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The Battlefield between East and West: History of Georgia as reflected by the town of Gori

It was August of 2008, together with my two sons I was enjoying the late summer in the summer house near the Gori. The ground began shaking and the planes started to fly on a very close distance. In the evening of that day we left the village, passed Gori and arrived in Tbilisi, the beginning of the war was obvious. In few days Gori was occupied by Russian troops, people were killed, houses were burned... Being at the front we felt what the war means: you can't do anything, nobody cares of you, your children, your home, and of your values, everything may be gone.

Thanks to the world leaders the war was stopped; our house in Gori, which was built by my ancestors in 1901 survived, the bomb fallen in the next house never blasted. I came back to Ankara, but only with one idea: to write a book on history and cultural heritage of Gori, the town I was born and I owe to.

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Geographical locality

Georgia is located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In the north it is bounded by the main Caucasian Range, forming the frontier with Russia, Azerbaijan to its east and Armenia and Turkey in south.

Gori is a small town with the population of 50.000, located in the middle of the country, in Kartli region, eastern Georgia. In classical sources eastern Georgia is called Iberia or Caucasian Iberia, while western Georgia was known to Greeks and Romans as Colchis.

Three rivers -Kura, Liakhvi and Mejuda are joining at the edge of the rock. These three rivers presumably shaped the structure of the rock, which stands in the middle of the plain area.

Gori has a good climate, the reason it was chosen as a residence for the royal families in good old times. It also was surrounded with hunting places. In modern Georgia Gori region is famous with best quality fruits and Vine.

Due to its location Gori was on the crossroads of the Georgia and its neighboring countries. The fact that shaped its history a lot:

Nobody knows exactly when the city was founded. It makes it even more complicated, that the archeological excavations has never been conducted in the town. During the occasional findings in mid 19th and in the mid of 20th of the burials in the city centre there were discovered Parthian coin hoard, Colchis (Colchian) Stater, Imitation of king **Lisymachus Stater of Thrace**, Silver Drachm of Parthian king Gotarzes, Bronze small bell, also necklaces of Egyptian work, and glass and pottery of Hellenistic period. In 1950 on the north slope of the castle was found where the kiln that was used for making ceramic vessels, water pipes, bricks and tiles was discovered together with the Hellenistic wall remains, built with the dovetail clamps.

Based on these occasional findings Georgian scientists of the 20th c. assume that the settlement was a town with acropolis in the second half of the first millennium BC. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that the cities of Iberia made a chain across the river Kura, where the trade roads were passing from east to the west, and west from east. The trade road crossing the black sea followed the river Rioni, then Kura and finally reaching the Caspian sea, going further as far as Persia and India. In the Antic period superiority in development took Mtskheta -capital city of Iberia and cave city of Uplistsikhe; both founded by the legendary Mtskhetos and Uflos, sons of Kartlos- - Archon of Georgia (Kartlos- Kartli-in Georgian name of Iberia). This medieval account of the legend contains some portion of truth, because these cities according the archeological evidence are definitely the earliest cities of eastern Georgia. The settlement of Gori must be in a chain of cities and its early period is much related to Uplistsikhe, located some 20 km on the east, which remains as one of the most important architectural and archaeological sites in Georgia and the most attractive touristic destinations in Gori region.

Uplistsikhe is a rock-hewn town considered as a multilayer archaeological-architectural site. But the town acquired its very specific profile mainly in the Late Hellenistic period (end of the

first and second centuries AD) when large-scale building works took place. At this time it acquired everything usually regarded as the necessary attributes of cities of the Hellenistic period: a moat, defensive walls and towers, a road network, a tunnel leading to the river, water supply and drainage and many structures of varying character both inside and outside the city walls.

Uphlistsikhe became the state's main religious centre, as maybe Persepolis was in Achaemenid Iran. All the main rock-hewn structures of the late Antique period probably were religious buildings. Later on with the conversion of Georgia to Christianity, Uphlistsikhe lost its importance as a primary religious centre and became a significant, but ordinary, city.

Several Christian churches were built, but the strong pagan influence was preserved in historical sources and in the memory of the local population. Uphlistsikhe as a city, finally was abandoned as a result of the Mongolian invasions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But the ninth-century basilica remained functional and continues in use today.

Importance of Gori raised after the decline of Uplistikhe. Besides that it was located on the trade roads, the geographical location made it strategically more important during the whole medieval period.

Legends and the name

The name Gori comes from the hill, hill in Georgian sounds as Gori. It was considered that Gori was mentioned by the Georgian Chronicles, Juansheri (XI author of Georgian Chronicles, who describes events of 5-7th cc. see: *Rewriting Caucasian History: The medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles, the original Georgian text and the Armenian adaptation, translated with Introduction and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996*) talking about the story of the Byzantine Emperor Herakleios defeating Persians near 626 in the Caucasus. Juansher tells that Emperor was not able to carry all his trophy and buried part of it in the hill called Tontio. This note coincides with other sources, saying that Herakeios took part in Eastern Campaigns and he himself spent some time in Caucasus. He even demolished a pagan fire temple in Gandza as a revenge to Persians for the Destruction of the Holy sepulcher in

Jerusalem built by Constantine. But while the emperor was on his eastern campaign, Persians in revenge attacked Constantinople. May be that was a reason he needed to put the trophy of war in a safe place instead of carrying it.

The document of King Vakhtang VI dated back to 1725 tells story about the foundation of Gori addressing it to King Tamar (1184-1213) who came and *"found the hill named as Tontio and founded a city Gori here"*.

Of course this legend is more legend than truth. King Tamar was so popular person that everything nice is addressed to her name. Even in eastern Turkey in historic Georgian provinces, people rarely remembering their origins will tell you legends about King Tamara.

Short historical excursion:

Mid 7th c.

Arabs invaded central Georgia, Capital city Tbilisi is controlled by Amira. Kings of Iberia are in exile; Bagrationi family, with the byzantine support establishes Georgian Kingdom and settles in the southern province of Klarjeti, taking Artanuji as a residential castle.

Uphlitsikhe once more became virtually the centre of the Iberia and a stronghold of resistance against the foreign conquerors.

At the end of 10th c. Uplistikhe and its surrounding area, including Gori is a place of dispute between western Georgian kingdom (who really controlled it), Kakhetian Kingdom, Kartvelian Kingdom (Kingdoms of Tao and Klarjeti) and Armenian Kingdom. King Theodoros II of Abkhazia – the name of western Georgian kingdom- was a blind man. According to Armenian sources (pseudo Shapuh Bagratuni) Armenian King Smbat decided to invade Theodoros, who at the same time was his relative by marriage. Unfortunately for Smbat, the battle took place in Gori, where the castle was dumped by waters, so nobody could reach it. Chronicle mentioned Gori twice as a village and once as a city. This note is regarded as the first one mentioning town with its modern name.

Meanwhile the Georgian Kingdom is on the way to its unification, David the III Bagrationi Kuropalates (990-1001) from Georgian Kingdom (whose architectural masterpieces are preserved in Erzurum and Artvin villayets, as Oshki, Parkhali, Othkta, Khahuli etc) adopted prince Bagrat as successor. Bagrat gained from father's side parts of Georgian Kingdom- Klarjeti and from mothers side – Abkhazian- western Georgian Kingdom, including central Kartli from the blind uncle Theodoros. At the end of 10th c Georgia was first time united with the capital in Kutaisi. Soon Bagrat III (960 – 1014) invaded Kakheti and Hereti regions; Arabs remained only in Tbilisi.

The following centuries Georgian Kingdom has few battles with Byzantine to keep control over the Tao (modern Erzerum-Artvin area) and with Arabs, and local strong family of Bagvashi who from time to time controlled Tbilisi.

Meanwhile in the beginning of 11th c Seljuk's started moving towards Iran, Byzantium, and Caucasus. 1048 they took Armenia from Byzantines, 1071 at the Battle of Manzikert Seljucs took control over the eastern Anatolia. Georgia was alone surrounded with the Sejuks, 1080 Seljuk raid became permanent: klarjeti, black sea coast, Shavsheti, Adjara, samche, Trialeti, Chkondidi and of Course Kartli were devastated with the nomadic invasions of Seljuks. Local population was leaving there villages. And country was left in a dreadful condition.

In 1089 King George II crowned his 16 years old son David IV, later David the Builder (1073 – 1125). To his name is addressed those military and state reforms that allowed him to clean the country from Seljuks, return capital city in Tbilisi, and even more, he occupied Armenian city of Ani from Seljuks. To support this achievement David needed army and a population. For this reason he took a very risky decision, brought 40.000 Kipchags from north Caucasus, who at that time were under the Kiev Russia's pressure and settled them in the different frontier borders of the country, also in central Kartli, which seems was mostly depopulated by Seljuk's.

The same seems to be happened with the town of Gori; Armenian Chronicle Mate Urhaeli mentions that Gori was built as a city by David the Builder, and the citizens of Ani were brought here. David built churches and made mercy over them. It seems that Gori took place of Uplistikhe, King needed a strong settlement with developed trade (Armenians are traditionally

good in this business and took this responsibility in Georgia until the USSR), at the same time Kings beloved residence was on Nacharmagevi lake, some 15 km on the north from Gori. Since this period it is obvious that Gori took a major place in defense of Kartli and Tbilisi.

The next stage of Georgian history and we may say the world history was shaped by Mongols.

Mongols occupied the Georgian territories very easily. In the same time, in the year of 1263 the Osetians - a Christian people from north Caucasus where pushed from there motherland by Berkar Khan. Osetians came to Kartli, first as refugees. Meanwhile the Georgian King Demetre II was killed by Mongols, followed by destabilization in the country. King Vakhtang II as a vassal of Mongols was forced to fight for them and came back to Kartli only in 1293; using the chance of instability Osetians in 1292 captured Gori; many Osetians and Georgians were killed in this battle, finally Osetians were forced to leave the town which they managed to burn before. But osetians moved to the Castle, which was also greatly damaged.

According to the Chronicles of Juansheri, "than Mongols came to Gori to mediate between Georgians and Osetians, to reach the peace". But actually the fact is that Mongols supported Osetians establishment in Gori. Osetians became allies with Mongols, participated in their war campaigns against Georgians and far away. The Mongolian formula of peace keeping in Georgia was successfully used in 21st c by successors of Mongols - Russians.

Osetians stay in Gori until George V the Brilliant (1286/1289 – 1346) took revenge. It took him 3 years release Gori and its surroundings from Osetians. During the Osetian Occupation city felt into decay. Armenian chronicle indicates that it became a village-like town.

The next tragedy for Georgia was Timur Lung, Tamerlane (8 April 1336 – 18 February 1405) whose ambition to restore the Mongol Empire brought new danger for the world. Timur was fighting with the Mongol Golden Horde;

Timur's first appearance in the Caucasus was a response to Khan Tokhtamysh's marauding inroad into Northern Iran through the Caucasian lands in 1385. Timur marched against Tbilisi and King Bagrat V was captured. Bagrat was converted into Islam, because this was the only way to escape the captivity and return to Kartli.

Converted King was sent back to Georgia with 12 000 troops, old king managed to send a message to his son George who managed to destroy the Timurid army and released his father. After that Timur sent his troops directly against Georgia. Timur has vanished Georgia 7-8 times. His own historian Moi Name Natanzj, describes that in whole Georgia and Armenia, mentioning Gori also, *no living place was left*. King George VII was forced to pay tribute to Timur .

According to Persian, Georgian and Armenian chronicles, many of Georgian dukes and rulers of different provinces arrived to Timur and declared their obedience. But one, the governor of Gori, Janibeg Amilakvari remained devoted to the King George VII, for what the villages near Gori were heavily invaded, churches destroyed and the crops were burnt. King remained in the Gori castle, maybe that's the reason that one of Timur's historian (nezam ad din shami) describes the Gori castle as an extremely strong fortress. Another historian (sharaf ad-din ali iezdi) describes it *as Strong as lovers oath*.

But later on he writes that the Gori castle was annihilated at the first attack. More than 60,000 people were captured as slaves, and many districts were depopulated during 8 campaigns of Timur against the Georgia.

In the 15 th. the whole Georgia and Gori together with Tbilisi, as a main bastion of Georgian Kingdom have struggled with the Türkmen tribe dynasties such as the Akkoyunlu and Karakoyunlu. This was followed by the internal wars among the Georgian kingdoms, at the end of xv th c Georgia was divided into 3 kingdoms with 3 kings of Bagrationi royal dynasty plus the most powerful and ambitious province of Samckhe, governed by Atabags, vassals of Ottomans.

All efforts of Georgian kings to free Tbilisi went without success and it remained under the Turkmen rule, Gori became a matter of competition /rivalry among Turkmens, Ottomans and Persians

From the sixteen century, when the ideas of humanism and renaissance flourished in Europe, Ottoman Empire has established its new power and Persia was trying to keep influence over the region; the only Christian neighbour of Georgia - Armenian kingdom was already abolished for

more than 200 years and was divided between Ottoman Empire and Persia, Georgian Kingdoms were left alone, struggling for existence.

New reality emerged from the 70-80 ears of 16th c.: the chain of the Persian-Ottoman wars. Georgia, including Gori once again became a battlefield.

Europe was interested in fall of Ottoman Empire, because they became a main barrier on the trade routes of east and west. Besides Ottomans were moving to the eastern and central Europe that was a big danger for the region. Because of those reasons Europe (except France, who was interested in sack of Rome) was supporting **Qizilbash Persia** and even more - supported the war. Europe was much interested in Georgia as an anti-ottoman country as it was reflected in a big number of documents that the European missionaries have recorded during their visits in Georgia. All this meant that the front of war was thrown far from Europe, unfortunately for Gori.

King Luarsab was enthroned in 1527 was first who moved the royal residence to Gori, Tbilisi was already under the Kizilbashes. His successor king Svimon I Bagrationi (1556-1569 & 1578-1600) was a remarkable person in history of Georgia, with the tragic personality. His residence was also in Gori, but he spent nearly all his life to keep control over it. First he spent many years in fighting against Kizilbash Persia. In 1569 he was captured and exiled in Persia, in the prison of Alamut, where he spent 10 years. Meanwhile the second Iranian- Ottoman war has started (1578); Ottomans led by Lala Pasha invaded Gori and declared it as sanjak. To prevent ottomans further move towards the Persia Shah send imprisoned Svimon back to Gori with 12 000 troops to release Kartli. During several years of Battles Gori was controlled from time to time by both Kizilbashes and Ottomans; Svimon successfully manage to balance between them to keep real control over the Kingdom. His policy (including the fact that he was converted into Islam) assisted Georgia to avoid the monopoly of neither Persia and neither Ottomans. Finely Svimon was captured by Ottomans and he send in Istanbul where he died I 1600. A merchant from Gori being in Istanbul managed to bring his relicts later back to Gori. Part is buried in Svetitskhoveli (Mtskheta), the main church of Georgia, and parts were sent to Jerusalem, Georgian monastery of Holly Cross.

Unlike Svimon his successors failed to keep unity and control over Gori and started each other backed by ottomans and Persians. Namely, at the beginning of 17th c Gori was rolled by Theimuuraz I supported by Ottomans. On the other hand, Persia sent to Gori powerful statesmen of Bagrationi dynasty nephew of Svimon, Rostom Bagrationi(1565–1658), who was brought up in Persia. He defieted Teimuraz and took control over Gori , made it its residential town and built a beautiful palace in Persian stile. He rebuilt the Castle and asked Italian Catholic missioners to make a drawing. Here it is. Rostom, who was brought up as Muslim, married a Christian Georgian Princes Mariam of Dadiani Family and grratly supported her devotion in construction and restoration of damaged churches in Georgia, as well as in Gori. The main cathedral Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta was restored. Rosoms rivalry Teimuraz I also converted to Islam greatly supported Christianity in Georgia. Teimuraz wanted to unify the Eastern Georgian Kingdoms, backed by Ottomans, and Rostom wanted to strengthen Kartli Kinglom only with residence in Gori backed by Persions.

Similar situation but with different consequences was developed in 19th c. King of East Georgia Erekle the II in agreement with his nephew Solomon the II King of west Georgia refused the idea of Unification and the reason was simple. Erekle the II recognized superiority of Iran and the Solomon the II of Ottomans. And thus, in close cooperation they saved whole Georgia from becoming again the battlefield. Later on Erekle the II one of the most popular king of Georgia, sighned agreement to Join the Russia and Solomon the Second followed him later. Subsequently Georgia as a battlefield of Iranian, Ottomans war disappeared and emerged as an unified kingdom within the Russia.

Soon after the death of Erekle Russia fully incorporated Georgia 1801 in order to Russify it:

- Annulled the longest in Europe ruling Royal dynasty of Bagrationi, that permanently lasted during 997 years.
- Annulled autocephaly of the Georgian church and declared it part of Russian Church
- Abolished Georgian Language as a state language.

1804 son of Erekle prince Aleksander and Solomon the Second organized first military rebellion against Russia that lasted for several years. Finally both were captured by Russia but both escaped. Ironically Alexander to Iran and Solomon to Turkey (Trabzon) both requesting support from Iran, Turkey and Europe (France); nobody was interested in Georgia, world was under the new redistribution. Obelisk of Solomon in Trabzon was considered as one of the highlights of Trabzon.

As a matter fact of the new redistribution of the world new battlefields emerged, but it was not Gori, it was Batumi and western Georgia, but it is another story.

My main message was to explain that sometimes small and not important towns may become spot of imperial clashes, left ignored by the rest of the world. While writing this paper I was trying to look at Georgian history from another angle, may be being in other country helped me to do so.

Gori is birth place of Stalin. House where he was born as Soso, Josef Jugashvili is preserved under the special pavilion. The only statue of him stands in Stalin Square, the only preserved Soviet Architectural ensemble in Georgia. Stalin Museum, a monumental building displays exhibition as it was created in Soviet times.

Who knows, the birth of Stalin in Gori may have its unforeseen logic: he was born in the town that served as a battlefield of world powers and he became himself the source of new world redistribution. Georgia gained nothing.

In front of Gori Castel, a monument of Worrier is erected. It does not personalize anyone, but symbolizes the victory and freedom. Youth holds a sword that depicts the cross, even more cross with wine branch – the cross brought in early 4th c. by the illuminator of Georgia - St. Nino of Cappadocia.