>4</sup> After the 2003 Rose Revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement to power, imaginaries of Georgia’s rapid and profound development were firmly based on an antithetical relation to the Soviet past and the political turmoil following independence.<sup>5</sup> The commemoration of Victory Day discussed above illustrates this practice of reframing and enacting the national past and future and the simultaneous rejection, or even “erasure,” of the Soviet past.

In this article I explore versions of the past that have been silenced and rendered void in post-Rose Revolution Georgia and I consider some of the political processes and consequences at play when certain people, events, or ideas are categorized as belonging to the past rather than the future. Mainly through a portrait of one woman, Nuno, I recount some particular features of

The first epigraph to this article is from “Saakashvili Downplays Protest Rally, Calls It ‘Masquerade,’” *Civil Georgia*, 25 May 2011, at [www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23509](http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23509) (last accessed 10 October 2013). Informants, including “Nuno,” who hold no official positions in government or political organizations have been anonymized.

1. See, for instance, Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, “Introduction: Contested Pasts,” in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., *Contested Pasts: the Politics of Memory* (London, 2003), 23–28; Zlatko Skrbis, “The First Europeans’ Fantasy of Slovenian Venetologists: Emotions and Nationalist Imaginings,” in Maruška Svašek, ed., *Postsocialism: Politics and Emotions in Central and Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2006), 138–58.

2. Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005), 3; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1993), 3–6.

3. Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York, 1999), 52. Emphasis in the original.

4. See, for instance, Irakli Chkonia, “Timeless Identity versus Another Final Modernity: Identity Master Myth and Social Change in Georgia,” in Lawrence E. Harrison and Peter L. Berger, eds., *Developing Cultures: Case Studies* (New York, 2006), 349–68; Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, 2006); and Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, 1994).

5. Stephen Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence* (London, 2013); Oliver Reisner, “Interpreting the Past—From Political Manipulation to Critical Analysis?,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 8 (July 2009): 2–4.

stories told to me by middle-aged and elderly people in the provincial town of Gori, a place associated by many—both Georgians and outsiders—with Stalin and with a widespread nostalgia for Soviet times. In 2010 and 2011 I conducted a total of ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in Gori. Among other themes, I focused on post-Rose Revolution official representations of the Soviet past and the manifestations of these representations (and their contestation) in cultural institutions, public space, and everyday life. Gori provided a fruitful location for such a study. The town, now with an official population of forty-eight thousand inhabitants, was an industrial center during the Soviet era. Today, however, most of the former industries and factories are closed down, a fact that was repeatedly engaged by my interlocutors when they spoke about their work histories in contrast to the current challenges of unemployment and making a living for themselves and their families. Following the 2008 armed conflict between Georgia and Russia, Gori was gradually being resig-nified—at least by state authorities and outsiders. Rather than the image of a model Soviet industrial production town connected to the state through its special link with Stalin (an image that was cherished among a majority of my middle-aged and elderly interlocutors), it was now increasingly invoked as a prime example of Russian aggression toward Georgia, Georgian military expansion and development, and the successes of rapid rebuilding and modernization projects.<sup>6</sup>

In the following pages I analyze Nuno's stories as exemplary of certain general, structural characteristics found in the twenty-five life story interviews I conducted with people between the ages of fifty and seventy-five.<sup>7</sup> I met some of these people in the context of the Stalin Society and the local Communist Party, while others were not active members of any such associations. What they shared in spite of this political difference, however, was that their educations, working lives, family lives, and social statuses in a broader sense were shaped by Soviet times, and the value of these everyday positions was commonly felt to have radically changed since Georgian independence and, notably, following the Rose Revolution. In that sense, my interviewees represent a formation of what Caroline Humphrey, has referred to, in the context of the post-Soviet Russian political economy, as the "dispossessed." That is, a group of people who, in light of post-Soviet economic and political developments, have been deprived of their previous social positions, work, and entitlements.<sup>8</sup> I contend, moreover, that this is a common feature they share

6. For examples of this rhetoric, see, for instance, the public speeches given by Mikheil Saakashvili, "The President of Georgia Delivered a Speech at the Parade Dedicated to the Police Day," 6 May 2012, at [www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements?p=7520&i=1](http://www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements?p=7520&i=1) (last accessed 10 October 2013; no longer available), and "The President of Georgia Addressed the Population of Gori," 11 January 2012, at [www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements?p=7273&i=1](http://www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements?p=7273&i=1) (last accessed 10 October 2013; no longer available).

7. The majority of the interviews, including the one with Nuno, were conducted and transcribed in Georgian. All transcriptions and translations have been done with the assistance of my research assistants, Gvanca Razmiashvili and Nestani Kvitsinadze.

8. Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca, 2002), 21.

with many others in their age group in contemporary Georgia. Hence, the portrait of Nuno and the contextualization and interpretation of her stories I present here draws attention to more general tendencies pertaining to how post-Rose Revolution government rhetoric and practice have been affecting this cohort.

In short, I contend that it is not only communist ideology and Soviet versions of history that are being rendered void, as we saw above in the case of the Victory Day commemorations. My interlocutors' personal pasts—social statuses, memories, and dreams— have also been increasingly neglected, due to their location in a historical and ideological space and time being redefined and renounced in post-Rose Revolution political discourse. This, I argue, produces a particular type of nostalgic longing that can be understood as an active attempt to make present personal pasts and futures that have publicly been rendered absent.

### Multiple Nostalgias

As illustrated by the epigraphs to this article, the Soviet past is perceived in radically different ways by President Saakashvili and Nuno. Nuno seems to be a case example of the (alleged) minority that has nostalgic dreams “oriented towards the past” rather than the future. Interestingly, though, even if she does long for the past, Nuno also clearly perceives Georgia as her homeland and her dreams as connected to the nation—not its extinction by the evils of the past, as the president seems to imply. Below, I address this claim regarding the incompatibility of nostalgia and the future in a double sense. First, I will show that it was not nostalgia per se that came to stand in contrast to visions of the future in the decade following the Rose Revolution but rather a particular kind of nostalgia and the longing for a specific epoch. Second, and relatedly, I account for the ways in which official efforts to represent the past, in order to carve out a particular vision for the future, produce nostalgia due to their failure to unite these novel visions with past dreams and present experience.

In illuminating these relationships between nostalgic pasts and envisioned futures, I draw on Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* and her distinction between *restorative* and *reflective nostalgias*: “Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* [homecoming] and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe their project is about truth.”<sup>9</sup> In the empirical material presented here, the interplay of these two nostalgic types illuminates axes of both uncontested and contested nostalgia in post-Rose Revolution Georgia; or, “truth” versus that which is publicly labeled “mere nostalgia.” Labeling something “nostalgia,” in this sense, is understood as labeling it “bad”; or, in Boym's words, giving “an affectionate insult at best.”<sup>10</sup> However, to quote Michael Herzfeld, “mereness is not a

9. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), 41.

10. *Ibid.*, xvi.

matter of essence but of attribution—and thus of the power to attribute.”<sup>11</sup> That is, rather than viewing nostalgia as essentially unreasonable, I propose an analysis of the political processes by which certain nostalgic longings are produced while simultaneously denied reasonability. Nostalgia is by no means expressed only by elderly people longing for the Soviet period. Whereas many historical eras are idealized and recounted nostalgically, however, only certain kinds of nostalgia are labeled and contested as such—in particular, the nostalgia for Soviet times that is dismissed as backward and evil by Saakashvili in the opening epigraph.

By alluding to conceptualizations of nostalgia that stress its intimate relationship with both present and future, I argue that this contested and ridiculed kind of nostalgia is contested and ridiculed precisely because it is concerned not only with the past.<sup>12</sup> Rather, we can understand these stories as politically charged attempts to carve out a place of social significance and certainty in a national context within which these interviewees have increasingly become marginalized and their former social status, experiences, and dreams for the future have become obsolete. Within this framework, nostalgic stories that emerge as fragmented and incoherent idealizations of the past can, on a deeper level, be understood as both meaningful and coherent. In short, we gain a better understanding of generational nostalgia in the former socialist space when we connect it to the specifics of contemporary politics and, in particular, the absences and voids which contemporary policies and representations create in everyday experience.

### New Futures, New Pasts

In the decade following the 2003 Rose Revolution that brought a neoliberal reformative government into power, Georgia has been depicted as a place of rapid and radical political transformation and economic development. As illustrated by the above epigraph, according to then President Mikheil Saakashvili, the government under his leadership has prepared Georgia for the future: economic investments are blossoming, infrastructure is continuously being developed, and the landscape is constantly changing with the mushrooming of new buildings, structures, and monuments. In this vision, Georgia is rapidly progressing toward a brighter future and is constantly increasing its distance from the “dark Soviet past,” Russian domination, and the perceived chaos of the 1990s which followed national independence.

Mikheil Saakashvili was among the main actors in the Rose Revolution, which was a massive popular reaction to electoral fraud and years of extensive corruption during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze. Besides his promise to rid the state apparatus of massive corruption, Saakashvili gained

11. Michael Herzfeld, “Anthropology and the Politics of Significance,” *Etnográfica* 4, no. 1 (2000): 18.

12. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, xvi; Peter Fritzsche, “How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity,” in Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana, 2002), 62–85. See also Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, eds., *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York, 2010), and Daphne Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany* (Bloomington, 2010).

support by advocating a more modern, European, and democratic path of reform and development in the country. One of the main strategies of the new government to accomplish this final “transition” was replacing old political, administrative, and state personnel who had served under Shevardnadze with young, “clean” candidates. In other words, candidates interested in reforms and without connections to the corrupt previous administration. The seemingly unquestionable value of youth, reform, and profound and rapid transformation became a central element of official discourse in the years that followed.<sup>13</sup>

Another strategy of the newly elected president was that of initiating a close relationship with the United States government, the European Union, and NATO. In government rhetoric such novel political alliances and strategies were supported and legitimized by representations of both recent and distant history. Through these, Georgia was historically linked to Europe, and the Soviet era and its perceived present political manifestation, Russia, were portrayed as the “Other” to Georgian development and prosperity. In other words, the creation of unambiguous and solid images of Georgia’s rapid and profound development was strongly connected to, and associated with, Russia and the Soviet past and viewed as its antithesis. This is amply illustrated by the quote from Saakashvili at the start of this article in which orientation toward the Soviet past is associated with evil, whereas good is on the side of the future presently being created.

The representation of the Soviet state as a colonial occupier and an oppressor of Georgian nationalist sentiments and freedom was evident in a range of government initiatives and practices pertaining to cultural institutions, public space, and state events. Examples include, for instance, the 2006 opening of the Museum of Soviet Occupation and a permanent exhibition at the Georgian National Museum, in Tbilisi, as well as a similar effort to recast the Stalin Museum in Gori as a critical assessment of Stalin and the Soviet state;<sup>14</sup> the removal of Soviet-era monuments, such as a WWII memorial in Kutaisi and the Stalin Monument in Gori; the passage in parliament, in May 2011, of the Liberty Charter, which restricted the public display of Soviet (and Nazi) symbols and established a state commission to assess the prevalence of monuments, street names, and inscriptions containing communist (or fascist) ideology and propaganda; and the introduction of Soviet Occupation Day as a public holiday, held on February 25, to commemorate the invasion of the Red Army in 1921. What these initiatives share is a symbolic and practical construction of the Soviet era as external and hostile to Georgian politics and nationality rather than as a formative past in which Georgians actively took part.<sup>15</sup>

In the light of the above developments, middle-aged and elderly people

13. Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union* (Burlington, Vt., 2005).

14. Katrine B. Gotfredsen, “Evasive Politics: Paradoxes of History, Nation and Everyday Communication in the Republic of Georgia” (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2013).

15. Reisner, “Interpreting the Past.”

became increasingly marginal to state discourse and practice in several respects. Partly because, at least rhetorically, youth was associated with the path moving toward the future and had become the main priority resource in public administration, and—what is more important for our purposes here—because a significant part of the older population’s memories, life experiences, and achievements are located in the context of a Georgia that was part of the Soviet Union, a time and space renounced and silenced in government discourse and practice.<sup>16</sup> In short, their personal pasts were rendered void as resources for achieving social status and recognition in the present.

### Un-crumbling Bread, Free Education, and Pioneer Camps

The first time I met Nuno was on Victory Day, 9 May 2011. Together with a small group of elderly people she was standing in front of Iosif Stalin’s birthplace in the center of Gori holding in front of her a painting of the former Soviet leader. The group, as it turned out, mostly consisted of members of the Stalin Society and the local branch of the Communist Party. These two associations are formally distinct, with the latter being a political party and the former an “apolitical society [with the task of] investigating the life and work of Stalin on the basis of science and . . . inform[ing] people about Stalin’s ideas,” as stated by the local chairman, Archil. The two organizations share an office in the town center and, in reality, most of their members.

The office is a bare room with concrete walls located in a backyard, and the painting held by Nuno on Victory Day usually hangs on the back wall, draped with plastic flowers, next to a huge map of an intact Soviet Union. The only furniture in the room consists of a row of chairs along the walls and a table in the center, from which the chairman of the Stalin Society and the leader of the Communist Party conduct the conjoined group’s meetings every Friday afternoon. At these weekly meetings the group discusses political issues—in particular, the central Communist Party’s position on new laws passed in parliament and their likely consequences. Interestingly, however, rather than being framed in relation to, say, Marxist or Stalinist socialist theory and practice, the discussions often draw on nationalist and religious imaginaries. And, in many respects, the meetings appear more like a place for sharing political grievances and protests than for making plans with regard to influencing future policies.<sup>17</sup> Hence, below I develop the point that the nos-

16. On the question of youth’s prioritization, see, for instance, Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution*, 200. Surely not all categories of youth fit within these imaginaries, and it is not only the meaningful pasts of middle-aged or elderly people which are rendered void. For a discussion of temporal marginality among youth in contemporary Georgia, see, e.g., Martin Demant Frederiksen, *Young Men, Time, and Boredom in the Republic of Georgia* (Philadelphia, 2013).

17. In that sense, the group is comparable to what Serguei A. Oushakine, in his *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, 2009), terms a *community of loss*. The construction of such communities, he argues, stem from the fact that “the downfall of socialist ideology in the 1990s cannot be limited to the disintegration of a particular value system. It also rendered meaningless the existing rituals of recognition. One’s social status, social achievements, and social biography suddenly became ostensibly devoid of familiar prescriptive clues.” Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*, 191. It is a similar experi-

talgic narratives I often heard from this group actually had more to do with their marginal position in present-day Georgia than an abstract adherence to communist ideology.

My interview with Nuno, which I quote at length below, took place at the office after a weekly meeting in the summer of 2011. Nuno, then sixty-nine years old, was born and raised in Gori. Her father fought in the Great Patriotic War and died just a few days before the war ended, leaving Nuno to be raised as an only child by her mother, who never remarried. In this context, it seems understandable that Nuno should form part of the group on Victory Day insisting that the Soviet context of WWII should be acknowledged in the commemorations. She was brought up to believe, and be proud of the fact, that her father fought and died for a great cause (the socialist victory over Nazism) and a great country (the Soviet Union).

Asked about her childhood, Nuno recalled,

I did not have bad childhood. At that time, we used to go to pioneer camps. My mother had to pay only a few kopeks to send me to pioneer camp. My mother was an accountant. She did not have a very high salary, but it was enough at that time. Do you know why? Food was very cheap. Stalin reduced the price of food every year on the first of April. You could buy a one-kilo loaf of bread for fifteen kopeks. It lasted a week without crumbling at all. It was very good bread. There were three or four kinds of butter. Everything was good and cheap. We were not poor. We had normal living conditions.

Having finished school, Nuno went to university in Tbilisi and later returned to Gori, where she started working as an accountant in a canteen serving local workers. At the age of twenty she met her husband and, a few years later, they had a son. Today, Nuno and her husband are both pensioners and live on their own, while the son lives separately with his wife and their four children, aged between eight and twenty. As we shall see from the following, the son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren are important reference points for Nuno's recollections of her own past and her comments on present-day Georgia.

KATRINE: You once told me that you studied in Tbilisi. . . . How do you remember your student period?

NUNO: It was very good. I had a scholarship. Now students pay money. At that time students had scholarships. If a student studied very well, then she got the Lenin Scholarship. If a student studied well, she got the Stalin Scholarship. Every student had a scholarship. That money was enough for food and clothes. Now it's the opposite. We have a very hard and difficult life. I have a pension of ninety lari and my husband also has a pension of ninety lari . . . no more.<sup>18</sup> My son has four children. My grandson is seventeen years old and is soon going to university. We will have to pay a lot of money for Giorgi's education and I don't know what we will do. On the list of universities he would like to go to, he wrote

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ence connecting this group, and the political and social changes in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution has, I argue, further exacerbated this experience.

18. Ninety lari is approximately \$51.



Javakhishvili, then Ilia University [both state universities in Tbilisi] and, in last place, he put Gori State University. I beg to God that he will be accepted at the university in Gori because it would be very difficult to keep two students in Tbilisi.

Nuno went on to tell me that her son has a degree in commerce and her daughter-in-law in chemistry. However, neither of them has been able to find jobs within their chosen professions. They ran a bookshop in the center of town for a while, but in the end they could not afford to pay the rent and had to close it down. Instead, they now sell cosmetics in the local market. As she continued, she explicitly connected their current working situation to the political developments in the country after independence:

**NUNO:** Our government does not worry or think about people. I don't like this system and I don't like this government. They sold my country. They sold everything, destroyed science. People who have a good education are not treated with respect. Some people who have five diplomas stand in the market to earn money to buy bread for their families.

**KATRINE:** How do you recollect the period when Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union?

**NUNO:** We were glad at the time. But then everything went the wrong way and now we miss the communist period. . . . I would go back to that time with pleasure. . . . I think if Stalin had lived longer we would have had a better life. Everyone was employed. It was not possible for someone to be unemployed. The police looked for people who did not work. We worked and we had salaries. We also had bonuses and passes for sanatoriums. Now I don't have enough money . . . and my son cannot afford to take his children somewhere on holiday. . . . We have a very bad time, and I am very sorry for our future generation. How will they live? If we manage to pay for Gvantsa's [the oldest granddaughter's] and Giorgi's educations, then what will happen? They won't be able to get a master's degree. It costs about five thousand lari to get such a degree. What should they do? Will they stand in the market? If they are going to stand in the market, why do they need to get a higher education and spend so much money on it? My daughter-in-law had been studying for seven years. Why did she need to study for so long if she was going to stand in the market? Wouldn't she be able to sell a book or [cosmetic] cream without graduating from university? For what purpose did she study?

From Nuno's recollection of her childhood and youth, we get the distinct feeling that this was a better time, a time for which she now longs. Bread was good and cheap, kids could go to camp in summer—even if their parents were not rich—and young people had the possibility of going to university in Tbilisi without paying and even of having a scholarship big enough to cover accommodations, food, and clothing. While telling her story, the economically se-

cure life she remembers from the communist era is juxtaposed with the hardships and worries she and her family faced under Saakashvili's government: anxieties about how to pay for her grandchildren's education, her secret wish that her grandson not be admitted to university in Tbilisi because it would put too much pressure on the family's finances, and her well-educated son and daughter-in-law selling cosmetics in the local marketplace rather than having a chance to use their degrees. What she sees as disregard for knowledge and experience on the part of the government and society at large is juxtaposed with the communist years, in which knowledge and experience were, in her recollection, valued and one had the opportunity to put one's knowledge to use for one's country. The present seems to her a place of stagnation and of a lack of opportunity for her loved ones to create and lead the lives they would wish.

Stories and recollections of this kind were prevalent among a majority of my middle-aged and elderly interlocutors. Their narratives would often revolve around issues similar to those addressed by Nuno above—stories of summer camps, cultural exchanges and visits to relatives in Russia or the other Soviet republics, cheap central heating in winter instead of expensive gas and electric heaters, universal free education, and working and actively contributing to society. Or they would explicitly consider questions of political repression, as Alex did; a man in his 50s working for an international NGO, he dryly noted that “maybe they [the government] are right that we could not demonstrate back then. But I didn't have anything to complain about, so why was it important?” Irina, who is also in her 50s and a curator at the Stalin Museum, displayed a similar pragmatism. As we talked about her parents and her childhood, she reflected:

They were communists, but they didn't believe in it. Maybe they believed something. Maybe they believed the ideas of socialism. . . . No. . . . It was not so bad, you know. The idea is not bad, but people—persons made it bad. . . . Today you see children in the street and they are asking you to help them. At that time there was not one child on our streets, not one child who was not in school. [. . .] And you didn't pay money in the Soviet Union; the children had a chance to get an education. Now we must pay and not everyone can afford it. . . . But now . . . our government, they've done their best to do something. They build things, roads and everything; maybe it is only the beginning. It is a very bad time for us, but maybe for our children, for our grandchildren, it will be a normal country.

Irina's characterization of the Soviet past seems more nuanced than Nuno's, which shows that the level of explicit critique of the present government in the nostalgic stories varies. But even if Irina and others like her were more nuanced in their recollections and characterizations, these still often stood in stark contrast to official representations of the Soviet period as a time of repression and poor living conditions. And when recalling these positive aspects of the past they would more often than not be labeled as nostalgics by government representatives, younger colleagues, grandchildren, and, now and then, even by themselves.

## Knowledge, Real Georgians, and the Global Order

As we continued our conversation, I asked Nuno if her grandchildren shared her bleak outlook on their future. Quite the contrary, she asserted, shrugging and smiling overbearingly. They did not fear anything and did not realize how much money is needed to support their lifestyles and studies. When I asked her what she thought it would take for their future to look brighter, she quickly responded:

The government needs to change. The country needs to be governed by a real Georgian who takes Georgia and the Georgians, our Orthodoxy and our traditions, to his heart.<sup>19</sup> All of us know that none of the government members are Georgian. They don't do Georgian affairs. They trampled all over Orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup> I can't say that I often go to church and keep all the rules, but I respect the church, our customs, and our past. This new law affected me very badly. I had high blood pressure. Their perfidious law affected me so much. . . . Georgia has a lot of educated people. But these very educated people could not stay here and they went abroad to work. They cannot come back here because our government does not need people who are strong. They cannot return. If they held fair elections, no one would choose the same president. Maybe a person will come to power who really loves his country. A president must be Georgian in Georgia. In the ministries there are people who are uneducated and inexperienced. It should not be this way. Educated people must have an opportunity to use their knowledge for their country. Bakur Kvezereli [then minister of agriculture] once said "a male cow" and "a female cow." A cow is a cow and a bull is a bull. What is he doing at the Ministry of Agriculture? Can you tell me? Maybe I'm not right because I think in the old way. But why is he the minister of agriculture? I am sure that he cannot make out greens or tell parsley from coriander.

Several things are brought into play in the above. First of all, the issue of younger generations and their relative knowledge is addressed. Her grandchildren and their naivety in approaching the hardships of life and the fragil-

19. Nuno is referring here to the quite widespread perception—among his opponents, in particular—that President Saakashvili is of Armenian origin. The Armenian minority in Georgia constitutes around 5.7 percent of the population (according to the 2002 census) and is primarily concentrated in Tbilisi and the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, which borders Armenia to the south and where Armenians make up the regional majority. Calling on the Armenian state for support, parts of the Armenian community in Georgia are demanding greater cultural, political, and religious rights, particularly within the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. For these reasons they are conceived of among some Georgians as a "fifth column" threatening Georgian national identity from within. Moreover, as will be evident below, Georgians and Armenians, who share a long history of cultural exchange as well as political coexistence and competition, both claim national ownership of certain aspects of cultural and religious heritage in the Caucasus, especially on a popular level.

20. Nuno is referring to a 5 June 2011 amendment to the law on religious freedom. The amendment, which was widely disputed by the Orthodox Church and Orthodox people in general, granted religious communities other than Orthodox Christians the right to be registered and to own property as religious communities. For a discussion of the amendment and the responses it spurred, see, for example, Shorena Latatia, "Georgia Adopts a New Law on the Status of Religious Organizations," *Human Rights House*, 26 September 2011, at [humanrightshouse.org/Articles/16973.html](http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/16973.html) (last accessed 10 October 2013).

ity of their futures are associated with a more general social problem: educated people have left the country or lost their jobs, while younger, but largely unqualified, people hold important positions—exemplified here by a minister of agriculture who does not know a cow from a bull or, perhaps, parsley from coriander. Moreover, her reflection that her arguments might be invalid because she “thinks in the old way” illustrates her perception of being denied a meaningful opinion and voice in such discussions. Second, a good future, for Nuno, is intimately connected with nationality and traditions, including religious ones, as will be even more evident in what follows. And, in contrast with the government’s representations, she does not feel these are respected in present-day Georgia. Rather, she feels them to be disregarded by a weak president and government. As we shall see below, this weakness and disregard are starkly contrasted with Stalin, who was, in her eyes, a strong leader with Georgian interests at heart.

As Nuno and I continued our conversation, we discussed the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. She insisted that Saakashvili was responsible for the outbreak of war and that actually it was the Americans who made him go into Tskhinvali, the capital of de facto independent South Ossetia, to suit their own interests. When I asked her what she thought about Russia’s part in the war and Georgian-Russian relations in a broader sense, she reflected:

NUNO: I am very sorry that we have bad relations with Russia. Russia did many bad things to us, but they also did a lot of good things. Now they [the government] are quite close to the USA, but I cannot speak to a people who have no nationality. They do not have a god; they do not live in their homelands. They annihilated the Indians—they conquered their territories and made rivers of blood there. They are plunderers. I can speak to a Russian. Russians and Georgians share religion—they are Orthodox, as we are. What can I speak to an American about?

KATRINE: So you think the Russians and the Georgians have more in common than Georgians and Europeans or Americans?

NUNO: In my opinion, we should have good relations with every country. Although Russia and America are big countries, they must not oppress my country. I have my territory, I have my customs, and I love the past, the culture, and everything about my country. Why do they dictate their will to us? I don’t want that. Some countries are rich and some are not but they are good neighbors. I want peaceful relations with everyone. I don’t support so many wars and massacres. Let’s live peacefully and be kind neighbors. Isn’t that possible? . . . Your country [Denmark] is also a small one. You have your culture, your pride. You love your country. And big countries, like the USA, England, or France, don’t have the right to swallow it up . . .

To Nuno, the relationship between Russia and Georgia is inscribed in a larger imaginary of national pride, cultural traditions, and the risk of being “swallowed up” by bigger nations. Interestingly, Saakashvili has often invoked a similar imaginary. Although his comment below expresses a more

hopeful tone than Nuno's, the lingering threat to national sovereignty and prosperity posed by what he calls "tyrant" leaderships, implicitly the Russians, is clear:

It is time to understand that the world has changed, that an army, as powerful as it might seem, cannot ultimately deny the will of the people; that a government, as strong as it might look, cannot unilaterally and freely dismember sovereign nations; that we are not in 1938 or in 1968, but in 2011. Ladies and gentlemen, the Cold War is over, but some leaders have still to realize it and to stop reasoning in terms of spheres of influence, near abroad domination and zero sum games.<sup>21</sup>

The difference between these two scenarios of possible national annihilation by greater powers is, of course, the face of that external power. Structurally, the president and Nuno engage in the same kinds of fears. The main difference, which is of course of political importance, is whether the danger to the Georgian nation springs from the United States, a "people without nationality and religion," or the imperialist "tyrants" to the north, who have still not realized that the time of empires is soon to be gone. To Nuno, it seemed the danger could potentially come from everywhere, although she implied that Georgia's relationship with Russia is at least culturally meaningful, while to the president, evil seems less difficult to locate. For him, Russia is clearly seen as a direct successor to the Soviet Union, continuing its imperialist approach to Georgia with no disruptions.

Toward the end of our interview, Nuno recalled the removal of Stalin's monument in June 2010 and the government's explanations for doing so:

They said that it was not Stalin's time any more. . . . I hate them. That's why I am saying that now Armenians hold Georgia—from president to ministers. All of them are Armenians. Soon they will ban speaking Georgian. . . . I love my country and town so much; Stalin too. In my house, Stalin is considered as God. I wish that monument could be put up again and that Stalin's name was as clean as he deserved. I wish this government did even half of the things that he did. Stalin loved hard-working and educated people and encouraged them to improve their knowledge. My dream is that a Georgian man could be leader in my country.

We are a people of great cultural history. The Georgian alphabet was invented by King Parnavaz in the fifth century. It is said that the Georgian alphabet was written by Mesrop. That's stupid. *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* was written in the eleventh century. *Shushaniki* was written in the . . . I think fifth . . . sixth . . . no, seventh century. How could Mesrop invent the Georgian alphabet when he did not know Georgian? Why do they need to tell such lies?<sup>22</sup>

21. Mikheil Saakashvili, "Remarks by H.E. Mr. Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia, Speech Delivered at 66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," 22 September 2011, at [www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements?p=6864&i=1](http://www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements?p=6864&i=1) (last accessed 14 October 2013; no longer available).

22. Mesrop Mashtots was an Armenian theologian and linguist. *The Martyrdom of Queen Shushaniki*, the first extant piece of Georgian literature, was written in the fifth century, and *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, a famous epic poem by the Georgian writer Shota Rustaveli, in the twelfth. Nuno's uncertainty about the correct references indicates

I am not against the other nationalities living in Georgia, but they should respect us, our culture and customs. That is my opinion. The president should be a Georgian man who is educated and thinks of his country and his people. I want free education for children. Now you have to pay for education and medicine. If you don't have money, you die because you can't go to the hospital. . . . I don't want to be a slave to some damned people till I die. . . . I am sure that any civilian of any country wishes freedom and peace for their country. . . . The government made us live in bad conditions, but we expect worse. Maybe soon they will not let us speak Georgian or go to church.

In expressing her fears and suspicions toward current political realities and the dangers facing the Georgian nation, Nuno draws on an idealized past of abundant Georgian cultural heritage. This seems, in her eyes, to be a period in which the nation was living up to its full cultural, religious, and territorial potential. The idealization of and national pride in the Georgian Golden Age, the tenth–thirteenth centuries, are widespread and very rarely contested in contemporary Georgia.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, it is an epoch continuously and explicitly invoked by the authorities as well. This is exemplified in a public speech given by Saakashvili in Gori in January 2012 at the opening of a new hospital. Here, the tenth-century Georgian king understood to have united the nation, David the Builder, is brought into play: “I would like all of us to remember that before David the Builder took the capital of Georgia back, he carried out many reforms, built many things in the territory that was under Georgian control. Since the epoch of David and Tamar, and in no epoch since has there been so much construction as during the recent years.”<sup>24</sup> Both Nuno and the president draw on a distant, idealized past to make arguments about the present. By comparing the progress accomplished by the post-Rose Revolution government to that accomplished by David the Builder, Saakashvili draws legitimacy to his present political projects from the nation's Golden Age.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, a number of my interlocutors repeatedly invoked the same David the Builder when trying to explain and rationalize the terror and oppression of Stalin's reign. They did so by drawing the comparison that David the Builder had also been compelled—for the greater good of the nation—to use ruthless methods to control his subjects. In that sense, two seemingly very different political arguments are able to draw legitimacy from the same legendary character, a character who is not easily dismissed.

Both Nuno's and Saakashvili's engagements with this distant national past can be understood as taking the form of what Boym terms *restorative nostalgia*: the absolute restoration of the ideal homeland; a project “about truth . . . which engage[s] in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swap-

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that her strong and affective national feelings draw largely on the Georgian Golden Age as a mythological past rather than necessarily the specifics of historical circumstances and events. I discuss this point further below.

23. Chkonia, “Timeless Identity”; Barbara Christophe, “When is a Nation? Comparing Lithuania and Georgia,” *Geopolitics* 7, no. 2 (2002): 147–72.

24. Saakashvili, “The President of Georgia Addressed the Population of Gori.”

25. See, for instance, Giorgi Maisuradze, “Time Turned Back: On the Use of History in Georgia,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 8 (July 2009): 13–14.

ping conspiracy theories.”<sup>26</sup> They both, to differing extents, produce suspicious truths about the grand national past and the threats the nation is now facing. The difference between the two is that Nuno sees this past potential of the nation to be evaporating, whereas the president sees it as reappearing in a perfected form in the (not-so-distant) future. The difference seems to be that of suspicious desolation versus hopeful conviction: To Nuno, the future of the Georgian nation is bleak. Due to suspicious government policies that undermine the nation, the Golden Age, to her, symbolizes an epoch that is forever gone. The president, on the other hand, makes analogies between the grandeur of the past and that projected for the future. In the following, I suggest that it is this difference that causes Nuno to be labeled a nostalgic rather than her idealized engagement with the past as such.

### Marginal Longings and Obsolete Futures

Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. . . . This typology of nostalgia allows us to distinguish between national memory that is based on one single plot of national identity, and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory.<sup>27</sup>

What, then, can be derived from the manifold memories, opinions, and theories evoked by Nuno above? Are they to be dismissed and denied as a “guilt-free homecoming”?<sup>28</sup> The sentiments of an old communist lady with dreams oriented toward the past rather than the future? There seem to be certain inconsistencies in Nuno’s linking of Stalin, communism, religion, and nationalism. Does it really make sense both to be highly nationalistic and to long for a time when Georgia was subjected to domination by a foreign power that suppressed this very nationality? She was happy when Georgia gained its independence—and thus, this would seem to imply, when the Soviet Union disintegrated. But with everything that has gone wrong after independence she regrets this development and would now gladly go back in time and live during Stalin’s era. Stalin, in other words, is associated in part with a better, simpler, and more secure life. Throughout her characterization of him, however, Stalin clearly also becomes associated with something more than this, something distinctively Georgian that has—ironically, perhaps—been lost to her since independence and the coming to power of the United National Movement. These apparent contradictions are surely one of the factors rendering her stories and political opposition easy to reject as irrational and idealized nostalgia.

It was hardly surprising to find nostalgic longings for the Soviet past among members of the Communist Party and a society devoted to the life and deeds of Stalin. Nevertheless, the nostalgia expressed by Nuno clearly resonated with the narratives and actions of my other middle-aged and el-

26. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

27. *Ibid.*, xviii.

28. *Ibid.*, xiv.

derly contacts in Gori—many of whom see themselves as neither communists nor Stalinists and some of whom even supported the government. Moreover, while nostalgia for communist times seems “natural” in this particular setting, the kinds of nationalist and religious opinions and stories recounted by Nuno are harder to explain in reference to her membership in the group. From a certain perspective, they can instead be understood as directly countering communist and Stalinist ideology and practice—at least as represented by the government.

In Nuno’s story, recent political developments, socioeconomic uncertainty, everyday Soviet life, and the Golden Age of the Georgian nation all merge through nostalgic longings and suspicious imaginaries that produce a fragmented and seemingly incoherent picture of the past and its relationship with the present. While chronologically, morally, and ideologically, these images and longings seem mutually exclusive, in practice they are engaged alongside each other and as such challenge the unambiguous representation of national history put forward by the government and many others, namely that the Soviet Union suppressed the ancient Georgian nation and nationality, Orthodoxy, individual freedoms, and, on a socioeconomic level, that the period of its rule represented a time of poor living conditions for all but corrupt party apparatchiks and leaders. In contrast, Nuno’s experience of better economic and material conditions during Soviet times stands alongside her present fears for the survival of the nation, a coexistence that rearranges the opposition within the official framework between Georgian nationalism, Orthodox religion, and communism.

Nuno’s stories can be read as a mix of the two nostalgic types proposed by Boym: the often suspicious and “truth-claiming” restorative nostalgia and the more fragmented and melancholic reflective nostalgia lingering in “the dreams of another place and another time.” In Nuno’s case, this was a place and time of social security and certainty—of leading a good and socially significant life with the promise of a better future. If we take her longings for this place and time seriously, the qualities they represent to Nuno can help us to understand why she and Saakashvili come to such starkly different conclusions concerning the future.

To reach this point, however, we must view nostalgia as being just as much about the present and the future as it is about the past. In other words, as a longing for structures, ideologies, practices, or experiences located in a different time—the past—nostalgia asserts what is not in the present. In that sense nostalgia is premised on a fundamental break with the past. As Peter Fritzsche puts it, nostalgia “maintains a necessarily troubled relationship to the past *which is as past* and it is quite foreign to the ordinary reactionary, who inhabits wholly, without the nostalgic’s dread, a verifiable universe in which today corresponds with yesterday.”<sup>29</sup> Nostalgia entails a realization that the longed-for time is lost. It has a utopian dimension which—in contrast to the modernist utopias of the twentieth century—is directed toward the past and its unrealized dreams and visions, toward a future that is now obsolete

29. Fritzsche, “How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity,” in Confino and Fritzsche, eds., *Work of Memory*, 65. Emphasis added.



rather than the future as such. From this perspective, nostalgia “is a longing for that shrinking ‘space of experience’ that no longer fits the new horizon of expectations.”<sup>30</sup> Nostalgia asserts what is not in the present but, just as importantly, contrasts the present with past utopias and dreams that did not come true.

Within this framework, what might be dismissed as the fragmented and incoherent nostalgia of an old Stalinist woman finds relevance and coherence in Nuno’s present life situation. Her stories can be seen as a search for a meaningful “space of experience”—the secure and purposeful life she once lived—that is, in her understanding, now rendered absent and void in official rhetoric and practice. Viewed in this way, the seemingly incoherent mix of communism, nationalism, and religion in Nuno’s narrative connects the un-realized dream of socioeconomic security and providing for the family, of being recognized for her life experience and wisdom, and of the visions she held around the time of independence for a unique and independent national community that would not be influenced or threatened by outside forces, whether globally or locally.

The nostalgia expressed by Nuno is, in other words, a longing for a former ideal future that, in her eyes, has now become obsolete. Her nostalgia represents the absence of a realization of the dreams she once held for herself, her family, and the Georgian nation. The most remarkable difference between her engagement with the past and Saakashvili’s, then, is that her dreams for the future are felt to be obsolete, whereas his dreams for the future are expressed as being on their way to being realized. This difference, I argue, has its roots in a combination of Nuno’s life experiences (or the way she remembers them) and her current social position. Whereas the government positively imagines the present and future based on an antithetical relation to a Soviet past that is cast as evil, Nuno positively evaluates the Soviet past based on an antithetical relation to a troublesome present and a threatening future.

### **Void Pasts and Present Struggles**

Nuno was by no means the only one engaged in challenging, whether subtly or explicitly, the casting of the communist past as evil. On a more general level, a longing for the relatively simple and predictable everyday life during Soviet rule, for a time when Georgian-Russian relations were unproblematic and friendly, for the possibility of traveling in Georgia and to other Soviet countries, and for steady employment, was prevalent among the overwhelming majority of my interviewees. This (sometimes uneasy and ambivalent) longing suggests that, whether for or against the government and current developments, the complexity of social memory rarely fits simple and unambiguous interpretations of the past. Moreover, the profound changes in the “truths” about the past affect and challenge former dreams and visions—dreams that are denied existence when their very everyday basis is rhetorically eradicated or cast as void. The social specifics of the past in which these dreams were

30. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 10.

once nurtured have ceased to exist, and, thus, so too have some of the social positions and statuses formerly achieved or nurtured within this sociopolitical reality.

The fragmented pasts infused with present suspicions discussed above can be rendered coherent by understanding nostalgic longing as an engagement with present marginality and a perceived lack of recognition as a socially significant being. The fragments are tied together by the specific social position and logic from which Nuno sees herself and her sociopolitical surroundings—not least her experience of occupying a constantly shrinking space within these. In other words, what appeared from the outset of this article to be a morally ambiguous and incoherent weaving together of Stalin, nationalism, communism, and religion, find a coherent explanation in contemporary experiences of cultural, social, and economic marginality and loss. Hence, within this framework it is not so much the political ideology and practice of the past being longed for as a present experience of marginality that is central to Nuno's and others' nostalgic longings. In that sense, it is not simply what the government articulates (the casting of the Soviet past and communism as evil) but also what such articulations silence (positive memories, the experience of formerly being socially significant, and a present sense of marginality) that produces nostalgia as a subtle political practice.

Nostalgia, in this sense, temporally connects several dimensions of the absence felt by Nuno and many of her contemporaries: the feeling of one's past being rendered void, a perceived lack of security and social significance in the present, and the way these two dimensions together render former dreams and visions for the future obsolete. In terms of void pasts, we can follow Eelco Runia, who understands "presence" as "being in touch"—either literally or figuratively—with people, things, events and feelings that made you into the person you are.<sup>31</sup> The absences engaged through nostalgia are configured precisely as the negation of such "being in touch," having been denied the value of the past that made you into the person you are, but also the perception of being out of touch with vital things, people, and feelings in the present. Nostalgia may thus be seen as a longing for presence but also equally a means of *presencing* that which has been rendered absent.<sup>32</sup> This attempt at presencing is, I contend, politically charged.

Nostalgia, as it emerges here, is a form of temporal displacement of a political struggle pertaining very much to the present. It is produced by a combination of a government political rhetoric and practice based on explicitly rejecting the Soviet past and of the voids and marginalities experienced in a specific sociopolitical reality. In other words, I suggest that we see Nuno's stories as active attempts to carve out a place for herself in a present constituted by a national context in which she has increasingly become marginalized and her former social status, experiences, and dreams for the future rendered

31. Eelco Runia, quoted in Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørensen, eds., *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss* (New York, 2010), 9.

32. *Ibid.*, 18.

obsolete. What is at play here, then, in a more general sociological sense, is what Axel Honneth terms a “struggle for recognition.”<sup>33</sup> It is a contestation and critique of the contemporary political reality and a subtle struggle for being recognized within this reality, a struggle and critique that is rejected and denied reasonability when dismissed as “mere” nostalgia.

As mentioned in the introduction, Georgia is by no means alone in politically and morally re-signifying the Soviet era. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, the previous decades have seen a multitude of attempts to construct (in imaginary and practice) independent and self-determining nation-states and political identities disconnected from the socialist past. Even if the concrete examples and practices described here are particular to the Georgian case, one can expect similar processes to be at play elsewhere in the wider region. Therefore, we can gain a deeper understanding of present-day generational nostalgia in the former socialist sphere if we include in our analyses the experience of social and political marginality connected to personal pasts being rendered publicly void rather than being recognized as resources for achieving social status and significance in the present. Postsocialist nostalgia, in this sense, is connected just as much to present political imaginaries and practices as to an adherence to communist ideology, a wish to reinstall Soviet power, or, to paraphrase Saakashvili, a reactionary resistance to democracy and general progress.

33. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).