MOUNTAINS OF DISCONTENT: GEORGIAN ALPINISM AND THE LIMITS OF SOVIET EQUALITY, 1923-1955

BY

BENJAMIN BAMBERGER

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2019

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Diane Koenker, Chair
Professor Mark Steinberg
Associate Professor John Randolph
Professor Antoinette Burton

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the development of an independent mountaineering community in Georgia and its relationship with the Soviet center from the early 1920s until the immediate post-Stalin period. In 1923, a group of Georgian students led by the mathematician Giorgi Nikoladze and the local guide Iagor Kazalikashvili summited the Kazbegi peak, an imposing 5000-meter high mountain located along the Georgian military highway. This ascent served as the foundation for the creation of a nationally oriented climbing community that focused on summiting Georgian peaks through cooperation with local peoples in mountainous regions. Over the next decade, Georgian alpinists formed their own Geographic Society and made numerous summits on Georgian mountains, making the Georgian alpinist community the only non-Russian organization of alpinists in the Soviet Union at this time. As Soviet tourism centralized and became more ideologically rigid in the early 1930s, Georgian climbers came under pressure from Moscow to conform to the new norms of proletarian touring. The centralization of Soviet mountaineering meant that over the next three decades, Georgian alpinists were repeatedly denied autonomy over where and when to climb and were criticized for their insistence on developing alpinism among the mountainous populations of Georgia instead of workers in industrial centers. Officials and tourists from the Soviet center who came to the Caucasus meanwhile regularly highlighted the "backwardness" of mountainous peoples as a way to emphasize the superiority of the Soviet project. As I show, these conflicting orientations meant that mountainous regions became contested spaces where questions about the centralization of control and the proper relationship to local people played out on mountain trails and alpine expeditions.

Histories of Soviet nationalities policies have often emphasized the constructive nature of Soviet rule; that is, the many ways that the Soviet federalism succeeded in promoting national identities and national spaces. I argue instead that despite a stated commitment to federalism and the equality of all Soviet citizens, the center consistently infantilized mountainous peoples and denied the projects of non-Russians in developing mountainous spaces. An examination of tourist periodicals, newspapers, and the archives of tourist institutions, both in Moscow and in Tbilisi, illustrates how these “great-power” attitudes represented a deep continuity with nineteenth century visions of the Caucasus and Caucasians. Secondly, by focusing on the works of Georgian alpinists and regional guides, I attempt to show how the meaning of Georgia itself, as both a physical space and an intellectual project, was often formed far from the center. Although the Georgian SSR was envisioned in Moscow, the content of that space was ultimately produced not just in Tbilisi but also in the mountainous regions of the republic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the collaboration and support of so many mentors, colleagues, and friends. It has been my absolute privilege to work with Diane Koenker, who has helped guide my research and writing from the first day I arrived in Illinois. I had no way of knowing when I began the program how fortunate I was to have Diane as my advisor, but it is clear to me now how central her guidance, encouragement, and unerring kindness have been to my development as a scholar. Mark Steinberg has been enormously generous with his time and I will always be grateful for his willingness to take on multiple independent studies even when his schedule was at its busiest. From the beginning, Mark always pushed me to expand the scope of my research and make broader and more theoretically rich arguments and this dissertation is better because of his mentorship. Antoinette Burton helped me to see some of the important historiographical intersections between British and Russian history, especially when thinking more critically about empire. But she has also been unfailingly supportive of a project that only tangentially touched on her own research, and Antoinette's feedback, suggestions, and teaching were fundamental to the dissertation's development. John Randolph encouraged me to clarify my arguments on the historiography of Soviet nation building and to think more deeply about the value of spatial histories. I have greatly valued his insights and support, whether on the dissertation committee or during a first year course when he was the first to teach me how to construct a historiographical essay. It is difficult to find the words to express my thanks to this wonderful group of scholars, and I hope it is obvious the ways that their own research and teaching are reflected in the dissertation.

The University of Illinois has been such a supportive home for the past seven years that I would be remiss if I did not thank several other people. Maria Todorova taught me everything I know about nationalism and always helped to put the stresses of the academic program into their proper perspective. Valeria Sobol's class on the Caucasus in the Russian imagination helped me think more deeply about the importance of Russian literary imaginations, and formed much of the material for chapter two. The Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center (REEEC) on campus has been incredibly supportive of my research, and Alisha Kirchoff and Maureen Marshall were always unbelievably helpful in working through all the details of FLAS appointments. I am likewise grateful for the financial support of the American Research Institute of the South Caucasus and the help of its director, Talin Lindsay. The Graduate College at the University of Illinois likewise provided a dissertation completion grant that provided the time and resources for me to finish the dissertation.

At the University of Illinois, I was fortunate to meet and become friends with so many excellent graduate students, many of whom are now well into their academic careers. I know that without the support of Alex Kais, I would have never made it through prelims. Patryk Reid and Deirdre Ruscitti Harshman have been wonderful colleagues and made me feel welcome in Russian studies from the very beginning. Utathya Chattopadhyaya always encouraged me to have confidence in my intellectual abilities and has been a great friend. Utathya saw the value of my research before I even could, and his encouragement has meant a lot to me. Zachary Riebeling is an excellent scholar and friend, and I have incorporated so many of his ideas into my thinking about European history. John Marquez is a brilliant researcher and has always offered help at moments of difficulty. I am grateful for the support of these friends and so many more that there is simply not space to list.

Outside of the history department I met a number of people who were also central to the completion of this dissertation. Will McGehee helped make Urbana feel like home with his delicious meals and great conversation. Dan Meyer and Miyuki Ansari Meyer have been the best of friends. Alissa Harvey was a fellow traveler for so much of my academic program and I will always be grateful for her support. Shawn Basey made trips to Tbilisi infinitely more fun and was an enthusiastic companion on countless trips. Lisa Morrison offered so much encouragement and help and is a great friend. Santiago Santacruz, Ana Chara, Nathan McCallum, Julia Cisneros, Haley Cabaniss, Jorge San Juan, Monica Lugo-Velez, and Alex Bragg have been absolutely amazing climbing partners and even better friends. Our friendship helped me to see, on a very personal level, how climbing creates affective bonds that transcend social difference, a key argument of the dissertation. My greatest thanks goes to my parents, Jeffrey and Debra Bamberger, who have supported me in so many ways throughout this program. I could not have completed the dissertation without them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1: AT THE EDGE OF THE NATION: THE FORMATION OF THE GEORGIAN CLIMBING COMMUNITY 29

CHAPTER 2: PROLETARIAN TOURIST OR GREAT-POWER CHAUVINIST?: SOVIET TOURING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CAUCASUS 86

CHAPTER 3: GEORGIAN ALPINISM AT THE CROSSROADS OF PROLETARIAN TOURISM...132

CHAPTER 4: CONTESTED AUTHORITY: THE GEORGIAN ALPINE CLUB AND THE REORGANIZATION OF SOVIET ALPINISM FROM REPRESSION TO WAR..180

CHAPTER 5: A QUESTION OF RESPECT: GEORGIAN MOUNTAINEERING AFTER THE WAR 237

CONCLUSION: GEORGIAN ALPINISM AT THE CENTER OF THE SOVIET PROJECT 285

REFERENCES 299

APPENDIX A: ABBREVIATIONS 307

APPENDIX B: NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION...308

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the development of an independent mountaineering community in Georgia and its relationship with the Soviet center from the early 1920s until the immediate post-Stalin period. In 1923, a group of Georgian students led by the mathematician Giorgi Nikoladze and the local guide Iagor Kazalikashvili summited the Kazbegi peak, an imposing 5000-meter high mountain located along the Georgian military highway. This ascent served as the foundation for the creation of a nationally oriented climbing community that focused on summiting Georgian peaks through cooperation with local peoples in mountainous regions. Over the next decade, Georgian alpinists formed their own Geographic Society and made numerous summits on peaks in the Caucasus, making the Georgian alpinist community the only non-Russian organization of alpinists in the Soviet Union at this time. As Soviet tourism centralized and became more ideologically rigid in the early 1930s, Georgian climbers came under pressure from Moscow to conform to the new norms of proletarian touring. The centralization of Soviet mountaineering meant that over the next three decades, Georgian alpinists were repeatedly denied autonomy over where and when to climb and were criticized for their insistence on developing alpinism among the mountainous populations of Georgia instead of workers in industrial centers. Officials and tourists from the Soviet center who came to the Caucasus meanwhile regularly highlighted the “backwardness” of mountainous peoples as a way to emphasize the superiority of the Soviet project. As I show, these conflicting orientations meant that mountainous regions became contested spaces where questions about the centralization of control and the proper relationship to local people played out on mountain trails and alpine expeditions.

Mountaineering, or alpinism, as it is also known, might initially seem like a strange place to explore ideas about the construction of Georgian identity and the limits of Soviet empire. In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Georgia was more famous for its wine, mineral waters, and rich cuisine than the towering peaks perched along its northern border, peaks like Mount Kazbegi mentioned above. To the Russian public in particular, Georgians were more likely to be associated with their ability to drink prodigious amounts of saperavi, a type of red wine from eastern Georgia, over any sort of alpine activity. But mountainous space and mountainous people were central to the ideas about the content of the nation since at least the late nineteenth century and were understood by the Georgian intelligentsia at this time as the most authentic representation of national identity.[1] These contradictory visions of space and people are particularly present in Russian and Georgian writing on the Caucasus, specifically literature from the nineteenth century. Russian authors like Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov created a vision of Georgia as a land of agricultural abundance filled with hospitable locals who were only too happy to share their overflowing wine with the Russian conquerors. These ideas were imperial and explicitly orientalist, but they also served to erase the mountains as an integral part of the Georgian nation. By the late nineteenth century, stories and poems by Georgian writers like Ilia Chavchavadze and Alexander Kazbegi offered a different vision of the Caucasus which illustrated how mountainous space and peoples were not just part of the nation but central to Georgian national identity itself. These competing literary works have been examined in several excellent studies, but placing them against the archival record of Georgian mountaineering and Soviet tourism more broadly yields significant new insights into the ways that Soviet ideas about the Caucasus and Caucasians remained deeply tied to the nineteenth

[1] Paul Manning, *Strangers in a Strange Land: Occidentalist Publics and Orientalist Georgraphies in Nineteenth-Century Georgian Imaginaries* (Boston 2012).

century. Despite the radical break of Soviet rule, these two basic frameworks continued to inform the contradictory ways that Russian and Georgian climbers understood mountainous space and especially mountainous peoples.

Put another way, mountaineering offers a unique vantage point with which to understand how these abstract conceptions of Georgia existed outside of the pages of literature and played out on the ground in the mountains themselves. Although founded in 1923, the Georgian climbing community had deep ties to the pre-Soviet period and saw alpinism as a means to physically conquer Georgia's mountains in ways that buttressed the claims made by Chavchavadze, Kazbegi, and others. Even as Soviet tourism centralized in the early 1930s and the Georgian climbing community was forced to integrate more closely into the larger community of Soviet alpinism and meet the norms of proletarian touring, Georgian climbers continued to see alpinism in the service of the nation. This set Georgian climbers apart and their distinctive ability to maintain an independent yet nationally informed climbing community caused enormous tension with the Soviet center. Georgians were always a uniquely privileged nationality within the Soviet family of nations and it is no surprise that Georgian representatives confidently asserted their rights in the central institutions of Soviet alpinism, refusing to back down in the face of repeated attacks on their independence. In doing so, they appealed to Soviet promises for national equality, the end of Russian chauvinism, and the construction of an explicitly anti-imperial state, suggesting that the lack of respect and support afforded to them indicated a larger failure of the Soviet project in the periphery (their term). In this way, an examination of mountaineering illustrates the ways in which Soviet promises for equality mobilized the national projects of non-Russians, but the failure to ensure that equality in practice is indicative of the limitations of Soviet anti-imperialism. Georgian climbers insisted on their

equality but even their privileged status meant that they had enormous difficulty attaining it in the Russian world of Soviet mountaineering.

Lastly, a study of Georgian alpinism offers productive insights into questions about the relationship between the Georgian intelligentsia and the mountainous peasantry. A key tenet of Georgian climbing was to involve local hunters and guides from mountainous regions on expeditions organized by climbers from Tbilisi, almost all of whom were part of the educated classes. There was significant social division between these two groups, and yet they formed an enormously productive partnership that led to some of the most daring Soviet climbs in the Caucasus and beyond. Instead of viewing the rural hunters as backward or culturally inferior – a practice that was typical of European mountaineering at this time – Georgian climbers like Giorgi Nikoladze or Alexander Japaridze articulated a radical vision for their equality.[2] The inclusion of regional hunters as professional alpinists and their promotion to leadership positions in the Georgian climbing community illustrates another aspect of Georgian mountaineering as a nation-building project. The partnership with regional hunters gave the Georgian climbing community in Tbilisi not just a larger cadre of talented alpinists with extensive local knowledge, it also offered a degree of authenticity to the entire project of Georgian mountaineering since those that lived in the mountains were seen as more authentic representatives of the nation than the often Russian-educated urban elite. Climbing proved uniquely suited to break down social barriers between the two groups, and the shared risk, constant threat of injury and death, and cold nights spent huddled together helped to form affective communities that transcended social or regional difference. In all of these ways, mountaineering is a particularly productive subject with

---

[2] As Peter H. Hansen has argued out the relationship of western European alpinists to guides, "(b)y the early twentieth century guides were often treated like children or commodities." See Peter H. Hansen, "Partners: Guides and Sherpas in the Alps and Himalayas, 1850s-1950s" in *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* ed. by Jas Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubies (London 1999): 210-231. Quote from 219.

which to understand Soviet Georgia, the legacies of the pre-revolutionary period, and the meaning of Soviet empire from the perspective of the periphery.

The Limits of Soviet Historiography

This dissertation grew out of a preliminary search of the Soviet tourist periodical *On land and on sea* (*Na sushi i na more),* published from 1929 until 1941, in an attempt to better understand the intersections of tourism, ethnography, and Soviet nation-building. Since Georgia constituted one of the most popular destinations for Soviet tourists, there were frequent accounts of travels to the republic and numerous well-documented articles that offered insights into the ways that Georgian regionality and ethnicity were understood during this period. But as I worked through the pages of the journal, I kept stumbling upon fragments and short articles detailing the work of the Georgian Alpine Club, often written by the head of the club Alexander Japaridze. These fragments offered the tantalizing possibility that there might be a larger story about Georgian alpinists and their relationship with the institutions of Soviet tourism, as well as wider connections between mountains, climbing, and the construction of Georgian identity. Two separate trips to Tbilisi in 2013 and 2014 confirmed that there were extensive local registers that often conflicted with the archival record in the center, illustrating how Georgian alpinists had their own vision of national space and their own ideas about the development of climbing in the republic. Here there was a local story that connected to larger questions about Soviet history, but one that could only be understood by engaging archives in Moscow and Tbilisi, and sources in Russian and Georgian.

My interest in utilizing a local, non-Russian story to grapple with questions about the meaning of Soviet history at large was driven by a wider frustration with the limitations of Soviet

historiography. As I started graduate school in 2012, it seemed that one of the key problems in Soviet history was that scholars have often focused on the ways that Russians made the Soviet Union, or how the Russian experience could stand in for the category "Soviet" in totality. If attention was paid to non-Russians, it was either as a separate national history or as a minor part of a Russian dominated narrative. This insistence on seeing the Russian experience as Soviet was itself clearly articulated, perhaps inadvertently, by one of the most influential Soviet historians of the past half-century, Sheila Fitzpatrick, while reflecting on of her earlier work on the Cultural Revolution. Fitzpatrick writes, "like most people at the time, I was dismissive of nationalities: the task of getting the Russian part of Soviet history in some kind of order seemed formidable enough, without adding further complications." She adds, "I remember as a graduate student diligently reading the education journals of the 1920's, year after year, more or less cover to cover, but skipping when I came to an article on nationalities. *Mea culpa.*"[3] That such a prominent scholar could so flippantly disregard the importance of non-Russians in a multi-ethnic state where Russians themselves made up only around half the population is suggestive of the bias of the field. That a prominent historian would believe it possible to write the "Russian part of Soviet history" as if the Russian part could be neatly separated from everything else is likewise telling about the conceptual apparatuses still being engaged by Russian and Soviet historians. Implicit to Fitzpatrick's statement is a conservative assumption that Soviet history could be compartmentalized in some way and that the non-Russian populations had little effect on the more important Russian one. But I would argue that there was never a Russian part and a non-Russian part of Soviet history – the two were always mutually constitutive of each other, and only in exploring both can we understand the full meaning of the Soviet experience.

[3] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution Revisited" *The Russian Review*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (April 1999): 208.

I should add that it is clear that the field of Soviet history is moving in this direction and has been for some time. Since I began the dissertation, there have been a number of excellent works published by scholars who have been grappling with these questions, who have taken seriously the importance of non-Russian experience to the Soviet project, and who have engaged local archives and stories in exciting and new ways.[4] My research is part of this larger shift and this writing has been deeply influenced by the work of these other scholars. And I want to temper my criticism of past scholarship, because it easy to look back and criticize when one never had to deal with the structural and conceptual impediments to conducting research in an earlier period when the field of Soviet history was still very much being formed. To conduct research in Tbilisi today requires only a plane ticket and funds for living expenses. Access to the main Russian archives usually entails a letter of introduction and the proper visa. This is certainly not true for every former Soviet republic, but as a whole there are fewer restrictions to conducting research at multiple sites and far more resources for accessing and understanding non-Russian materials. As Yuri Slezkine has noted, some of the very basic conceptual apparatuses that are now taken as a given – for instance, the fact that the Soviet state was dedicated to national development – were not that long ago considered completely unorthodox.[5]

---

[4] For example, Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca 2015); Rebecca Gould, *Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus* (New Haven 2016); Krista A. Goff, "'Why Not Love Our Language and Our Culture?' National Rights and Citizenship in Khrushchev's Soviet Union." *Nationalities Papers* Vol. 43, No. 1 (2015): 27–44; Anna Whittington Forging Soviet Citizens: Ideology, Identity, and Stability in the Soviet Union, 1930-1991, Ph.D diss., University of Michigan (2018); Jeremy Johnson Literacy Unveiled: Citizenship, Nationality, Gender and the Campaigns to Eradicate Illiteracy in the Soviet South Caucasus 1922-1936, Ph.D. diss, University of Michigan (2018).

[5] Yuri Slezkine. Interview with Natalia Laas, "I tend to do my own things and expect you to do yours" in *Historians* (online journal) http://historians.in.ua/index.php/intervyu/1180-yuri-slezkine-i-tend-to-do-my-own-things-and-expect-you-to-do-yours (last accessed June 26, 2019). Slezkine notes the intense pushback to his now seminal article, "The USSR as Communal Apartment," which was one of the first major statements about the Soviet national project. *"*I remember submitting it to *The American Historical Review.* One of the readers' reports was very negative. What do you mean, 'the Bolsheviks promoted ethnic particularism'? They were terrible, right? They oppressed the nationalities." See: Yuri Slezkin, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism" *Slavic Review* Vol. 53, No. 2 (Summer 1994): 414-452.

Soviet Nation Building from the Perspective of the Periphery

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars have increasingly looked to understand the many ways in which the Soviet state was dedicated to promoting non-Russian nationalities, languages, and cultures. The scholarship that resulted, loosely focused on policies surrounding nationality policy and national delineation, represented one of the largest paradigmatic shifts in Soviet historiography in the past fifty years. Until the early 1990s, there was a wide historiographical consensus that the Soviet Union was a repressive empire, and that the Bolshevik Party crushed the national aspirations of the native peoples of the Soviet Union through force and subjugation. The Soviet Union was a "prison-house of peoples." Work by Ronald Grigor Suny, Yuri Slezkine, Terry Martin, Francine Hirsch, and others firmly dispelled this myth, and illustrated how the Soviet Union was in fact committed to the development of national territories, cultures, languages, and elites. Far from crushing the national ambitions of non-Russians, Soviet policy fundamentally encouraged them.[6]

This scholarship surrounding Soviet nationalities policy has done enormous work to reject past assumptions about the nature of Soviet rule in the non-Russian periphery, illustrating how Soviet policy was primarily *expressive* and not *repressive*. Put another way, this scholarship demonstrated how one of the Soviet Union's primary goals was the construction of nations rather than the destruction of them, even if mass deportations and ethnic cleansing complicated this construction at key moments. But I would argue that one of the limitations of these works is that they look from the center outward and see how policy was made in Moscow and then applied to the periphery. In many ways, this focus re-inscribes the historiographical problem described

---

[6] See Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1993); Slezkin, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment"; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, 2001); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005).

above, which was to dismiss the role of non-Russians as makers of Soviet history. I do not mean to suggest that non-Russians did not participate in this process at its highest levels – they clearly did, including many Georgians. But rather, the scholarship on Soviet nationality policy suggests that ideas about Soviet nations and nationality were formed in Moscow with little input from the republics themselves. As Adeeb Khalid has argued, "since much of this new scholarship focuses primarily on policy as it was debated and formulated at the center, it runs the risk of exaggerating the role of the Soviet state and rending it more benevolent that it perhaps was."[7] That is, it misses the complex interplay between national elites, the Soviet state, and pre-revolutionary ideas about national culture and identity. Perhaps more critically, it overlooks some of the ways that Soviet policy was hostile to national projects as imagined outside of Moscow and in the republics and autonomous regions.

The Soviet national project as a whole was neither as repressive as understood by the earlier prison-house model, or as expressive and constructive as the newer scholarship contends. Rather, it was complex combination of both, simultaneously both expressive and repressive. Soviet leaders could be invested in the promotion of national territories, cultures, languages, and elites, and at the same time oppose other expressions of national identity that they did not deem appropriate or fitting with that nation. Terry Martin has described how Soviet policy involved an "aggressive promotion of symbolic markers of national identity: national folklore, museums, dress, food, costumes, opera, poets, progressive historical events, and classic literary works."[8] These symbolic markers were a powerful means to define the nation and often attracted immense support from national intelligentsias. There could be enormous overlap in the goals of the national elite in the periphery and Soviet policy makers in Moscow that led to common ideas

---

[7] Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan,* 18.
[8] Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 13.

about the meaning and content of Soviet nations. But there was often conflict. As Khalid notes, "(i)ndigenous elites were often disappointed in what they could achieve in practice, while bringing them in line… was a basic preoccupation of the Soviet regime and its organs of political control. Soviet cultural polices were productive and destructive at the same time."[9]

The goal of this dissertation then is to move away from a narrative about policy and politics, and to write a story about how nationality was constructed in the republics themselves – not from the center outward but from the periphery inward. Georgian mountaineering was a local alternative to how Georgian nationality was defined in Moscow, one that was envisioned by members of the Georgian intelligentsia and which connected to ideas about the nation that pre-dated the Soviet experience. In principle, since the practices of Georgian climbing largely adhered to the purported goals of Soviet alpinism as articulated by the 1930s – collectivism, mass ascents, the promotion of women, conquering nature for the benefit of industry, among others – Georgian climbers should have been supported by the central institutions of the sport. The Georgian climbing community saw mountaineering as a means to promote a particular vision of the Georgian nation, but at its core there was nothing inherently anti-Soviet about its activities. Despite this, the independence and expeditions of Georgian climbers were repeatedly attacked by the various institutions of Soviet tourism, and this conflict only resolved when Georgian alpinists began to focus more seriously on high-altitude ascents in Central Asia – that is, when climbing no longer intersected so prominently with questions about Georgian identity and space.

The experience of Georgian mountaineers suggests how conflict with the Soviet center hinged on differing interpretations of the symbolic markers of nationality. Georgian wine and food would go on to conquer the Soviet table, and the Soviet state poured significant resources

[9] Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan,* 18.

into promoting Georgian cuisine and viticulture. It is unsurprising that food, wine, and hospitality became representative of "sunny" Georgia in the Soviet period, since these were also the symbolic markers of the nation in the nineteenth century. But Georgian mountaineers were never afforded such attention or the same sense that mountains and the exploration of mountainous space were fundamental markers of Georgian identity. Georgian mountaineering was a national project that was mobilized by the promises of Soviet national development – the expressive parts of Soviet nationality policy – but it was confronted by state institutions that refused to recognize it as a legitimate expression of national identity and which were threatened by its independence. The result of these incongruities was nearly three decades of conflict between Georgian climbers and the Russian dominated leadership of the sport in Moscow.

The focus on local expressions of national identity over the visions of policy makers in Moscow offers the promising opportunity to move beyond the binary of center and periphery and to begin to understand how non-Russians themselves constructed the nation. The story of Georgian mountaineering is not simply a story of Georgian climbers in Tbilisi confronting the leaders of the sport in Moscow, it is also a story about how those same climbers managed regional and ethnic difference and the ways that such difference was intimately linked to questions over what it meant to be Georgian. The narrative that emerges is a tripartite structure with three sets of locales, each with a distinct set of actors. There is the Soviet center, made up of leading Soviet climbers, who were predominantly Russian and who had enormous influence on the development and institutions of Soviet alpinism. There are leading Georgian climbers in Tbilisi, and to a lesser extent Kutaisi, almost all of whom could in some way be considered part of the national elite and who often had Russian or western European educations. And lastly, there were hunters and guides in mountainous regions like Svaneti and Khevi, who, in addition

to Georgian, spoke regional dialects and languages but often not Russian. These hunters were eventually recognized as some of Soviet Union's most decorated alpinists, but they were an anomaly within the wider Soviet climbing community, which was dominated by the urban elite and Soviet middle classes. Despite an emphasis on worker alpinists, Soviet mountaineers were more often engineers, professors, or students, than workers or "peasants," as the Svan hunters came to be labeled.[10]

This tripartite structure opens up important questions about the meaning of Georgian regionality and the way that different ethnic or regional identities contributed to ideas about the nation as a whole. Georgia is a deeply regionalized country with significant and marked difference between its constituent parts, a fact that remains true in the twenty-first century. The basic reason for this deep regionalization has to do with geographic differences that were magnified by differing political orientations between eastern and western Georgia prior to Russian annexation in the nineteenth century. The Likhi or Surami mountain range in central Georgia divided the country into eastern and western halves, which then served as an imperial border between the Ottoman and Iranian empires. As Stephen Jones has detailed, "This political division remained until the nineteenth century; western Georgia was part of the Ottoman cultural and political world, and eastern Georgia was in the Iranian sphere of influence."[11] This division between east and west was further complicated by differences between highland and lowland regions, between mountainous peoples and lowland populations. Mountainous regions like Svaneti or Khevsureti were largely isolated from urban Georgia and developed their own unique regional cultures that were arguably more distinctive than other regions. On top of this regional

---

[10] Eva Maurer, "An Academic Escape to the Periphery? The Social and Cultural Milieu of Soviet Mountaineering from the 1920's to 1960's" in *Euphoria and Exhaustion: Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society* (Frankfurt, 2010), 159-178.

[11] Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883-1917* (Cambridge, Mass 2005), 11.

difference is also linguistic difference, particularly in the regions of Samegrelo in western Georgia and Svaneti in northwestern Georgia. Mingrelians and Svans, as the people from these two regions are known, speak their own languages that are related to Georgian but not mutually intelligible with it. These linguistic differences can be quite extreme. As Kevin Tuite has noted, the Svan language "is no closer to Georgian than Icelandic is to Modern English."[12] Other regions, especially mountainous ones, have distinct dialects that are immediately recognizable by other Georgian speakers.

The result of all this difference was that in the Soviet period, there were sustained questions about who exactly was part of the Georgian nation. As Francine Hirsch has shown, Soviet officials repeatedly doubted whether Mingrelians, Svans, and Adjars – predominantly Muslim Georgians who lived along the Black Sea coast – were members of the Georgian nation. All three groups were initially considered separate nationalities during the first Soviet census in 1926.[13] Georgian representatives pushed back against these assertions and insisted that these groups were in fact Georgians. As Hirsch notes, these representatives "berated central authorities and experts for attempting 'to break up the Georgian nation,' maintaining that the 'false division' of the Georgians was reminiscent of tsarist colonial politics."[14] Ultimately, Georgian leaders prevailed, and the revised list of nationalities produced in 1927 showed these groups to be sub-groups of the larger Georgian nation.[15] But as late as the 1937 census, there were still questions over the degree to which Mingrelians, Svans, and Adjars were actually Georgian.[16]

---

[12] Kevin Tuite, *Svan* (Munched 1997), 1. It is also important to note that Georgian is not an Indo-European language and is not related to an of the other languages families in the Caucasus.
[13] Hirsch, *Empire of Nations,* 132-133; see also appendix two, 329-333.
[14] Ibid, 132-133.
[15] Francine Hirsch, "The Soviet Union as a Work-in-Progress: Ethnographers and the Category Nationality in the 1926, 1937, and 1939 Censuses." *Slavic Review, Vol. 56, No. 2* (Summer, 1997), 264.
[16] Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 278.

The inability of ethnographers to see a more unified Georgian nation is perhaps not surprising. As Stephen Jones has illustrated, the 1897 census divided Georgians into eight distinct regional groups, with the Svans, Mingrelians, and Laz constituting a "separate subgroup" entirely. Jones argues that the reason Tsarist officials saw so many groups of Georgians was because of real regional difference, and not a more nefarious plan to divide the Georgian nation in order to secure imperial control, as Georgian officials contended in the Soviet period.[17] As Jones notes, "Walking down the streets of Tiflis in the 1890s, an observer could easily identify a Gurian, Kakhetian, or Mingrelian."[18] As Georgia modernized and became more interconnected in the early twentieth century these regionalisms ameliorated to some degree, but they were always visible. The larger point here is that, Georgian regional difference was not just a challenge to Soviet officials, but also to the Georgian intelligentsia for whom such difference was both central to ideas about the nation and also a problem for its cohesive formation.

A study of Georgian mountaineering unfortunately does not offer many insights into the ways that Mingrelians and Adjars were integrated into the nation, but it does offer a unique perspective on the alterity of mountainous regions, the ways that mountainous peoples like the Svans understood their own nationality, and the relationship of the Georgian urban center to its own mountainous periphery. As Kevin Tuite has noted, "the inhabitants of the northern Georgian mountain districts, both east and west of the Likhi range – some of which had never yielded to a foreign army until the tsarist period – have held on to their ancient folkways and pre-Christian religious systems to a degree unparalleled in modern Europe."[19] Mountainous regions offered unique challenges to the formation of a homogenous Georgian nation because their historical experience was often separate from the lowland regions to the south, even if authors like Ilia

---

[17] Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors*, 14.
[18] Ibid, 15.
[19] Kevin Tuite, *An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry* (London 1994), 16.

Chavchavadze were conceptualizing such regions and peoples as the most authentic parts of the nation.

Georgian alpinists from Tbilisi were forced to deal with this difference in their climbs, since it was impossible not to engage the local population while organizing alpine expeditions. Their approach to the local population was unique and diverged dramatically from the practices of western European or Russian climbing in the Caucasus. Instead of seeing mountainous peoples as backward representatives of a pre-modern past that needed to be discarded, they saw hunters and guides as equals whose material culture and local knowledge were critical to alpine success. Put another way, Georgian climbers explicitly rejected a form of "nesting" orientalism, where mountainous peoples were essentialized as uncultured and primitive in relation to the more culturally "advanced" climbers from Tbilisi.[20] That leading Georgian climbers did not orientalize mountainous peoples is surprising and notable. In the early Soviet period, mountainous regions were explicitly seen as places of backwardness, and the culture of these regions was often understood to be medieval and fundamentally hostile to the project of socialist modernity. For Georgian climbers, these were not just abstract conceptions – Svaneti in particular was made into one of the most well known examples of such backwardness illustrated by the 1930 film *Salt for Svaneti,* which portrayed Svans as superstitious, primitive, and lacking the most basic essentials for civilization – salt. It would have been very easy for leading Georgian climbers from Tbilisi to engage the discourses of mountainous backwardness, especially since they themselves were regularly seen as less advanced by other Russian climbers and tourists.

[20] Milica Bakic-Hayden and Robert M. Hayden, "Orientalist Variations on the Theme "Balkans": Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics," *Slavic Review* Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring, 1992): 1-15.

The reason that Georgian alpinists did not is because the entire project of Georgian climbing was focused on constructing nation through the exploration of mountainous space and was informed by a pre-revolutionary imaginary geography that saw mountainous peoples as central to the Georgian nation. It was essential that mountainous peoples were included on expeditions as equals because their participation affirmed the role of such groups in the nation itself. It is not surprising that urban Georgian climbers regularly criticized Russian and European alpinists for their attitudes towards mountainous Georgians, but had much less to say about similar attitudes directed at Ingush, Balkar, or other North Caucasian hunters and alpine guides. And the process of climbing together across difficult and dangerous terrain brought the two groups together in ways that fostered mutual respect that was reminiscent of an earlier alpine club in Poland, the Tatra Society, which similarly focused on the intersections between mountainous spaces, peoples, and the nation in the late 1800s. As Patrice M. Dabrowski has shown, the Tatra Society was formed to explore the Tatra Mountains in the Carpathians, but soon came to focus on improving the lives of the *Gorale*, the impoverished highland shepherds who lived there. As Dabrowski writes, “The more lowlanders learned about the *Gorale*… the more they came to admire them. This was truly a superior Polish peasant, one that came to be seen as preserving the old Polish ways. Ultimately, the *Gorale* came to be courted as the youngest, most desirable members of a modern Polish nation in the process of formation.”[21] A similar process occurred with Georgian climbers from Tbilisi. The more they worked with hunters and guides from mountainous regions – hunters like Iagor Kazalikashvili from Khevi or Goji Zurebiani from Svaneti – the more they came to admire their abilities and see them as essential to fulfilling the national mandate of Georgian climbing.

[21] Patrice M. Dabrowski, “‘Discovering" the Galician Borderlands: The Case of the Eastern Carpathians,” *Slavic Review* Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer 2005): 387.

For their part, local or regional climbers like Kazalikashvili and Zurebiani were equally mobilized by the prospect of climbing in the service of the nation. The partnership between climbers from Tbilisi and mountainous regions like Svaneti was successful because both groups were invested in the project of Georgian alpinism. Soviet and Tsarist officials may have doubted whether mountainous peoples, and specifically those from Svaneti, were part of the Georgian nation. But the history of Georgian climbing suggests that such people never had any doubt about their national allegiance, even if they maintained their regional difference. This focus likewise allows us to see important intersections between the mountainous regions themselves that often bypassed Moscow or Tbilisi. The exploits of climbers from one mountainous region could inspire those from another and helped to create an idea of mountainous space as Georgian that transcended regional difference. One of the real limits to this approach, however, is that it does not allow for an exploration of inter-regionality that extends beyond the nation. There were clearly important connections between Georgian hunters and guides and their North Caucasian counterparts, particularly in the region of Khevi, that simply are not accessible with this methodology. In this way, the tripartiate structure allows us to better investigate the construction of the nation, but in doing so re-centers it as a category of analysis.

The Meaning of Soviet Empire

A study of Georgian alpinism also offers unique insights into the distinct nature of Soviet empire. While there is an increasing acceptance of the utility of seeing the Soviet Union as an empire, there is still significant debate over the nature of that empire and the degree to which it was exploitative and colonial. Part of the reason for this is that the Soviet leaders took seriously the mandate to construct an explicitly anti-imperial state. As France Hirsch has shown in her

research on the State Colonization Research Institute (Goskolonit), Soviet experts were knowledgeable of "European and North American colonization policies" and sought to articulate how Soviet actions would be different from British or French ones.[22] Experts at Goskolonit attempted to explain how "Soviet *kolonizatsiia* was premised on a new relationship between metropole and colony" and thus was not exploitative.[23] At its core, the Soviet Union was a state dedicated to an anti-imperial ethos that aimed not just to overcome the abuses of Russian chauvinism during the Tsarist era, but also to challenge British, French, and American global leadership by fostering more equal relationships between Russians and non-Russians at home.

Other scholars have suggested that relationship between the Russian center and non-Russian periphery in fact remained exploitative, despite the lofty anti-imperial rhetoric. In particular, Douglas Northrup's work on unveiling campaigns in Soviet Uzbekistan has shown how women's dress became a way to measure the commitment of Uzbek men to the Soviet project and Soviet values. But by doing so, Russian leaders ultimately created the veil "as a principal maker of social difference" which, as Northrop notes, "shows the centrality of ethnic and cultural difference in shaping Bolshevism for the non-Russian periphery.[24] In this sense, Northrup argues that the Soviet Union ruled through the creation of social and ethnic difference like other European empires. Or as he states more bluntly, "the USSR, like its tsarist predecessor, was a colonial empire. Power in the Soviet Union was expressed across lines of hierarchy and difference that created at least theoretically distinct centers (metropoles) and peripheries (colonies)."[25]

---

[22] Hirsch, *Empire of Nations,* 87-88.
[23] Ibid, 90.
[24] Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca 2004), 22.
[25] Northrop, *Veiled Empire,* 22.

In contrast, Adeeb Khalid has argued that Soviet actions in Central Asia were inherently not colonial, and that the Soviet state was "a different kind of modern polity, the activist, interventionist, mobilizational state that seeks to sculpt its citizenry in an ideal image."[26] Here, Khalid sees a fundamental difference between colonial empires and mobilizational ones. As he argues, the former sought "the *perpetuation* of difference between rulers and ruled" while the latter "tended to homogenize populations in order to attain universal goals."[27] Both types of empires attempted to transform the places they ruled with their own distinct civilizing missions, but the scope of the Soviet civilizing mission was simply much broader than that of British or French imperial regimes. As he suggests, it is important to distinguish whether ideas about backwardness and ethnic classification were "deployed to exclude people from politics or to force their entry into it, whether it is used to assert inequalities or to preach world revolution."[28] In this way, Khalid suggests that the label "colonial" makes little sense in the Soviet context.

It is not clear that the debate over the nature of Soviet empire and the degree to which it reflected the colonial practices of western European empires has ever been resolved in the historiography, a fact that has led to wider questions over the applicability of post-colonial studies and methodologies to Soviet history.[29] I would argue that the lack of resolution oftentimes is a result of differences in perspective. For historians studying the actions of Russian elites in Moscow, the Soviet Union does appear to be genuine in its commitment to anti-imperialism. For those who look at the objects of Bolshevik transformation, like Northrup,

---

[26] Adeeb Khalid, "Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective," *Slavic Review* Vol. 65, No. 2 (Summer, 2006): 232.
[27] Khalid, "Backwardness and the Quet for Civilization": 233; see also Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, 8-10. Khalid cites Northrop's quotation included above and clearly disagrees with Northrop's conception of Soviet empire. Since these two scholars offer such differing interpretations about the nature of Soviet empire, it is useful to place them into conversation with each other here.
[28] Khalid, "Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization," 251.
[29] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram and Vitaly Chernetsky, "Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space," *PMLA* Vol. 121, No. 3 (May 2006): 828-836.

Soviet policies appear much more colonial. And for those who look at the actors mediating between the local population and Moscow, like Khalid's work on Central Asian intellectuals known as Jadids, the situation seems much more complex and fluid. Indeed, we are left with the paradox that the Soviet Union was what Nancy Condee described as an "anti-imperialist empire."[30] Or, as Harsha Ram has aptly noted, "If the Soviet Union was an empire, it was one that combined an exceptionally violent and coercive centralism with a paternalistic internationalism whose relation to the peripheries of the USSR was by no means purely exploitative."[31]

A study of Georgian mountaineering offers unique insights into understanding this paradox. Georgian climbers never saw themselves as colonial subjects and were active participants in the construction of socialist modernity. But they often expressed their discontent with Soviet alpinism's failure to fulfill the promises of the October Revolution and regularly highlighted how their relationship with the "center" (their own term) was an imperial one. Georgian climbers insisted on their equality but even their privileged status meant that they had enormous difficulty attaining it in the Russian dominated world of Soviet mountaineering. Here, I would argue that it is possible to take seriously Soviet attempts to confront the imperial past and construct an anti-imperial present, while also seeing how those attempts were incompletely implemented on the ground. As a mobilizational state, the Soviet Union promised equality to all of its citizens regardless of ethnicity, but consistently struggled to see non-Russians as culturally advanced representatives of socialist modernity in ways that often mirrored ethnic or national hierarchies in the pre-revolutionary period. The history of Georgian alpinism illustrates the

---

[30] Nancy Condee, "The Anti-imperialist Empire and After: In Dialogue with Gayatri Spivak's "Are You Postcolonial?" *PMLA* Vol. 121, No. 3 (May 2006): 829-831.
[31] Harsha Ram, "Between 1917 and 1947: Postcoloniality and Russia-Eurasia," *PMLA* Vol. 121, No. 3 (May 2006): 832.

complexity of this process, and the ways that Georgians could form their own climbing community and achieve success that was recognized at the highest levels of Soviet sport, but still be frustrated by the continued existence of Russian chauvinism and sustained attacks on their ability participate in the development of Soviet climbing. The key is not to see where the Soviet Union completely failed or succeeded in its anti-imperial ambitions, but to search out the limitations of these ambitions.

Notes of Sources

It is only possible to begin the process of understanding these limitations by engaging sources in the non-Russian periphery, often in local languages. This dissertation utilizes a number of important sources from Tbilisi, including books, periodicals, and newspapers, many of which were published only in Georgian. But even Russian language sources from Georgia offered new insight into understanding the ways that alpinism and tourism was implemented in the republic, offering a local perspective even if written in the imperial vernacular. Comparing these local sources with the archival record in center illuminates some of the many ways that policies could be formed in Moscow, and then enacted in a manner that totally diverged from their original intent in Georgia. Here the local perspective, placed in comparison with more central archives and sources, allows us to see the divergences between ambition and reality.

Like most works of climbing history, this dissertation relies heavily on first hand accounts of key expeditions and ascents. Many of these sources are particularly rich with detail regarding the personal relationships between various climbers and climbing groups, and, read carefully, offer insights into the social history of climbing that extends beyond the ascent itself. Having worked with these sources for a number of years, it is clear that the particular details of

climbing expeditions – the difficulty of the ascent, the number of days spent climbing, even the exact time of the summit – were rarely exaggerated and almost always accurate. An essential element of Soviet alpinism during this period was the practice of leaving notes on mountain peaks that could then be checked and retrieved by other climbers to confirm the ascent. Published expedition accounts were read voraciously by other alpinists, and any exaggerations were likely to be criticized publically in the press or at alpinist meetings. There does not seem to have been any real problems with fraudulent representation, and as a result I have chosen to take these details as fact and include them uncritically in the dissertation when describing the climbs.

One of the strategies that I utilized was to re-narrate many of these expeditions or ascents so that the stakes of climbing were apparent to the reader, so that the reader could feel the cold on their fingertips, hear the crunch of ice under their feet, and understand that climbing during this period always involved the risk of death or significant injury. I wanted readers to grasp, in a visceral way, the real dangers of climbing even if this was their first introduction to the sport. This is perhaps an unorthodox strategy for historical narration and especially for a dissertation. But I would argue that there is real analytical value in this approach apart from making the text more engaging. A key thread of my argument is that the dangers of climbing and the shared risk of alpine ascents helped to create affective relationships between Georgian climbers from Tbilisi and those from mountainous regions that were central to the national project of Georgian mountaineering. The deaths of leading Georgian climbers, meanwhile, were often moments of contention that reflected sustained conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi. It is only possible to understand how those relationships formed if we are able to get a vivid sense of what it meant to climb together under the constant threat of death and to understand how the tragic fate of fallen climbers resonated emotionally within the Georgian climbing community.

One of the drawbacks to this approach is that it risks presenting a triumphalist picture of Georgian alpinism. This is not my intent, and to some degree this is a byproduct of a focus on Georgian climbers and not Russian ones. The Georgian climbing community was extremely successful, and leading Georgian climbers made brilliant ascents that were marked as important Soviet achievements. But this was also true of other groups of Soviet climbers, including those in Moscow, Leningrad, and urban centers in Ukraine – climbers that this dissertation only mentions in brief. The world of Soviet climbing during this period, and arguably much later, was one that was comfortable with a high level of risk. I want to make clear that in their expeditions, Georgian climbers reflected the normative practices of Soviet climbing and were not an exceptional aberration to them. What was unique about Georgian climbers was not their climbing success but their institutional longevity and their ability to maintain some form of independence across the entire Soviet period. But it is undeniable that in my own re-narration, my personal admiration for the accomplishments of Georgian climbers becomes apparent. Here, I should emphasize that such admiration is not for Georgian climbers as Georgians, but for Georgian climbers as climbers, and this approbation could easily be applied to any number of Russian alpinists from this period.

Writing this dissertation has brought me into the practical world of climbing in small but meaningful ways, and has given me a strong sense of how risk is managed today and what is considered an appropriate tolerance of risk. In reading expedition accounts of Soviet climbers, I was consistently taken aback by the level of risk that such climbers were willing to accept. Not only were these climbers accomplishing difficult ascents, they were doing it without modern weather forecasting and with equipment that, as they regularly complained, was consistently deficient. Today it is extremely rare for equipment to fail when used properly, but in the Soviet

period equipment failure was a constant problem. For Soviet climbers, it was not uncommon for ropes to tear, for carabineers to break under load, for the wooden handles of ice axes to snap in half, or for the teeth of crampons to be tempered improperly, leading to teeth that broke off because they were too hard or bent because they were too soft. Oftentimes, these deficiencies would only become apparent when the climbers were well into the ascent, leaving them without pieces of necessary equipment thousands of meters into a climb. And even when this equipment did not fail, it offered much less protection and comfort than the equipment used today. Modern nylon climbing rope was only mass-produced beginning in the 1950s, and modern harnesses and belay devices became available even later. What this meant was that even if the equipment held, the chance of injury after falling was significantly higher than today. Despite these limitations, the achievements of Soviet climbers during this period, including Georgians, was simply exceptional. To give one notable example, the route that Gabriel Khergiani led on Ushba in 1937 is still considered to be a serious alpinist achievement today and continues to carry his name. It is simply unimaginable to me what it would be like to climb this route without the protection of modern equipment. It is my hope that this dissertation can offer important insights into the meaning of Soviet empire, the construction of Georgian national identity, and ideas about mountainous space that crossed the revolutionary divide. But it is also my hope that the narrative structure and reconstruction of significant Georgian and Soviet ascents gives the reader not just an appreciation for climbing during this period, but for climbing as a whole.

Overview

This dissertation is organized in five chapters that generally follow the chronological development of Georgian mountaineering and the creation of Soviet institutions organized to

govern the sport. I have utilized this relatively linear chronology not just because the history of Georgian alpinism lends itself to historical narration, but also because it suggests how national conflict often transcended the more general political timeline of Soviet national development. For thirty years, leading Georgian alpinists consistently articulated their goal to create a national climbing community through a partnership between the mountainous peasantry and the urban intelligentsia. This created significant conflict with the central institutions of the sport, but this conflict was only mitigated when, in the post-war period, Soviet climbing began to shift its focus to Central Asia and decreased its emphasis on worker alpinists. By the mid-1950s – a time of resurgent Russian nationalism and Georgian unrest due to de-Stalinization – the relationship between Georgian alpinists and the central institutions of the sport was never better. What this suggests is that on the ground the relationship between Russians and Georgians and more generally between center and periphery, was complicated and does not easily align to more standard political timelines.

The first chapter, "At the Edge of the Nation: The Formation of the Georgian Climbing Community" examines how Georgian intellectuals envisioned alpinism as a project to both physically and discursively conquer mountainous space in the name of the Georgian nation that was informed by nineteenth century Georgian literature. This vision resulted in the creation of the Geographic Society of Georgia in 1924, which served as the institutional home of Georgian mountaineering until the early 1930s and connected Georgian climbers with leading alpinists in western Europe. Led by Nikoladze, Georgian alpinists articulated a unique set of guiding principles that would define Georgian mountaineering well into the post-war period, notably the necessity of developing local climbing communities in mountainous regions, the need to include

and promote Georgian women in alpinist activities, and a keen sense that mountaineering was a valuable tool for the promotion of national identity.

Chapter two, "Proletarian Tourist or Great-Power Chauvinist?: Soviet Touring from the Perspective of the Caucasus," steps back from alpinism and looks at the motivations of the mainly Russian tourists as they traveled to the south. As I argue, these tourists brought with them not just rucksacks and sleeping bags, but a set of discursive assumptions about the backwardness of local Caucasians based on the works of nineteenth century romantic authors like Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov. Although such attitudes were publically condemned, they dovetailed nicely with official Soviet understandings of modernity as industrial and urban. The search for the exotic among tourists consistently frustrated administrators in the Caucasus who openly complained about Russian chauvinism. Proletarian tourism then was not just the Soviet response to capitalist leisure time, but, at least initially, an inherently imperial project with significant commonalities to the Tsarist period, despite its vocal commitment to anti-imperial politics. These first two chapters illustrate how Georgians and Russians had radically different understandings of mountainous space in the Caucasus that stemmed from the competing imaginary geographies of authors like Pushkin and Chavchavadze. As I explore in the following chapters, these contradictory orientations prove fundamental to understanding the conflict between Georgian climbers and the Soviet center from the 1930s until the early 1950s.

The following chapter, "Georgian Alpinism at the Crossroads of Proletarian Tourism," looks at the initial attempts of the Geographic Society of Georgia to develop alpinism in Svaneti, a mountainous region in northwestern Georgia home to some of the most challenging peaks in the Caucasus. Despite the tragic deaths of two Georgian climbers in the region, Georgian alpinists cultivated relationships with local hunters, the first steps in the formation of a local

climbing community in Svaneti. But these efforts were attacked by the newly created Society for Proletarian Tourism and Excursions (OPTE) based in Moscow, which sought to prohibit the mountaineering activities of the Geographic Society because of its connection to English alpinists and failure to promote alpinism among urban workers. I argue that this conflict was driven by two starkly different visions for the development of alpinism in Georgia and conflicting imaginations surrounding mountainous space and especially mountainous peoples.

Chapter four, “Contested Authority: The Georgian Alpine Club and the Reorganization of Soviet Alpinism from Repression to War,” traces the continuation of this conflict after the collapse of the OPTE in 1936 and the creation of new institutional bodies like the All-Union Section of Alpinism (VSA). Georgian climbers used the failure of the OPTE to form their own alpine club in the same year, a unique institutional arrangement that stood out for its relative independence from the leaders of the sport in Moscow. But this reorganization of Soviet alpinism did not solve the fundamental differences between leading Georgian climbers and their counterparts at the VSA. Instead, the VSA used safety violations as a way to impose control over Georgian alpinists, moving to disqualify the head of the Alpine Club from climbing activities in 1943. Through the use of both official and personal archives, I reconstruct how these conflicts culminated in open hostility between the VSA and Alpine Club and illustrate the complicated yet clearly imperial nature of Soviet rule in the non-Russian periphery.

Lastly, chapter five, “A Question of Respect: Georgian Mountaineering after the War” follows the deteriorating relationship between the Georgian Alpine Club and the VSA after the death of a leading Georgian climber in 1945. As a result of the accident, the Alpine Club gained a reputation for reckless climbing and the VSA moved to curtail its authority to conduct difficult ascents. These tensions only abated after several daring, but safe, expeditions by Georgian

climbers amid the increasing focus on high-altitude summits in Central Asia. By the mid-1950s, the larger Soviet de-emphasis on the primacy of class as a social marker and the desire to develop alpinism in Central Asia led the VSA to positively reevaluate the Georgian Alpine Club, whose insistence on developing alpinism in local mountainous regions had by now produced several leading Soviet climbers. As I argue, the goals of the Georgian climbing community remained remarkably consistent since 1923, but their relationship with the center only improved once they were treated as equal partners in the project of Soviet alpinism.

CHAPTER 1: AT THE EDGE OF THE NATION: THE FORMATION OF THE GEORGIAN CLIMBING COMMUNITY

Introduction

On August 28, 1923 a Georgian expedition led by the academic Giorgi Nikoladze made a successful ascent on the Kazbegi peak, an imposing five thousand meter mountain overlooking the Georgian Military Highway made famous in both Russian and Georgian literature. Nikoladze's summit was followed a few days later by an equally successful research expedition led by Professor Alexander Didebulidze from the recently formed Tbilisi State University. At the time, these two summits had little impact beyond the Transcaucasian Federation, but they would eventually be memorialized as the first Soviet ascents and a key event in Soviet sports history. Writing in 1948 for a collected edition celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Soviet alpinism, the alpinist E. Rokotian argued that these two expeditions exhibited the fundamental principles of a specifically Soviet form of mountaineering, namely its "patriotism, mass nature, collectivism, manifestation of genuine friendship of the peoples, combination of political, sport and scientific-research goals, careful preparation to the ascent, (and) care for human life."[1] On the surface, Rokotian was right – both expeditions entailed long and detailed preparations, no participant sustained any serious injuries, and Nikoladze's expedition in particular, where thirteen men and five women successfully summited through collective effort, exhibited the

[1] E. Rokotian, "Voskhozhdeniia sovetskikh al'pinistov na kavkaze" in *K vershinam sovetskoi zemli,* ed. D.M. Zatulovskii (Moskva, 1949), 105.

"mass character" and a commitment to gender inclusion that made up the stated goals of Soviet alpinism.[2]

Rokotian's account reflected a relatively new focus on the history of Soviet alpinism and the memorialization of specific ascents that emerged in the post-war period. And while he was undoubtedly influenced by Georgian arguments about the centrality of the 1923 expeditions to Soviet alpinist history, his account represented an uncontroversial consensus that Soviet alpinism began in 1923. However, despite the fact that the two 1923 expeditions retroactively fit within larger Soviet discourses and came to be intimately conceptualized as "Soviet" summits, written accounts from the participants at the time make clear that the expeditions had a much narrower national focus and should be seen as part of a specifically Georgian nation building project that had its roots in the pre-revolutionary period. The 1923 expeditions began a decades long project by Georgian alpinists to both physically and discursively lay claim to mountainous regions and mountainous peoples as inherently Georgian, a project that often conflicted with larger Soviet nation-building efforts. Instead of "friendship of the peoples," alpinism (and ultimately tourism more generally) was frequently a sphere of conflict between Georgian alpinists and the institutions that governed the sport in Moscow. At its core, this tension was about the meaning of the Georgian nation and the limits of the Soviet anti-imperialism.

This chapter examines the initial formation of a Georgian climbing community in Tbilisi and the first several expeditions organized by Georgian alpinists. Throughout the 1920s, Georgian alpinists received almost no resistance from the Soviet center as they developed a practice of climbing that focused on the importance of fostering relationships with local people and climbing peaks in the name of the nation. As I illustrate, these practices were deeply

[2] For the list of participants see: Giorgi Nikoladze, "pirveli kartuli asvla mq'invar-ts'verze" (The first Georgian summit on mq'invar-ts'verze), *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin*, no. 1, 1924: 14-15. For more on the goals of Soviet alpinism see, Maurer, "An Academic Escape to the Periphery?," 159-178.

influenced by ideas about the centrality of mountainous space and mountainous peoples to the Georgian nation that stemmed from nineteenth century Georgian literature. In forming their own geographic society in 1924, the organizers of Georgian climbing oriented themselves not towards Moscow or Leningrad, but towards western Europe and in particular London. All of these developments made the Georgian climbing community unique within the burgeoning world of Soviet alpinism and created the possibility for sustained conflict as the sport began to centralize in the following decade. Understanding this conflict, however, requires a deeper examination of first several expeditions in the 1920s, which proved foundational to the wider practices of Georgian climbing. Despite institutional upheaval or political change, the goals of Georgian alpinism remained remarkably consistent from 1923 until the immediate post-Stalin period. Before reconstructing the most important expeditions from the 1920s, however, it is necessary to step beyond the revolutionary divide and examine how nineteenth century ideas about the nation influenced the development of Georgian climbing in the Soviet period.

Mountainous Space and Georgian Literature: A Question of Authenticity

Nineteenth century Georgian literature influenced the expeditions Georgian alpinists in the 1920s, and helped to inform their own approach to developing an alpinist community. Although mountains may seem like they would be an intrinsic part of modern Georgian literature, the relationship between key Georgian writers and mountainous regions and peoples was in fact not straightforward and fluctuated across the nineteenth century, complicated by the realities of Russian imperial expansion. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Georgian writers remained deeply influenced by Russian romanticism and constructed the alpine sublime in many of the same ways that Russian authors did, foregrounding the landscape over local

people and local culture. As Harsha Ram and Zaza Shatirishvili have shown, Georgian romantic poetry from this period reflected the complex relationship of the Georgian nobility to their Russian colonizers, one that entailed resistance to Russian empire at home but significant cooperation with the imperial conquest of North Caucasus.[3] What this meant is that the subjugation of North Caucasian mountainous populations was seen in the service of the Georgian nation, "just revenge" for earlier raids on Georgian lands in the previous century.[4] For romantic Georgian authors, there was nothing necessarily inherently Georgian about mountainous space.

This relationship changed in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the 1870s, there was a dramatic shift in the conception of mountainous space and its relationship to the Georgian nation, perhaps best seen in Ilia Chavchavadze's "Letters of a Traveler," first published in 1871. As Paul Manning notes, in "Letters of a Traveler," "Ch'avch'avadze radically revises the geopoetics of these earlier Romantics, who often sought to align Georgia with Russia *against* the Caucasus, by creating a novel geopoetics in which the Caucasus, in the form of the Terek River, is identified with Georgia as opposed to Russia."[5] "Letters of a Traveler" reflected a tension between the emergent Georgian intelligentsia and the mountainous Georgian peasantry, illustrated through a conversation between the narrator, an educated Georgian traveling from Russia, and a local peasant from the mountainous region of Khevi, Lelt Ghunia. Here, Chavchavadze minimizes the difference between the two groups, suggesting that authentic

---

[3] Harsha Ram and Zaza Shatirishvili, "Romantic Topography and the Dilemma of Empire: The Caucasus in the Dialogue of Georgian and Russian Poetry," *The Russian Review* Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 2004): 1-25. Paul Manning notes that "If earlier Russian and Georgian Romantics exulted over the natural beauty of the Caucasus, it was a nature alien to humanity and devoid of human voices" citing Ram and Shatirishvili's discussion of Aleksandr Chavchavadze's poem "K'avk'azia" in "Romantic Topography." See Paul Manning, "Describing Dialect and Defining Civilization in an Early Georgian Nationalist Manifesto: Ilia Ch'avch'avadze's 'Letters of a Traveler,'" *The Russian Review* Vo. 63, No 1 (January 2004): 36, footnote 25.
[4] Ram and Shatirishvili, "Romantic Topography," 17. In particular, see Ram and Shatirishvili's section on Nik'oloz Baratashvili's poetry, pages 13-17.
[5] Manning, "Describing Dialect," 36-37.

Georgian culture is best represented by mountainous peasants like Ghunia, but one that can only be understood by the Georgian intelligentsia as a member of the same nation.[6]

This impulse to see mountainous space as integral to the Georgian nation only accelerated in the following decades as Russian imperial expansion physically incorporated Ottoman Georgians into the nation itself. As Paul Manning has shown in his excellent examination of late nineteenth century Georgian print culture, Ottoman Georgia offered an "unassimilable alterity" that challenged the way in which the Georgian intelligentsia conceived of the nation and their place in it. The newly incorporated Georgians were predominantly Muslim, and as such represented a form of eastern backwardness in the orientalist geographies of the urban Georgian intelligentsia based in Tbilisi. As Manning argues, "it is as if the East Georgians, unable to incorporate the alterity of Ottoman Georgia into their sense of identity at the end of the 1870s, instead turned their attention to the mountains in the 1880s in compensation."[7]

By the 1880s there was a shift towards ethnographic realism that further stressed the centrality of mountainous culture to the nation, perhaps best illustrated by the works of Alexander Kazbegi. Kazbegi was born to a wealthy family in the village of Stepantsminda in northern Georgia, an important stop on the Georgian Military Highway and one that would be a frequent site of engagement for Georgian alpinists in the Soviet period. But his father's untimely death curtailed his education in Moscow, and Kazbegi soon chose to spend seven years as a shepherd.[8] His stories reflected this experience, and as Donald Rayfield has noted, made the

---

[6] Ibid, 32-36.
[7] Manning, *Strangers in a Strange Land,*18. See also chapter two, "Imperial and Colonial Sublime: The Aesthetics of Infrastructures," 59-79.
[8] See Rebecca Gould "Afterword: Aleksandre Qazbegi's Mountaineer Prosaics," in Aleksandre Qazbegi, *The Prose of the Mountains: The Tales of the* Caucasus trans. by Rebecca Gould (Budapest, 2015): 192-194; Donald Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History* (London, 2010), 196-206.

mountainous populations of northeastern Georgia "into new representatives of the national struggle."[9] Kazbegi's impact on Georgian literature and Georgian understanding of mountainous space was enormous. As Rebecca Gould has argued, "since Qazbegi transformed Georgian fiction, Georgia's mountaineers have been treated in Georgian literature as the bearers of sanctified traditions lost to Georgian lowlanders."[10] Kazbegi's biography was mirrored by one of his literary counterparts, Vazha-Pshavela, who was born in neighboring region of Pshavi, had his own aborted Russian education in St. Petersburg, and lived as a mountain peasant.[11] It is certainly difficult to compare the novellas of Kazbegi with the folk poetry of "Vazha," as he is affectionately known in Georgia, and the latter's influence on Georgian literature was arguably much greater, but what they both shared was the ability to narrate the ethos of Georgia's mountainous populations as authentic mountaineers – that as, those from the mountains themselves.

By the turn of the century mountain peasants like Lelt Ghunia, were understood not just seen as part of the nation, but as its most authentic representatives. Here, however, there was still a contradiction. Chavchavadze's narrator and Ghunia may have been part of the same nation, but this could not conceal the ethnic difference that separated them. As Chavchavadze notes in his text, the narrator initially mistook Ghunia for an Ossetian, while Ghunia mistook the narrator for a Russian.[12] The problem facing the often-Russian educated Georgian intelligentsia was how to collapse these differences and be authentic representatives of the nation in the eyes of peasants like Ghunia. The examples of Alexander Kazbegi and Vazha-Pshavela offered little help, since they were themselves of the mountains – their authenticity was never in question.

---

[9] Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia*, 196.
[10] Gould "Mountaineer Prosaics," 211
[11] See Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia*, 207-208.
[12] Manning, "Describing Dialect," 41-44.

Georgian alpinism emerged in the early 1920s as a product of these tensions and offered a unique solution to the problems of authenticity. As I explore below, the founder of Georgian mountaineering, Giorgi Nikoladze, was intimately connected to the nineteenth century intelligentsia and had a personal relationship with Chavchavadze himself. That Nikoladze would see alpinism in the service of the nation is unsurprising, and he demonstrated a remarkable attention to the intersections between physical and discursive conquest in his own writing. For Nikoladze and at least the first two generations of Georgian climbers, alpinism was a means to reclaim mountainous space in the name of the nation and to insist that Georgia was not just a land of wine and grapes but also one of towering peaks, a theme explored more fully in the following chapter. Even in the post-war period, Georgian alpinists were utilizing medieval manuscripts and Chavchavadze's own poetry to discover an important religious cave site near the Kazbegi peak, a discovery that, as they highlighted, illustrated the long history of Georgian engagement with mountainous areas. But alpinism also had the unique ability to solve the problem of difference between the urban elite and the mountainous peasantry, the problem of Chavchavadze's narrator seeing Lelt Ghunia as an Ossentian and Ghunia seeing the narrator as a Russian. Nikoladze sought out the cooperation of Mokhevian hunters and guides like Iagor Kazalikashvili and Gakha Tsiklauri, and explicitly articulated the importance of local participation as a fundamental principle of Georgian climbing. The precedent set in 1923 would have lasting effects on the development of Georgian alpinism, and ensure the participation of communities in mountainous regions like Khevi, Svaneti, and Khevsureti. More importantly, this participation forced the actual bodies of the urban elite and the rural peasantry into the same space in ways that had a radical ability to promote a sense of equality between the two groups. The shared sacrifices of climbing, the intimate nature of alpine camps, and the necessity of trust

and cooperation, often in the face of death, pushed these two groups together in ways that helped to erase social difference. In this way, alpinism solved the tension between intelligentsia and peasant that existed in the nineteenth century, marking both as authentic representatives of the nation.

Giorgi Nikoladze and the Georgian Intelligentsia

The initial idea for the 1923 expeditions to Kazbegi came from Giorgi Nikoladze, an engineer, mathematician, and gymnast from one of Georgia's most prominent intellectual families. Born in 1888 in didi jikhaishi, a small village in the Imereti region in western Georgia, Nikoladze's life reflected the peripatetic existence of many Georgian intellectuals during the late tsarist period. Nikoladze's provincial upbringing was complemented with trips to Russia and western Europe where his family had contacts among the Russian and western European intelligentsia.[13] Educated initially at the prestigious First Gymnasium in Tbilisi, Nikoladze would go on to study at the Petersburg Institute of Technology where he graduated with honors as an engineer in metallurgy in 1913. Upon graduation, he worked in the Donbas as an engineer at two different metallurgical factories before returning to Tbilisi in 1918. Nikoladze remained in Tbilisi after the fall of the short-lived Democratic Republic of Georgia in 1921, working as an engineer in the nascent Soviet metal industry.[14]

In many ways, Nikoladze's wide technical and literary interests mirrored those of his father, Niko Nikoladze. A contemporary of Ilia Chavchavadze, Niko Nikoladze was a prominent journalist, publisher, and intellectual and one of the most important members of the second generation of Georgian intellectuals known as the "meore dasi" or "second group" that were

[13] A.N. Bogoliubov, *Georgii Nikolaevich Nikoladze* (Moskva, 1973), 36.
[14] For a general overview of Nikoladze's life, see: I.A. Aslanishvili, "G.N. Nikoladze – zachinatel' sovetskogo al'pinizma" in *Pobezhdennye vershiny* (1951): 389-394.

influential in the mid to late nineteenth century.[15] As the first Georgian to receive a doctorate from a European university, Niko Nikoladze's education represented some of the new opportunities for Georgian intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century and a more direct connection to western European intellectual society, a connection that benefited his son.[16] Niko Nikoladze's work developing the port city of Poti on the Black Sea, the manganese mines of Chiatura in central Georgia, and rail and pipeline connections throughout Georgia likewise illustrated a deep commitment to Georgia's economic development. In general, Nikoladze's politics reflected the larger reformist tendencies of this "second group," which were characterized by an emphasis on economic growth often through some form of state sponsored capitalism.[17] Nikoladze's contributions to both Georgian literature and economic reorganization simply cannot be underestimated. As Ronald Suny points out, Nikoladze and his contemporaries "operated with a confidence and energy unseen in earlier generations" and both his literary and economic projects were critical aspects of Georgian nation building in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.[18]

Nikoladze's mother, Olga Guramishvili, likewise was an active participant in Georgian public life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both in Georgia and in Georgian communities in Europe and Russia. Forbidden by her father to study abroad, an undeterred Olga ran away from home to study in Switzerland where there was a large group of Georgian émigrés. According to one story, she cleverly slipped past the border guards without a passport, while in

---

[15] Georgia had three separate generations of intelligentsia that were invested in nation building in different ways that spanned the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Niko Nikoladze was a part of the second group known as the *meore dasi* (from *meore* meaning second and *dasi* meaning group). For more on the development of Georgia's intelligentsia see Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington, 1994), 118-143.
[16] Ibid, 131.
[17] Suny, *Georgian Nation,* 131-134. This focus on economic growth and reorganization separated this generation both from the more conservative gentry politics of the *pirveli dasi* (first group) as well as the more radical Marxist politics of the *mesame dasi* (third group) that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century.
[18] Ibid, 132.

another she used the passport of Niko Nikoladze's older sister to travel to Zurich in the early 1870s.[19] In Zurich, Guramishvili was an active member of Georgian society "ugeli" (yoke), an organization that focused on national liberation by uniting Georgian youth who were living in Zurich, developing Georgian literature, and integrating itself with other European social movements.[20] A few years later, the majority of the group moved to Geneva where it became more closely aligned with revolutionary movements in Russia and Europe, and especially with intellectual leaders of Georgia's own national liberation movement like Giorgi Tsereteli.[21] Guramishvili would continue to be an important member of Georgian intellectual society in Switzerland and later St. Petersburg, before being forced to return to Georgia after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. There, Guramishvili was invited by the famous Georgian reformer and educator Iakob Gogebashvili to teach in the Noble Gymnasium in Tbilisi.[22] By the early twentieth century, Olga Guramishvili was a well-known pedagogue in Georgia who helped to develop new methods of instruction in Georgian schools.[23] Guramishvili's reputation as an educator was so well known that she was one of the first Georgian women to teach in a men's gymnasium.[24]

Giorgi Nikoladze was clearly influenced by the social circles and intellectual interests of his parents and developed a deep love for Georgian literature. As a child, Giorgi often read Chavchavadze's newspaper *Iveria* and would later read his father's Russian language newspaper

[19] See Nino Chikhladze, *Gruzinskie zhenshchiny – deiatel'nitsy natsional'noi kul'tury* (Tbilisi, 1987), 186; Bogoliubov, *Nikoladze*, 15.
[20] Chikhladze, *Gruzinskie zhenshchiny,* 186-187. Olga Guramishvili herself came up with the name "ugeli." See Ibid, 186.
[21] For more on Ugeli and Guramishvili's role, see: Chikhladze, *Gruzinskie zhenshchiny*, 186-193.
[22] Chikhladze, *Gruzinskie zhenshchiny*, 196. Gogebashvili was actively involved in promoting Georgian language and literacy, and his children's book "Mother Tongue" is still widely used today.
[23] Ibid, 196.
[24] Ibid, 195-196.

New Review.[25] A five-year-old Giorgi even impressed "Uncle Iliko" (Chavchavadze) himself by reciting one of his poems by memory while visiting Chavchavadze with his mother.[26] A few years later, he would win a friendly competition against his cousin, the future Georgian Menshevik Irakli Tsereteli, over who best knew Rustaveli's famous medieval epic "The Knight in the Panther's Skin."[27] Nikoladze was likewise influenced by the romantic poems of the early nineteenth century writer Nikoloz Baratashvili, going so far as to attend the First Gymnasium in Tbilisi because Baratashvili and Chavchavadze had studied there.[28] This deep love of Georgian literature and personal connection to some of the most important members of the Georgian intelligentsia meant that Nikoladze was intimately connected to pre-revolutionary nation building efforts in Georgia. Nikoladze was also a talented mathematician who published several works on algebra and geometry and eventually defended a dissertation in geometry at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1928 while on an officially endorsed research trip. Like his father, Nikoladze ultimately came to terms with the Soviet regime, successfully trading his technical knowledge and experience as an engineer for a respected place in Soviet society. As such, he was emblematic of a certain part of the Georgian intelligentsia that found common ground between the Soviet project and their own interest in developing Georgia during the 1920s, both culturally and economically.[29]

In addition to his wide-ranging intellectual achievements, Nikoladze was an avid gymnast who trained at the gymnastics society "Sokol" (Falcon) during his studies in Petersburg. By all accounts he was an excellent athlete, taking honors while still a student in both gymnastics and

---

[25] Bogoliubov, *Nikoladze,* 31.
[26] Ibid*,* 31-32. Chavchavadze was particularly close friends with the family, and other important Georgian intellectuals were regular visitors.
[27] Ibid. This competition was held by Akaki Tsereteli, another great Georgian writer of the nineteenth century and close friend of Chavchavadze.
[28] Ibid, 32.
[29] As such, Nikoladze should be contrasted with Mensheviks like Noe Zhordania who lived in exile, or Bolsheviks like Filipp Makharadze who were totally committed to the Soviet project.

the pentathlon at the "all-Slavic Sokol" international competition in Prague in 1912. Originally founded in the mid-1800s by the Czech Miroslav Tyrs, by the turn of the century Sokol had become a trans-national gymnastics and physical culture movement.[30] Although the Sokol movement only slowly made its way to Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, it took off more quickly after the 1905 Revolution when restrictions against the club were lifted and Czech trainers were soon in demand in Russia.[31] As historian Claire E. Nolte has argued, these developments were likewise mirrored by the "new-Slavism" of Czech politicians after 1905 and Sokol quickly became a means to "forge alliances across the Slavic world" through gymnastics activities and competitions.[32] In many ways, the national club structure of Sokol reflected larger political conflict between Czechs and Germans and within the Slavic world more generally. It is clear that this national emphasis, as well as the increasing neo-Slavism of Sokol, influenced Nikoladze and he would go on to argue that the Russian Sokol club should be divided along national lines, ultimately with multiple "Sokols" for each nationality within the Russian empire, a suggestion that was eventually accepted in 1913 with the opening of the "Third Sokol" specifically for peoples from the South Caucasus.[33] Nikoladze went on to found gymnastics circles (kruzhki) at each of the factories he worked at in Ukraine, and eventually founded Georgia's first gymnastics society *shevardeni* (falcon) in 1918, the realization of his desire for a Georgian oriented Sokol.[34] Photos from this period show a lithe and muscular Nikoladze

---

[30] For more on the Sokol movement, see: Claire E. Nolte, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation* (Basingstoke, 2002).
[31] Nolte, Sokol, 166.
[32] Ibid, 158, 163.
[33] Bogoliubov, *Nikoladze,* 54.
[34] Ivanishvili, "Znachinatel'", 390-391.

performing exercises on the parallel bars and rings, the literal embodiment of the intellectual-athlete and a reflection of cultured masculinity at the time.[35]

Nikoladze likewise had a strong love of the outdoors from an early age, taking long excursions outside of Tbilisi as a child and making his first mountain ascent in Switzerland at age thirteen on the 2,235 meter high Tete de Jean. As his mother wrote at the time, “Giorgi is already preparing to become an alpinist.”[36] That Nikoladze would ultimately turn to alpinism more seriously in his adult life seems unsurprising. But it would be a mistake to understand Nikoladze’s interest in mountaineering as purely related to the athletic challenges alpinism represented. Instead, mountaineering served as a platform to articulate a specific version of the Georgian nation that combined the imaginary geography of nineteenth century Georgian literature with the physical conquest of mountainous peaks in the Caucasus. Ultimately, it was the intersection of literary, technical, and athletic interests that influenced Nikoladze’s desire to create a mountaineering community in Georgia and shaped the nationally oriented goals of that community throughout the 1920’s.

Claims on Mountainous Space

What we know about the 1923 expedition comes largely from Nikoladze’s own account that was published in 1924 as part of the first bulletin of the Geographical Society of Georgia, a society formed because of the successful summits several months prior. The forty-five page long document, “The first Georgian summit to mq’invarts’veri” detailed all aspects of the summit and was the first major articulation of the desire to create a modern alpinist community in Georgia, a formative document that has been regularly quoted by Georgian alpinists in Soviet alpinist

[35] For some photos of Nikoladze, see: “Giorgi Nikoladze,” last accessed June 26, 2019. https://burusi.wordpress.com/2009/12/18/giorgi-nikoladze/
[36] Ivanishvili, “Znachinatel,’” 392.

literature and reprinted twice, most recently in 2017 with an English translation.[37] Nikoladze's article, along with others in the Geographic Society's bulletin, was intended to inspire the Georgian intelligentsia in Tbilisi to participate in mountaineering, or, at the very least understand the wider connections between alpinism and the nation. As Nikoladze makes clear in this account, one of the central goals of the expedition to Kazbegi was the reclamation of space through an assertion of Georgian climbing ability. As he explained, "the aim of our group is to become acquainted with every corner of Georgia," a goal that was held since 1918, the year of Georgia's independence, but was only now coming to fruition.[38] The choice of Kazbegi as a first ascent was likewise significant because it had been climbed repeatedly by western European and Russian alpinists since the first ascent by the Englishman Douglas Freshfield in 1868, a history that Nikoladze was acutely aware of.[39] This history of foreign expeditions made the success of Nikoladze's expedition a matter of national pride. As he questioned, "Why is it that English, Germans, and Russians are skilled in high mountain summits, but we Georgians, however, who show our large skill in different fields of sport, in alpinism we have done totally nothing until now."[40] In climbing Kazbegi, Georgians would not only learn more about Georgian mountains, but also finally become members of the international climbing community.

The idea that Georgians "had done nothing until now" was, strictly speaking, not true. Local Georgian guides from the Khevi region where Kazbegi is located had been leading expeditions to Kazbegi for years, many becoming relatively famous and well respected among western European and Russian alpinists in the pre-revolutionary period. In fact, a Mokhevian guide named Akhia Pitskhelauri guided Douglas Freshfield in Khevi, while the guide Muratbi

[37] Giorgi Nikoladze, *The First Georgian Ascent of Mount Kazbek*, ed. Levan Ghambashidze, trans. Phillip Price (Tbilisi 2017).
[38] Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla,"11.
[39] Ibid, 11-12. In his account, Nikoladze gives a history of the most famous ascents on Kazbegi.
[40] Ibid, 11.

Kibolani helped famous European alpinists such as Willi Rikmers, Adolf Schulze, and others summit several peaks in Svaneti in northwest Georgia.[41] Among the most famous of the pre-revolutionary guides was Gakha Tsiklauri, known as the "Professor of Kazbek" who had summited Kazbegi fifteen times before 1923. Other well-known guides included the Mokhevian Iagor Kazalikashvili from Stepantsminda and the Kist-Ingush brothers Iani, Absii, and Isaak Bezurtanov from a village near the Darial Gorge. Many guides were skilled hunters with years of experience trekking in the mountains around Kazbegi and the foreign alpinist community was reliant on the local knowledge these guides possessed and their skill in navigating the mountainous terrain. These guides often worked together and shared a common regional culture and love for the mountains that often transcended their ethnic identities.[42]

Nikoladze was aware of the work of Georgian guides and even highlighted many of their achievements in his account of the 1923 expedition. However, Nikoladze saw a marked difference between climbing as a professional guide and climbing as a tourist. As Nikoladze argued, "I think that before us on mq'invar-ts'veri (Kazbegi), and other high mountains, not one Georgian traveler-tourist has summited."[43] Placed into this historical context, Nikoladze positioned the expedition as an important national achievement, claiming it to be the "First Georgian Ascent on mq'invar-ts'veri," using the more local, and ultimately more linguistically Georgian, name for Kazbegi. And while Nikoladze's group was multinational, consisting of an

---

[41] Kibolani helped to lead a nearly successful expedition in 1895 to summit Ushba. See I. Aslanishvili, *Al'pinizm v Gruzii* (Tbilisi, 1935), 22-23.

[42] There are only archival traces with which to understand the relationship between the different guides, but it is clear that the guides often had close bonds that crossed ethnic boundaries. In prominent example, the Mokhevian (Georgian) Iagor Kazalikashvili acquired his "alpinist baptism" (first summit) under the leadership of the Kist-Ingush Iani Bezurtanov. See Aslanisvhili, *Al'pinizm v Gruzii,* 25. The work of Georgian alpinists from Tbilisi like Nikoladze would help to make these ethnic identities more nationally fixed.

[43] Nikoladze did note that the one exception was the Mokhevian student Andria Topadze who summited Kazbegi first in 1911 and several times afterwards, although Topadze's connection to the region made him less of a "traveler-tourist." Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla," 12.

Armenian, a German, a Kazakh, and Swede, the vast majority of the group was Georgian.[44] As Nikoladze noted, Georgian guides may have summited Kazbegi in the past, but this new group, mostly of young students interested in exploring Georgia's mountainous landscape, represented a radical departure from past participation in mountain ascents by Georgians.

It was not simply the expedition that was Georgian, however. In using "mq'invar-ts'veri" (literally "glacier peak" or "icy peak") in place of the Russianized "Kazbek" or the Georgianized "Kazbegi" Nikoladze was discursively reclaiming the mountain from the European and especially Russian explorers who had previously reached the summit. There is a rich body of scholarship that has shown the intersections between physical conquest, discursive conquest, and empire – in short the ways that exploration and the naming of places helped to lay claim to ownership of those places. Writing about the renaming of mountains by British and American explorers, the historian Peter Bayers has argued that, "The naming of these spaces was a powerful gesture that effectively usurped the mountains from the indigenous populations, making it easier to configure expeditions within British and American imperial discourses."[45] In two prominent examples, Bayers shows how Everest was named by the British in 1865 after it was "discovered" in 1852, a fact which ignored local names and traditions and which helped to give the British a claim to the mountain. Likewise, the naming of Denali as Mount McKinley by a white prospector in 1896 and its official recognition in 1917 by the US government overlooked the fact that Denali was a well-established name among the indigenous populations. The erasure of indigenous names was an important step to claim discovery and ownership and a way to deny indigenous populations their own claims to space.[46] Ultimately, the name "Kazbek" or "Kazbegi" did not represent the same imperial project as the renaming of Denali to Mount

---

[44] 23 of the 27 members were Georgians.
[45] Peter Bayers, *Imperial Ascent*: *Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire* (Boulder, 2003), 6.
[46] Bayers, *Imperial Ascent*, 1-15.

McKinley, since Kazbek referred to the adopted surname of a Georgian family who guarded the military highway.[47] But Kazbek *was* a name that was intimately connected to the history of Russian empire in the Caucasus, a name that arose only at the beginning of the nineteenth century and one whose linguistic origins were not Georgian. Using “mq’invar-ts’veri” suggested that the mountain was Georgian outside of the history of Russian imperial expansion and that it was more deeply connected to the Georgian people. In this way, Nikoladze was making a powerful claim of mountainous space as nationally Georgian, a claim which challenged Russian understandings of the Georgian nation, a theme more fully explored in chapter two.

The intersection between physical and discursive conquest continued during the ascent itself. When Nikoladze’s group set camp at Ermolov’s Hut, a small base at 3600 meters built by the Russian Mountain Society in the late nineteenth century, Nikoladze promptly renamed it the “Falcon’s Nest,” a reference to his own gymnastics club.[48] The years of war, revolution, and civil war meant that the now renamed Falcon’s Nest was in disrepair and without a caretaker, and Nikoladze later suggested that the Georgians rebuild it in memory of the first expedition.[49] Despite Nikoladze’s attempts, Russian alpinists continued to use the original name of the hut well into the 1950s while Georgians persisted in using Nikoladze’s name, a form of contested memory that hinted at different alpinist histories and contradicting ideas about space.

The national sentiment of the expedition was also evident in Nikoladze’s attempt to find Georgian words for foreign ones, even foreign words that had an already existing Georgian cognate. Nikoladze created a number of specifically Georgian words for the instruments used

---

[47] This family’s name was Chopikashvili. See also, Gould, *The Prose of the Mountains*, xxi-xxiii.
[48] Ermolov was not named after the famous Russian general, but after a prominent member of the Russian Mountain Society.
[49] Nikoladze, “pirveli asvla,” 51. As Nikoladze noted, “If anyone has a right to take possession of the place, it is my group of intrepid Georgian travellers, and I dream of coming back here on day together with the group and rebuilding Shevardeni Nest in memory of our first ascent.” Nikoladze, *The First Georgian Ascent*, 99 -100.

during the expedition, like thermometer (tbilzoms), pedometer (bijzomi), binoculars (shorsatvali), and barometer (haertsnev-zomi), all of which cleverly incorporated Georgian roots to capture the essential meaning of the object.[50] Despite the inventiveness of his linguistic creations, many of the original cognates remained in use. Nikoladze likewise displayed a preference for using older Georgian terms over western cognates. For example, instead of using the Georgian avguisto for August, Nikoladze would regularly use the older, folk name "mariomobastve" – literally, the month of mariamoba, named after the August holiday celebrating the assumption of Mary.[51] Nikoladze was much more successful in his invention of sport terms, where he created Georgian words for volleyball (prenburti), basketball (kalatburti), gymnastics (tanvarzhishi) and soccer (pekhburti) all of which are in use today.[52] But perhaps the most important term that Nikoladze created was "mtamsvleloba" the Georgian word for mountaineering (from the root mta, meaning mountain).[53] In doing so, Nikoladze created an able Georgian substitute for the western cognate "alpinism," and a linguistic claim to an indigenous tradition of mountaineering that existed outside or alongside of European climbing in the nineteenth century, a fact that would become increasingly important in the 1930's when Georgian alpinists began to look more seriously at the pre-revolutionary origins of mountaineering in Georgia.[54] In this way, Nikoladze is rightly celebrated as the founder of alpinism in Georgia, although the importance of his linguistic inventions is often overlooked.

---

[50] These inventions were truly clever. For example, pedometer combined the Georgian word for "step" (biji) with the word for measure (zoma). "shorsatvali" combined the Georgian word for far (shori) with the word for glasses (satvale). All of these words had existing Georgian cognates. For example, binoculars are simply binok'li in Georgian.

[51] Another example here is Nikoladze's use of "jomardobi" for sport.

[52] Nikoladze's linguistic creativity was yet another place where his life mirrored that of his father. As Zaza Abzianidze points out, Niko Nikoladze was likewise successful in creating Georgian words for industrial terms where none previously existed, such as "liandagi" for railway track and ortklmavali for steam engine. See Giorgi Nikoladze, *pirveli kartuli asvla mq'invarts'verze,* edited by Zaza Abzianidze (Tbilisi, 1983), 10.

[53] The word alpinism comes from the fact that mountaineering as a sport developed first around the Alps, an etymology which centers the history of mountain climbing within Europe. In the 1930's this was challenged by Georgian alpinists who highlighted ascents by Mokhevian peasants that predated the first climbs in the Alps.

[54] See for instance Aslanishvili, *Al'pinizm v Gruzii,* 16-18. This is further discussed in chapter three.

Nikoladze's insistence on Georgian names and terms does not simply illustrate the nationally oriented character of his expedition, but also a keen awareness and attention to the power of language and a striking ability to upend the imperial logic behind the naming of space.

Preparations for the Ascent

Nikoladze was the first to articulate the need for mountaineering in Georgia, but he quickly found a number of willing collaborators who helped to make the first climbs a reality. In particular, he utilized his contacts at the university where he worked to enlist the help of other Georgian academics and students while also pulling from his own gymnastics club to form a group of nineteen men and nine women, almost all of whom were Georgian and under the age of twenty.[55] The group was notable not only for its large size and the young age of its participants (the youngest was fourteen years old), but also for the wide participation of women at a time when women were largely understood as unable to perform the "masculine" work necessary for climbing mountains.[56]

A critical aspect of Nikoladze's preparation was the collection of necessary clothing, footwear, and gear.[57] From the beginning, this posed a serious challenge considering the large size of Nikoladze's group and the fact that most alpinist equipment was imported from abroad and not easily obtainable. To do so, Nikoladze reached out to a number of state institutions and

[55] For Nikoladze's involvement in the development of the university, and particularly the mathematics faculty, see Bogoliubov, *Nikoladze*, 97-99. As Bogoliubov notes, Nikoladze was a key figure in the development of math at the Tbilisi State University, conducting his own geometrical research, giving doctor's exams, and teaching courses, ultimately earning the title of assistant professor (dotsent'i). For a list of the participants, their occupations and nationalities see: Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla," 14-15. As mentioned earlier, there were several non-Georgians who participated in the summit, although their contributions were largely not highlighted in Nikoladze's account. For one "Stavropol Russian," Nikoladze in fact highlighted the very opposite – the ways that this Russian held back Nikoladze's group and held up the expedition.
[56] The one notable exception to this was the Russian "alpinistka" Maria Preobrazhenskaia, whom Nikoladze's group would later meet.
[57] This included ice axes, walking sticks, rope, large tents, and sunglasses, among other items that were likely especially scarce in 1923.

social organizations for help, gaining support from Department of Metallurgy at the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy, the sports organization Spartak, and especially from the State Commissar for Education, David Kandelaki, a fact that illustrates the ways that Nikoladze's planned summit resonated with Georgia's educated elite and transcended traditional political boundaries in Georgian society.[58] Nikoladze's group also relied on the material culture of Georgia's mountainous populations to construct "bandulebi," a type of hand sewn leather shoe that were commonly used in the mountainous regions of Georgia, especially in Khevi and Pshavi. Banduli (singular) or bandulebi (plural) cleverly used leather soles woven in a crisscross pattern for more traction on snow and ice that were then stuffed with straw for insulation, and were regularly worn by Mokhevian hunters. Nikoladze sought out a local expert to help him make several pairs of banduli, although not without difficulty, a fact he would discover later.

By late August, the preparations were finalized and all of the equipment, food, and clothing were gathered at Nikoladze's apartment in Tbilisi. Although the expedition consisted of twenty-seven total participants, the group decided that only the eldest nineteen would attempt the summit while the rest would remain at the base camp at the Falcon's Nest. At six o'clock in the morning on August 22, the twenty-seven participants arrived at Nikoladze's in anticipation for the long journey to Khevi, although the truck they had arranged for transport was late. In the meantime, Nikoladze was visited by his friend Soso Aslanishvili, a prominent Georgian endocrinologist who was a key participant in the second "scientific" expedition led by Didebulidze and who stopped to wish Nikoladze's group well. Aslanishvili and Nikoladze had taken part in training excursions together and were clearly close, and his visit illustrated the

[58] Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla," 13. Kandelaki is perhaps better known for his diplomatic work to Germany in the 1930s on behalf of Stalin, before he was repressed in 1938.

personal connections between the two expeditions.[59] As Nikoladze noted, the success of the second scientific expedition, which required a number of heavy scientific instruments, was dependent on Nikoladze's group making a successful summit to show them the way. After several hours of delay, the three-ton truck arrived at one in the afternoon, where it was quickly overloaded with equipment, food, and participants. As the truck rolled down the Rustaveli Prospect, Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, people gathered on the street to watch the spectacle.

The group's journey to Stepantsminda, the closest village to the Kazbegi peak, followed the path of the Georgian military highway north towards the Russian border. Although the journey was slow and arduous, often requiring the group to walk on foot through the passes to lighten the load of the overburdened truck, it was largely uneventful save for the biting cold. Stopping in a village past Pasanuri on the Georgian Military Highway, Nikoladze's group noticed a beautiful fortress on a hill. Intrigued, they asked a local what the name of the fortress was, but, as Nikoladze noted, the local "was not able to understand our Georgian pronunciation" and answered back in a "strange mountaineer accent," a clear reminder of the limits of Georgian nation building and the tenuous connection many mountainous regions had to the more urban Georgian culture in Tbilisi.[60]

After reaching the village of Stepantsminda, Nikoladze's group quickly began to seek out local guides to aid them on their expedition. Soon they found the "famous guide Iagor Kazalikashvili and the celebrated hunter Levan Kushashvili" who promised to help them on the summit.[61] Instead of seeing the participation of local guides as peripheral to the expedition, Nikoladze understood their involvement as integral to its success. This positive characterization of guides as partners was itself markedly different from the relationship local guides had with

[59] Because Aslanishvili was a doctor, he planned to take part in the more research oriented second expedition.
[60] Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla," 18.
[61] Ibid, 20.

western European and Russian alpinists and travelers in the pre-revolutionary period, and Nikoladze's account would continually highlight the aid that Mokhevians gave to the expedition. The failure to acknowledge the work of local guides was clearly something that bothered Georgian alpinists, and Soso Aslanishvili would later go on to lament that most European alpinists in pre-revolutionary period would only note that they were helped by a "local from the village Kazbek" or "local Kazbek inhabitant," thus depriving the Georgian guides of any claim to a successful expedition.[62]

To some degree, this respect came from the inexperience of Nikoladze's group and a real need for the knowledge that local guides possessed. Despite their extensive preparation, much of the equipment Nikoladze collected in Tbilisi was unsuitable for serious mountaineering, a fact that Kazalikashvili quickly pointed out. Inspecting the rope and bandulebi, Kazalikashvili joked that "'it's easy to see you lot have never climbed any mountains before."[63] The bandulebi in particular were made incorrectly, a fact which, as Nikoladze noted, "had the entire population of Stepantsminda in fits of laughter."[64] It turned out that the group had interlaced the soles incorrectly with knots that would have dug into their feet as the walked, and ultimately they were forced to remake all of the banduli with Kazalikashvili's guidance. Meanwhile, the rope that Nikoladze had brought was too thin and weak to support climbing and the group had also neglected to bring along crampons, a metal attachment with teeth that are tied to a mountaineer's boots for added traction on ice – a common piece of alpinist equipment. These oversights showed how little Nikoladze's group knew about mountaineering, a fact he readily admitted.[65] The lack of crampons delayed the group two days as they scoured the town for the equipment,

---

[62]Aslanishvili, *Al'pinizm v gruzii*, 22.
[63] Nikoladze, *The First Georgian Ascent*, 33.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Nikoladze recounted: "Here we could see we were without experience." Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla", 20.

where they eventually found a mix of English, Swiss, and locally made crampons for their expedition.

Before setting off for the Falcon's Nest, the expedition broke into several groups to attempt smaller practice excursions. One of these excursions culminated in a summit of the nearly four thousand meter Mount Shino as a practice run for Kazbegi, which future histories would count as the first Georgian summit and which reinforced the importance of pacing and light equipment to the inexperienced Georgians.[66] Eventually, the group traveled to the nearby village of Gveleti to start their expedition to the Devdaraki Glacier where they encountered the famous Russian alpinist Maria Preobrazhenskaia who was leading a children's excursion in the area. Excited to hear her insights on the summit (Preobrazhenskaia had summited Kazbegi successfully a number of times and was the first woman to reach the peak), the group "greeted her respectfully" but she quickly dismissed their chances for success, arguing:

> "'You might as well give up now! I've never heard of such a big group of people trying to make it to the top of a mountain together. And besides, you're going to need two guides for each girl to help them get over the difficult parts, or one each at the very least. There's no way a group of juveniles like you will be able to do it.'"[67]

As Nikoladze noted, "(h)er words offended us deeply," partially because the more experienced Preobrazhenskaia brusquely dismissed their chances of success, but also because she doubted the physical capacity of the women in the group, a stunning failure to extend solidarity from the first woman to summit Kazbegi. Nikoladze had no such doubts about the physical abilities of the young women of his expedition, and he later highlighted the fact that they required no additional assistance during the summit, unlike Preobrazhenskaia who "needed considerable help during her ascents."[68] More generally, the encounter with Preobrazhenskaia illustrated the Russian's

---

[66] See N. Ketskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'azionze* (Tbilisi, 1959), 303.
[67] Nikoladze, *The First Georgian Ascent*, 52.
[68] Ibid, 52, 83.

own sense of superiority over the Georgians and failure to offer meaningful support, a recurring theme would become a consistent point of conflict for Georgian alpinists well into the post-war period.[69]

This conflict is examined in more depth in the following chapters, but was present from the very beginnings of Georgian alpinism. Later in his account, Nikoladze would note that the group called Preobrazhenskaia the "Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna" for her haughty attitude. It seems that Georgian alpinists never developed a positive relationship with Preobrazhenskaia, even as Soviet tourist literature celebrated her achievements as an important part of Soviet sports culture. Ivane Japaridze, a Georgian journalist with deep familial ties to the Georgian mountaineering community, once recalled a story told to him by the famous alpinist Alexandra Japaridze about how Preobrazhenskaia would go on to assume the same position of superiority and lecture her on the technical points of mountaineering, even though by this point Alexandra Japaridze had made several highly technical summits much more difficult than anything that Preobrazhenskaia had accomplished in her entire career. That this story is still remembered today is suggestive of the ways that Russian arrogance deeply frustrated Georgian alpinists.

The "First Georgian Ascent" on Kazbegi

On August 27th, Nikoladze's group was fully prepared to begin the summit having collected the last few crampons in Gveleti. The group set off for the planned base camp at the now renamed "Falcon's Nest" located at over 3600 meters above sea level. At four-thirty in the morning on August 28th, Nikoladze's collection of young climbers left the Falcon's Nest for the Kazbegi peak, led by Kazalikashvili and two other guides, Abzi Bezurtanov and Levan Kushashvili. The attempt was immediately threatened by strong winds, and Kazalikashvili told

[69] Conversation with Ivane Japaridze, June 14, 2016.

the group that if the winds did not die down then they would have to turn back. As Nikoladze noted, this was a potentially fatal setback – they did not have enough supplies to remain on the mountain and they felt that if they did not summit that day, then their chance would be lost.[70] The group was able to work through the wind and by mid-morning they were at 4200 meters, just over eight hundred meters from the summit. Here, they ran into more problems which forced several members of the expedition to turn back: one member could not go forward because he did not put straw in his banduli and he began to get frostbite, another lost one of his crampons making the ascent impossible. Because of the danger, one of the guides, Levan Kushashvili, and another member accompanied both back to the base camp. Since the second guide, Iani Bezurtanov, had turned back earlier, this left Iagor Kazalikashvili as the only guide.[71] Nikoladze told the group that if anyone else began to feel bad and had to turn back he would order the entire group to return, but even after asking several times in freezing conditions, everyone was focused on summiting. Soon Nikoladze recorded 4800 meters on his barometer, only 250 meters from the peak.

Nikoladze's group was aided in particular by the excellent physical condition of its participants, and he noted that not one member had heart trouble or breathing difficulties, an impressive accomplishment for a group without previous experience in such thin air.[72] But Nikoladze's account makes clear that the success of the expedition ultimately rested on Kazalikashvili's leadership. When Nikoladze would suggest going one way, Kazalikashvili would take them another, safer way, showing them how to cut steps into the ice with their

[70] Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla", 37.
[71] Ibid, 40-41.
[72] Altitude sickness can begin at elevations as low as 3000 meters, and can be crippling and ultimately deadly to those affected.

mountaineering ice axes.[73] Nikoladze consistently deferred to Kazalikashvili's leadership, at one point noting that "we were obedient to him as if we were under a magic spell.[74] In his account, Nikoladze consistently refers to Kazalikashvili by his first name, a sign of respect and recognition of Kazalikashvili's own fame. Despite Kazalikashvili's leadership, the setbacks had delayed the group's progress and it was mid-afternoon as they were reaching the final summit. Because the afternoon weather patterns are more unpredictable and significantly more dangerous than the morning weather patterns, the group had planned to start the descent by this time but despite the danger, "everyone had only one thought – to the peak."[75]

With so little distance left to climb, the group pressed on and they were soon cutting steps for the last few meters. One by one, the group began the final ascent, with Nikoladze going last. Finally, after eleven hours of continuous walking, the entire expedition of eighteen men and five women were gathered on the peak, finding success, "despite the many obstacles."[76] As Nikoladze later recalled, "(t)he dream we had held for many years had finally come true!" (emphasis is Nikoladze's), an important quote that is suggestive of the ways that the expedition was envisioned completely outside of the Soviet project, instead related not only to Georgia's few short years of independence but also to the larger nation building projects of nineteenth century intellectuals like Nikoladze's own parents.[77] This quote would continue to be reproduced in alpinist literature throughout the Soviet period, although Georgian authors would necessarily downplay the national sentiment to the quote, often providing it only in the context of the successful expedition.

---

[73] Ibid, 40,42.
[74] Ibid, 41.
[75] Ibid, 42.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Nikoladze, *The First Georgian Ascent*, 81.

Nikoladze's account also illustrates the deep emotional response the group felt upon realizing they had succeeded in their goals. After summiting, Nikoladze immediately ran to Kazalikashvili and threw himself into the guide's arms, hugging and kissing him with congratulations, again suggestive of the respect Nikoladze afforded the guide. As Nikoladze argued, "our happiness had no bounds" and the group screamed out "hurrah" as if they were crazy, crying and laughing at the same time.[78] One of the group members brought along two apples, which they ate "in triumph" arguing that only those who had experienced such minutes could understand their feelings.[79] Nikoladze was proud of the summit not just because so many people had reached the peak but also that the expedition succeeded despite the unseasonably low temperatures that were lower than anything previously recorded on Kazbegi.[80] But the group's "greatest feelings of pride were reserved for our girls" who had consistently illustrated their skill and equal abilities to the men.[81]

The group only stayed on the peak for five minutes, attentive that any further delay would only increase the danger of the descent although disappointed that the cloudy weather did not allow them to see the majestic view. And as the group quickly realized, the real danger was not in the ascent, when the pace was slow and methodical, but in the descent, when it was even easier to lose traction and fall off the mountain.[82] The group slowly made it back to the Falcon's Nest despite several near deadly falls, where they rested for two days before crossing the Devdaraki Glacier. There they met up with Didebulidze's scientific expedition, which was making its way up the mountain. Warming themselves by Didebulidze's fire, they finally met the famous guide Gakha Tsiklauri who was leading the scientific expedition. As Nikoladze recalled,

---

[78] Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla," 42-43.
[79] Ibid, 43
[80] Ibid, 48. the temperatures reached minus 20 Celsius.
[81] Nikoladze, *The First Georgian Ascent*, 82.
[82] Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla," 44.

the stoic Tsiklauri “enjoyed hearing our stories, and even laughed at some of them” even though he was “not a talkative man.”[83] But their successful expedition had earned them the respect of the local guides and porters, with whom they quickly became friends. Nikoladze’s group continued to praise the impressive climbing abilities of the Mokhevian porters and guides, as well as the equipment they acquired in Khevi. As Nikoladze noted, the bandulebi had performed wonderfully and ably protected the group’s feet from the biting cold, while the crampons made by Mokhevian blacksmith Kotia in Stepantsminda were in fact much more reliable than the Swiss and English crampons they used.[84] The group gave some of this equipment to Didebulidze’s group to help them on the second ascent.

Nikoladze’s group eventually finished the descent and they traveled by foot across the Darial Pass to the village of Lars located just across the Georgian border. As Nikoladze noted, the desolate rocky pass made an impression on the entire group, despite having spent several days in the mountains. Quoting a Mokhevian folk song as they passed the “wretched Darial” Nikoladze noted that they were leaving the limits of Georgia’s borders, an acute attention to political space demonstrated through a knowledge of folk traditions.[85] In Lars, their arranged transport never arrived, and they were stuck for several days as they worked out a different form of transport. As they were waiting for a car to take them to Vladikavkaz thirty kilometers north of Lars where there was a rail connection, Nikoladze’s group ran into a Russian-speaking couple dressed as tourists.[86] When the couple asked to make their acquaintance, Nikoladze’s group proudly told them that they had just returned from the Kazbegi peak. The couple began to laugh

[83] Nikoladze, *The First Georgian Ascent*, 103.
[84] Ibid, 97-98.
[85] It is unclear from whom Nikoladze learned this song from but his quotation does suggest a deeper attention to folk traditions and culture. Nikoladze only quoted a small piece of this song, which anthropomorphizes the Darial Pass. Nikoladze, “pirveli asvla,” 54.
[86] Nikoladze does not make clear that these are Russians, simply that their attire was that of “English tourists” and that they spoke Russian. From the context, it is likely that they were educated and well-placed Russians on vacation in the Caucasus.

at them, refusing to believe that the group had summited such a high peak. When Nikoladze showed them some of their alpinist equipment, including the crampons and ice axes that they had with them, they continued to doubt him, arguing that the crampons were rusty and therefore had not been used.[87] The argument went further – when Nikoladze told him that he was not only the head of the expedition but also a professor at the university in Tbilisi, the Russian couple refused to believe him since he was wearing shorts and was shoeless, having accidentally burned his shoes while sitting at Didebulidze's fire. Nikoladze soon realized that he would have an easier time convincing them that he had summited Kazbegi than that he worked at a university. The root of this skepticism was soon discovered. "Ostensibly their lack of trust was inspired by the fact that we were Georgians, because when (our) Swedish brother Kurt spoke to them in German, they immediately believed him."[88] This dismissal of Georgian accomplishments and orientalist refusal to see Georgians as members of an advanced nation equal to that of Russia mirrored Nikoladze's frustrations with Preobrazhenskaia, and would continue to be a point of tension in the decades to follow.

Nikoladze's group was stranded for four days in Vladikavkaz where the group stayed at a Georgian school, a hint of the Georgian communities that existed in the Caucasus outside of Georgia's political borders. Still attentive to the power of space and language, Nikoladze referred to Vladikavkaz, a town founded as the Russian empire expanded south whose name translates as "ruler of the Caucasus," only by a Georgianized version of its original Ossetian name, "Dzaugi", a choice which undercut the explicit imperial logic and claim to space behind the Russian name and one that was more commonly used by Georgian mountain populations.[89] The group quickly ran out of money and food, but was able to receive help from a local official who gave the group

[87] It is likely that the equipment was rusty exactly because it had been used recently in the mountains.
[88] Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla," 54.
[89] Rebecca Gould, *The Prose of the Mountains*, xv.

some money and arranged rail tickets to Tbilisi through Baku. Eating only grapes along the way due to their low cost the group was eventually greeted warmly at home, where "everyone knew and was interested in our summit."[90] Nikoladze's statement is likely an exaggeration to some degree, although it is clear that among the educated elite the expedition was well received and was ultimately covered positively in the Russian and Georgian language press in Tbilisi.

Nonetheless, there was a marked difference in the press coverage of the expedition between the two major Tbilisi based newspapers, the Russian language *Zaria vostoka* and the Georgian language *k'ommunist'i*. Nikoladze's expedition received only a short but positive account in *Zaria vostoka*, while garnering more attention in *k'ommunist'i*. To some degree, this disparity reflected the differing audiences of each paper, since *Zaria vostoka* covered the all three Transcaucasian Republics while *k'ommunist'i* was more exclusively focused on events within the Georgian SSR, although *Zaria vostoka* did regularly include significant accounts of travels to Georgian regions by special correspondents and figures. While both papers noted that the expedition was led by Nikoladze and aided by the guide Kazalikashvili, *k'ommunist'i* went further in highlighting the connections to local peoples and guides, reflecting many of the same arguments about the importance of local help made by Nikoladze. As one article noted, "the Mokhevians greeted the excursion with great hospitality" and were especially impressed that Georgians themselves wanted to explore their own country.[91] The article quoted an unnamed Mokhevian, who explained: "what country's travelers have we not met here (in Khevi), but Georgians never!"[92]

Ultimately, it is impossible to know the degree to which these press accounts accurately portrayed Mokhevian enthusiasm for the expedition, or were simply reproducing the larger

[90]Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla" 56.
[91] "Sp'art'ak'i" mq'invarze," *k'ommunist'i*, September 16, 1923 (No. 213).
[92] Ibid.

arguments made by Nikoladze and the expedition members. Rather, the positive accounts of cooperation with Mokhevians in *k'ommunist'i* illustrated the longstanding need to bridge the gap between the urban Georgian from Tbilisi and the peasant Mokhevian. If Chavchavadze was met with suspicion by the Mokhevian peasant Lelt Ghunia in "Letters of a Traveler," as discussed above, Georgians were now greeted "with great hospitality" by Mokhevian guides. Ultimately, the press accounts suggest that the expedition's impact was felt most deeply by Georgians in Tbilisi, and was relatively unknown even within the South Caucasus. Later alpinist histories would claim this as the first Soviet expedition, but at the time it had almost no resonance outside of a Georgian audience.

Didebulidze and the Second Ascent on Kazbegi

In reality, while Nikoladze's expedition became more widely celebrated in alpinist literature in the post-war period, at the time the press was more interested in Didebulidze's research expedition. This second expedition focused on observing and recording "all meteorological, magnetic, glaciological, and topographic features" of the Devdoraki glacier and Kazbegi itself and thus fit easily into a larger Soviet discourse of mobilizing scientific knowledge to better understand and ultimately exploit natural resources.[93] As one article noted, this focus meant that "the expedition has the greatest scientific interest" and both the Russian and Georgian language press went into detail about the specifics of this research, which went far beyond anything that had previously been attempted by European or Russian explorers. The Georgian language press in particular gave regular accounts of the group's progress, informed by telegrams from the expedition itself.

[93] Aslanisvhili, *Al'pinizm v gruzii,* 29.

Despite such enthusiasm for the expedition, Didebulidze's own account remained far more sterile, reflecting little of the romantic nationalism that characterized Nikoladze's writing. Although Didebulidze noted that this was the first expedition of a scientific character, not counting two failed attempts by Preobrazhenskaia to measure the maximum and minimum temperature on Kazbegi, he largely offered a straightforward account of the group's many scientific observations, the wide array of equipment they used, and the weather difficulties the group faced. This difference in tone likely reflected an attempt to frame the expedition in the objective language of scientific observation, as well as the fact that Didebulidze himself failed to summit Kazbegi due to altitude sickness. Regardless, Didebulidze's expedition represented another avenue to claim mountainous space as implicitly Georgian. If Nikoladze's expedition was characterized by a focus on physical and discursive conquest of mountainous space, Didebulidze's expedition produced scientific knowledge about that space as yet another powerful means of ownership. Didebulidze's scientific research was also an implicit claim that Georgians should be considered modern in their own right, equal not just to Russians but western Europeans as well, a contention that would become increasingly important in the following years.

Other members of Didebulidze's expedition offered a more enthusiastically national interpretation of the successful second ascent. For Soso Aslanishvili, Nikoladze's close friend and member of Didebulidze's group, the second expedition was a chance not just to produce scientific knowledge, but also to explore the Georgian countryside and "get to know one of Georgia's most wonderful corners."[94] As Aslanishvili argued in the first of a series of articles written about the expedition for the Georgian newspaper *tribuna*, "I am happy with the fact that it is purely a Georgian expedition… with the goal to investigate the homeland," thus placing the

[94] Soso Aslanishvili, "saqartvelos midomoebshi," *tribuna,* August 21, 1923 (no 551).

mountain squarely within the Georgian nation and the expedition as a uniquely Georgian achievement.[95] Aslanishvili makes clear that the success of the expedition was important not just because of its scientific achievements, but because it would serve as patriotic agitation for Georgians to explore and better know their own "homeland." Aslanishvili would go on to quote poems by Ilia Chavchavadze and Vazha Pshavela at length in his writing in *tribuna*, drawing a direct line from Didebulidze's scientific expedition to the nation-building efforts of nineteenth century Georgian literature.[96]

Creation of the Geographical Society of Georgia

The two expeditions served as the foundation for the creation of the Geographical Society of Georgia (GSG) in January 1924. Led by the preeminent Georgian historian and then rector of Tbilisi State University, Ivane Javakhishvili, the GSG was imagined as a Georgian version of European Geographical societies and Javakhishvili himself directly connected the GSG to the increasing number of geographical societies across the globe.[97] In its charter, the GSG set forth a number of goals to support the study of geography in Georgia, including establishing a library, museum and office, holding meetings, lectures and courses, and arranging expeditions and excursions.[98] The initial goals of the GSG were ambitious, and included not just the development of scientific research but also the promotion of geographical knowledge beyond the scientific community.[99] As Aslanishvili argued, "Georgians themselves should know Georgia, the

[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Al. Javakhishvili, "sakartvelos geograpiuli sazogadoebis daarseba da misi mnishvneloba," *sakartvelos geograpiuli sazogadoebis moambe (*Hereafter, *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin)*, no. 1, 1924: 13-18.
[98] *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin*, no. 1, 1924: 6-7.
[99] Ibid, vi-vii.

Georgian people themselves should take part in the nature of Georgia."[100] For Aslanishvili and others, the promotion of mountaineering and tourism by the GSG would help to solve the problem of too few Georgians knowing about their own country.

The GSG was not the first geographical society in the Caucasus. The Russian Geographical Society (RGO) founded a Caucasian division in Tbilisi in 1851, only a few years after the RGO's own founding in 1845.[101] As Joseph Bradley has argued, the RGO was an important part of Russian civil society in the nineteenth century whose mission to study the Russian nation in its most broadly imagined form was largely encouraged, or at least tolerated, by the state.[102] The Tbilisi chapter of the RGO reflected these goals and thus served as an extension and representation of the empire in the Caucasian periphery. Although the RGO was reinvented during the Soviet period, its existence continued to reflect this history of scientific knowledge used in the service of imperial extension and hegemony.

The creation of the GSG in 1924 then was a direct attempt to reclaim the mantle of local scientific knowledge and redirect it away from the Russian center. While in many ways the goals of the Geographical Society of Georgia reflected the larger project of utilizing scientific knowledge in the name of the nation, the production of scientific knowledge was now intended to promote the nation building projects of Georgian academics and intellectuals, not their counterparts in St. Petersburg. Although formed only in 1924, the GSG was originally envisioned in 1918 during the first year of Georgian independence and Javakhishvili went on to draw up a draft charter in 1919, but the turbulent years of the Georgian Republic and Bolshevik

---

[100] Soso Aslanisvhili, "mtasvla-mgzavrosnoba sakartveloshi," *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin*, no. 1, 1924: 4.
[101] A. G. Isachenko, ed., *Russkoe geograficheskoe obshchestvo 150 let*, (Moskva, 1995), 22.
[102] Joseph Bradley, *Voluntary Associations in Tsarist Russia, Science: Patriotism, and Civil Society* (Cambridge, Mass, 2009), 97.

takeover in 1921 meant that the creation of the GGS was pushed back for several years.[103] Nonetheless, while the GSG would embody a general Marxist interest in the promotion of science as a marker of civilizational progress, it clearly reflected the nation-centered ethos of Georgian Menshevism. The first Bulletin of the GSG, a remarkable document produced in 1924 that included the transcribed accounts and speeches of Nikoladze, Didebulidze, Aslanishvili, Javakhishvili, and others, was published not in Russian but in Georgian, with a table of contents in French and several articles in German, despite the fact that the organizers were clearly fluent in Russian. In this way, the Geographic Society of Georgia was being constructed as a western European scientific body, one that totally bypassed the importance of the Soviet center.

The first two expeditions in 1923 and creation of the GSG in 1924 would structure the direction of Georgian alpinism throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s. Iagor Kazalikashvili and Gakha Tsiklauri would become fixtures within the Georgian mountaineering community, helping to accomplish some of the most daring climbs in Svaneti in the early 1930s, including the first Soviet ascent on Ushba in 1934, a monumental climbing achievement. This focus on collaboration with local peoples would lead to the development of a local Svan climbing community in the 1940s and 1950s, eventually producing arguably the greatest Soviet climber of any decade, the Svan Mikhail Khergiani. Expeditions to mountainous regions like Khevi, Svaneti, Pshavi, and Khevsureti would serve as an important aspect of Georgian nation building, bringing mountainous regions in closer contact with Tbilisi. In doing so, Georgian alpinists rejected the Bolshevik insistence on the backwardness of mountainous populations while still arguing for the need to develop mountainous regions, a curious articulation of Soviet modernity that was often at odds with larger discourses. Future Georgian expeditions would

[103]Dav. Dondua, "Deiatel'nost' geograficheskogo obshchestva GSSR za vremia s 1924-1945 god," *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin*, no. 2, 1946: 59.

continue the reclamation of space, renaming mountains after famous writers like Shota Rustaveli while relying on Georgian history and folklore to explore caves that contained important medieval artifacts. And even as the GSG came under pressure in the early 1930s the Georgian mountaineering community leveraged its contacts to create the Georgian Alpine Club in 1936, the only nationally organized climbing club in the pre-war period. All of these developments would create friction in various ways and at various times between Georgian alpinists and sport and tourism institutions in Moscow, a friction that can only be understood by seeing the 1923 expeditions not only as the beginning of a Soviet mountaineering community, as Rokotian argued, but more importantly as the beginning of a Georgian one.

Elbrus and Kazbegi in 1925

Despite the successes of 1923 and the enthusiasm created with the formation of the Geographical Society of Georgia in January 1924, the GSG was not able to conduct any major ascents in that year, accomplishing only smaller training expeditions in North and South Ossetia and the Racha region in northwestern Georgia. Ostensibly, the reason for this delay was a lack of preparation, but it seems likely that the anti-Soviet uprising of 1924, which resulted in extensive violence and disruption in the Georgian countryside, as well as the need to secure funding for any potential expedition also poised problems for the organizers.[104] By 1925 the GSG had reorganized their alpine activities and planned two major ascents, including another research expedition to Kazbegi as well as an expedition outside of Georgia's political borders to the highest peak in the Caucasus, Mount Elbrus.

[104] Davit Mikeladze notes that it was a lack of preparation that led the GSG to delay any major ascents in 1924, but does not go into more detail about this. Other sources are equally silent. See Davit Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti" in *kavkazionze,* ed. by D. Purtseladze (Tbilisi, 1959), 86. For more on the 1924 anti-Soviet uprising see, Suny, *Georgian Nation,* 221-225.

In a number of ways, both expeditions illustrated a commitment to continue the work of 1923, and relied on a number of the same organizers, financial supporters, and local guides. The 1925 expedition to Kazbegi was again led by Professor Didebulidze, and the expedition was organized solely around a set of clearly articulated research goals. Having already "conquered" the peak twice, the group now focused on research and not exploration. Among the many goals of the group was to use self-recording instruments on the peak to gather meteorological data such as wind speed, minimum temperature, atmospheric pressure.[105] Didebulidze's expedition continued to rely on local guides and porters, especially the Mokhevian guide Kote Pitskhlauri, to lead the group and help carry the heavy scientific equipment to the peak. On the return route the group utilized the already familiar Falcon's Nest for shelter before returning to Stepantsminda.[106] The 1925 expedition to Kazbegi would reemphasize the need to gather scientific data on the mountain and would prefigure more sustained attempts in the following years to set up a Georgian operated meteorological station on Kazbegi.

Nikoladze's expedition to Elbrus, meanwhile, was arguably more ambitious. Although Elbrus was and is not considered a more technically difficult climb than Kazbegi, it is nearly six hundred meters higher in elevation, meaning that the summit poses an even greater threat of altitude sickness and exposure to the elements. Beyond these physical challenges were a number of organizational and financial difficulties. The trip to Elbrus from Tbilisi would first require a rail trip south to Baku, then a transfer north along the Caspian Sea until the North Caucasian town of Kislovodsk, where the group would ultimately embark by foot to the mountain's base located over sixty kilometers away.[107] Nikoladze meanwhile planned not just a summit of Elbrus,

[105] "Nauchnaia ekspeditsiia na vershinu Kazbeka," *Zaria vostoka*, 30 July 1925.
[106] *Zaria vostoka*, 3 September 1925.
[107] Later, this trip would become much easier with the opening of the Tbilisi-Sukhumi-Krasnodar railway connection. Today, it would likely be faster to make the trip by car through the Upper Lars border crossing.

but also an extended trip across the Caucasian range by foot through upper Svaneti, where part of the group would continue across the Svan-Abkhazian ridge to the coastal city of Sukhumi in Abkhazia, a trip of over seven hundred kilometers by foot.[108] Such a complicated itinerary required detailed planning, high-quality equipment, and a large degree of financial support. As a result, Nikoladze created an organizing commission, which, through its own fundraising efforts and the support of a number of state institutions, was able to raise three thousand rubles for the expedition by the middle of June, just over a month before the planned expedition in early August. A short time later, the Commissariat of Education, a key supporter in the 1923 expedition, gave Nikoladze an additional thousand rubles for the expedition.[109] Ultimately, the group was able to accomplish the nearly two month long expedition on the paltry sum of only four thousand rubles, a fact which was remarked upon positively by foreign alpinists.[110]

There were other important similarities between the 1925 Elbrus expedition and the Kazbegi expedition in 1923. Like 1923, the expedition to Elbrus was unusually large with twenty-seven participants in total, many of whom were participants in the first ascent on Kazbegi. Out of this group of twenty-seven were ten women participants, a fact which reinforced the important contribution of Georgian women in 1923. Both the size of the group and the number of women participants was itself a marked departure from both European and Russian alpinist norms, illustrating the ways that Georgian alpinism in the 1920s was developing its own forms of practice and tradition.

---

[108] "The Geographical Society of Georgia," *Geographical Journal* Vol. 69, No. 4 (April, 1927): 341; The group split into two on September 2 at the village of Kal in Upper Svaneti. Nikoladze led one half of the group to Sukhumi while the other half returned by foot through lower Svaneti to Kutaisi, where they continued to Tbilisi by rail. Both itineraries were far more arduous and demanding than the 1923 expedition. For more see Ibid, 341-343.
[109] Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti," 88.
[110] "The Geographical Society of Georgia," *Geographical Journal*: 342.

Moreover, instead of finding local guides near Elbrus, Nikoladze's group instead reenlisted the services of the two Mokhevian guides from the 1923 expeditions, Iagor Kazalikashvili and Gakha Tsiklauri. This was a critical decision and suggests that the friendship and close working relationship built in 1923 was not simply one of convenience. The diary of Davit Mikeladze, a new participant in 1925 who would become a leader in the Georgian climbing in the following years, showed how the relationship between the group and "our Mokhevians," as they called Kazalikashvili and Tsiklauri, was a still a warm one.[111] Stuck at high elevation for several days, Nikoladze would defer to Gakha Tsiklauri's judgment on when it was safe to attempt the peak. And as Mikeladze recalls, Tsiklauri took this responsibility seriously, arguing that while he could climb *mq'invarts'veri* blindfolded, Elbrus was different and unfamiliar, but nonetheless he would lead the group safely, leaving no one behind.[112] Well into the final ascent, Mikeladze recalls how Tsiklauri would shout out "we should glorify Georgia" to encourage the group as it made its way up the mountain, only to be teased by Kazalikashvili who jokingly told Tsiklauri not to slip, lightheartedly implying that Tsiklauri should talk less.[113] Nonetheless, Tsiklauri's repeated attempts to inspire the group by arguing that a successful ascent would bring honor to the nation showed that the guides themselves understood the national stakes of the expedition.

There were also a number of important differences between Nikoladze's first expedition to Kazbegi in 1923 and his second expedition to Elbrus in 1925. While the 1923 expedition to Kazbegi was articulated through a need to physically and discursively conquer mountainous space in the name of the nation, the expedition to Elbrus was largely absent of such language, a fact that undoubtedly stemmed from Elbrus' physical location outside of Georgia's borders and

[111] Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti," 95.
[112] Ibid, 113.
[113] Ibid, 114.

its more tenuous connection to Georgian history and literature. Instead, the Elbrus expedition was conceived of as both a research and a sport expedition, with the goal not just to climb the mountain but also to gather scientific materials from the region. To this end, the expedition was divided into a number of different sections, each with a clear research objective.[114] In doing so, the expedition sought to gather materials ranging from alpine flora to local folk costumes, study physical features like glaciers and rivers, and to correct a number of misnamed geographic locations on foreign maps.[115] This ambitious research agenda placed the expedition, and the Geographic Society of Georgia, squarely in line with the work of other European geographic societies, but the organizers still felt the need to summit Elbrus to illustrate that their climbing abilities were equal to those of their western European counterparts.

Nikoladze's large group and all of their gear made it to the base of the Azau glacier on August 7th after five days of walking from Kislovodsk.[116] Here, the group met with an expedition from the Caucasian Mountain Society, led by the Russian alpinist and researcher Ia. I. Frolov. Both groups set a base camp at Azau, where they left a number of companions who were not planning to participate or were not feeling well enough to summit.[117] Nikoladze's group, now containing twelve men and five women plus the two Mokhevian guides, joined Frolov's smaller contingent of seven men in a joint expedition. The now combined Georgian and Russian group began their ascent from Azau early in the morning on August 7th, reaching the camp at "Krugozor" (Horizon), the standard first camp at around three-thousand meters. The next day the group reached the "Shelter of the Eleven" at 4200 meters, a small, somewhat protected area of

---

[114] *Zaria vostoka*, 29 July 1925. These sections included botanical, mineralogical, entomologic, the cartographic, ethnographic, and geophysical.
[115] Ibid.
[116] The most accessible account of the expedition is given in S. Anisimov, *Ot Kazbeka k El'brusu*, (Balabanova, 2013), 130-134. Anisimov's original version was printed in 1928. See also Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti," 97. There are some discrepancies between these two accounts and between the various accounts in the press, although the main details of the expedition correlate between the different accounts.
[117] Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti," 98.

volcanic rock used in 1909 by a group of eleven alpinists from the Caucasian Mountain Society. The groups set camp at the Shelter of Eleven with the plan to attempt the ascent the following day, but this quick progress was stalled the next morning when the weather conditions took a turn for the worse.

Waking up to a thick fog and bitter winds, Nikoladze and Frolov made an early morning attempt to test the conditions but were quickly turned back because of the weather. Both the Georgian and Russian groups waited several more hours before making a more sustained joint group attempt in the morning, although the weather had still not improved. Led by Gakha Tsiklauri in the front with Iagor Kazalikashvili bringing up the rear, the entire twenty-four-person group began to snake up the mountain in one line. After three hours of walking, Tsiklauri led the group to Pastukhov's Rocks, a small outcropping at 4700 meters where the famous pre-revolutionary Russian scientist had spent the night in 1896.[118] But here, the group's slow progress stalled and it became clear that they would not be able to continue the ascent. The majority of the group descended to the Shelter of the Eleven, while Frolov, Simon Japaridze, and another unnamed member of Frolov's expedition attempted to push ahead, only to return to the Shelter a short time later.[119] The Georgian group was of course dejected by the failed first attempt, but hoped to use the experience they gained on a second try.[120]

Due to their extensive preparations and additional supplies stocked at Azau, Nikoladze's group was well equipped to continue climbing when the weather improved. Frolov's expedition however, had not prepared for a delayed summit and was forced to abandon any subsequent attempts, descending to Krugozor where the rest of the Russian expedition was conducting

[118] Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti," 106.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

meteorological research.[121] The weather, however, continued to worsen, leaving the Georgian group stuck at high elevation for several days. Nikoladze busied himself with taking photographs whenever the clouds cleared, and the group created an informal "chess club" to pass the time. While a few members of the group fell ill, likely a result of remaining at such high altitude for an extended period of time, the vast majority felt fine and the group remained in remarkably good spirits.[122] The group received extra food from the base camp at Azau and exchanged letters and reports with the rest of the expedition below.

After several days at high elevation and no real change in the weather, this hope began to shift and the participants started to feel unwell in some way.[123] The group was beginning to doubt that the weather would improve for another attempt to take place, and Mikeladze notes that only Nikoladze and Tsiklauri remained hopeful for a successful summit.[124] On August 12th, after four days at the Shelter of the Eleven, the weather finally improved and the group began a second attempt. Encouraged by Tsiklauri's enthusiasm, the group donned their bandulebi and began to climb the remaining 1400 meters. Six hours and forty-five minutes later the entire group of nineteen, led slowly and methodically by Tsiklauri, stood victoriously on the peak. As Mikeladze noted in his diary, "today is a historic day. Georgian youth recorded another new page in the annals of world mountaineering."[125]

Mikeladze was not incorrect in his assessment. Although Elbrus had already been climbed a number of times by European and Russian alpinists, it had not been climbed since 1913, and the usual base camp at Krugozor was in disrepair, a fact that made the ascent in exceedingly difficult conditions all the more impressive. The group's four-day encampment at

[121] Anisimov, *Ot Kazbeka k El'brusu,* 133; Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti," 106.
[122] Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti," 107-111.
[123] Ibid, 120.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.

high elevation, large size, and successful summit by five women set the expedition apart from previous ascents. Nikoladze's expedition marked the largest single group to ever summit Elbrus as well as the first women to reach the peak, history-making feats that drew praise from Russian and European alpinists.[126] The Georgian expedition likewise had succeeded where a more experienced but less prepared Russian one had been forced to abandon the ascent, vividly demonstrating the organizational abilities of the Geographical Society of Georgia and the technical skills of its young alpinists, a fact that did not go unnoticed. As one correspondent in *Zaria vostoka* wrote when discussing the expedition:

> "It is necessary to note one more thing – the expedition was accomplished under unusually difficult conditions. At the height of more than 4000 meters, it (the expedition) had to endure a three-day snowstorm. Another expedition – the Caucasian mountain society, among which were such experts of the ascent on Elbrus like Frolov, Maslentsikov, and Dzigovskii… was forced to turn back. Only thanks to the diligence of the leadership, the strict discipline and excellent training the Georgian expedition achieved its goal."

The correspondent would go on to recall the successful ascent of Kazbegi in 1923 and the meticulous training of Georgian alpinists that created such "internal discipline and deep cohesion" that allowed for the victory on Elbrus.[127]

Zaria vostoka offered extensive coverage of both the Kazbegi and Elbrus expeditions, providing regular updates on preparations and progress of each expedition. Nikoladze himself gave a number of interviews prior to the expedition in Tbilisi, and remained in close contact with the press as the expedition developed.[128] *Zaria vostoka* in particular included not just positive articles but stylized drawings of Didebulidze, Nikoladze, and the five women to summit Elbrus as well as articles on the history of previous expeditions to Kazbegi and Elbrus.[129] The increased

---

[126] "The Geographical Society of Georgia," *Geographical Journal*: 341-342
[127] *Zaria vostoka*, 25 August, 1925.
[128] Mikeladze, "ialbuzi da svaneti," 89.
[129] *Zaria vostoka*, 30 August 1925; *Zaria vostoka*, 30 August, 1925; and *Zaria vostoka*, 1 September 1925.

press coverage in 1925 suggests not just the growing recognition of Nikoladze and the Georgian alpinists at the Geographical Society, but also the public's own mounting interest in the exploration of mountainous space.

Nikoladze did not just earn praise from the press. A day after the summit Nikoladze wrote to the famous Russian researcher and travel writer Sergei Anisimov, describing the successful ascent. A few years later, Anisimov would include this letter as well as a description of Nikoladze's 1925 expedition in his book *From Kazbek to Elbrus*. Published in 1928, *From Kazbek to Elbrus* contained stories from Anisimov's travels in the Caucasus, popular folk legends and stories, scientific observations, and accounts of the most famous ascents. Here, Anisimov argued that the Georgian expedition in 1925 was "the most remarkable expedition on Elbrus" and that "(t)his climb must be recognized as absolutely exceptional both in terms of achieved success and in scientific relations."[130] Anisimov would go on to give a full account of the expedition, contending that the Georgian experience proved that it was not necessary to "force the peak" but to be patient and set camps every thousand meters or so to avoid altitude sickness.[131] Anisimov was a prodigious and well-read writer on the Caucasus from even before the revolution and his resounding endorsement of the Georgian Elbrus expedition undoubtedly supported Nikoladze's contention that the activities of the Geographic Society of Georgia were on par with other societies in the Soviet Union.[132]

[130] Anisimov, *Ot Kazbeka k El'brusu,* 130.
[131] Ibid, 134.
[132]For more on Anisimov, see: "Issledovatel' Kavkaza – Anisimov Sergei Segeevich" at http://www.mountain.ru/article/article_display1.php?article_id=6419 (last accessed June 26, 2019).

Connections to the Royal Geographic Society

The biggest endorsement of the Geographical Society of Georgia came from abroad, however. Six months after the expedition Nikoladze traveled to London on a research trip and gave a talk about the work of the GSG at England's Royal Geographical Society (RGS). As a result, the activities of the GSG and especially the Elbrus summit were given relatively extensive coverage in the *Geographic Journal*, the official journal of the RGS. Although the account is written in the typical dry style of the *Geographic Journal*, it nonetheless places the successful Elbrus expedition within the history of European mountaineering, and argues that the foundation of the GSG "promises well for the future of geography in the Caucasus."[133] Nikoladze's talk was likewise attended by the famous English alpinist Douglas Freshfield, who gave a shorter account of the expedition in the *Alpine Journal*, the official journal of London's well-known Alpine Club.[134] Nikoladze shared photographs from the expedition with the RGS, and the RGS encouraged the GSG to send Georgian language maps in order to better transliterate Georgian place names.

This initial interaction in 1926 began several years of correspondence and cooperation between the two scientific societies that was only curtailed with rise of Stalinism. In January 1927, Douglas Freshfield wrote personally to Nikoladze to congratulate him on the creation of the GSG and encouraged Nikoladze to continue to inform the RGS about the work and activities of the GSG. Freshfield went on to offer "my best wishes of success" to the GSG and again commend the group "and in particular the five girls" on the successful ascent of Elbrus.[135] A few months later, the *Geographic Journal* reported that Freshfield had been made an honorary member of the GSG. As the *Geographic Journal* wrote, "(t)his honour was tendered as an

---

[133] "The Geographical Society of Georgia," *Geographical Journal*: 340.
[134] D.W. Freshfield, "Caucasian Notes," *Alpine Journal* Vol. 39, No. 234 (May 1927): 162-163.
[135] Aslanishvili, *Al'pinism v Gruzii*, 33-34.

expression of deep gratitude for Mr. Freshfield's travels and ascents in the High Caucasus and for his important scientific works upon that region."[136] It is clear from other sources that Freshfield and Nikoladze exchanged several friendly letters, although there seems to be no extant copies of these letters in either Nikoladze's fond at the National Archives of Georgia or at the holdings of the RGS in London.[137] Nikoladze remained in contact with the RGS and sent the society a copy of Simon Japaridze's report on meteorological work conducted from 1925-1927 and an overview of this report appeared in the Geographic Journal in 1928.[138] A few years later, Douglas Freshfield offered a more extensive review of the work of the GSG in the Alpine Journal in 1930.[139]

Articles about Georgian alpinists in the prestigious pages of the Geographic Journal and the Alpine Journal firmly placed the work of the GSG in the mold of western European geographical societies. Moreover, it is clear that these connections advertised the research and activities of the GSG to a wider European audience. In 1927 Nikoladze received a letter from Doctor Fritz Leve, a German scientist at the Berlin Aeronautical Observatory, asking to take part in one of Nikoladze's expeditions in the Caucasus. Leve noted that he read about the work of the GSG in the Geographic Journal, and having long desired to climb in the Caucasus decided to write to Nikoladze.[140] These growing connections with western European societies, scientists, and alpinists illustrate some of the ways that the foundational decision to orient the GSG towards Europe was beginning to bear fruit. After only three short years of existence and four remarkably

[136] *Geographical Journal* Vol. 70, No. 2 (August 1927): 188.
[137] See for instance the letter Freshfield quotes in the Alpine Journal: Douglas Freshfield, "Caucasus Notes" *Alpine Journal* Vol. 42, No. 240 (May 1930): 132-135.
[138] "Scientific Work in the Caucasus," *Geographical Journal* Vol. 71, No. 1 (Jan., 1928): 103.
[139] Douglas Freshfield, "Caucasus Notes" *Alpine Journal* Vol. 42, No. 240 (May 1930): 132-135.
[140] Aslanishvili, *Al'pinizm v Gruzii*, 34-35.

successful expeditions, the Geographical Society of Georgia was poised to become a major sponsor of scientific exploration in the Caucasus.

Georgian Mountaineering from 1926-1928

The work of Georgian alpinists in the following years would consolidate the gains of 1925. With Nikoladze abroad for several years, the talented climber Simon Japaridze, a participant in the 1925 expedition to Elbrus, emerged as the leader of Georgian mountaineering. In 1926 Japaridze led an expedition to Kazbegi in early September with the goal of checking the meteorological instruments that Didebulidze had placed there in 1925. In many ways, this expedition imitated the organizational structure of the past years, and the fifteen-person group included five women, was guided by Iagor Kazalikashvili and Gakha Tsiklauri, and involved two local porters. Among the women climbers were participants from previous expeditions, including Vera Bezhanishvili, a member of Nikoladze's original 1923 expedition but who had not been allowed to participate in the summit because of her young age.[141] By 1926, the GSG had a clearly defined system of developing young alpinists, irrespective of gender.

Japaridze's group unsurprisingly reached the peak with few difficulties. Along the way, the group camped in the middle of the Gergeti moraine, where they named a large rock "Iagor's sign" as a trail marker in honor of Kazalikashvili and the rock and its name would become well known even among Russian travelers to Kazbegi. At the summit, the group took a recording from the thermometer left by Didebulidze, and positioned new self-recording instruments in its place, including a more accurate thermometer, a barograph, and a thermograph. After descending, the expedition continued into the neighboring region of Khevsureti where they visited the village of Juta, located about twenty kilometers from Kazbegi. There, as Japaridze

[141] S. B. Japaridze, "Voskhozhdenie na vershinu Kazbeka v sentiabre 1926 goda," in *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al'pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze* ed. V. Semenovskii (Moskva, 1930), 84.

recounts, Kazalikashvili told them "many interesting things about the way of life and mores of the mountains inhabitants of Georgian-Khevsurs," a statement which illustrated some of the many ways that Mokhevian guides served as cultural mediators for the GSG.[142] Returning from Juta, part of the group departed to Tbilisi and a smaller six-person expedition led by Japaridze, Kazalikashvili, and Tsiklauri, made another summit on Kazbegi in heavy snow in mid September. Japaridze notes that the snow was so deep that the guides grew tired and began to doubt the point of this second expedition, so in order to relieve them Japaridze led the expedition the remaining hour and a half to the peak.[143] After several successful summits, the skill of the guides and alpinists from Tbilisi was increasingly becoming equal.

The two 1926 expeditions demonstrated that the GSG had developed an institutional structure and a quickly growing cadre of skilled mountaineers that transcended the personality of Nikoladze. As Simon Japaridze himself argued, the "strong walls" of Georgian alpinism were being erected on the foundation laid in 1923 and 1925, and it was only a matter of time to see if "this building, which is called alpinism, will be built."[144] Japaridze continued: "And if until this time the most beautiful mountains of the Caucasus, and in particular Georgia, were available only for European alpinists, then from this time they will be reachable for their own sons.[145] As the quote makes clear, the GSG had a clear vision for the future of Georgian mountaineering, the core of which was making Georgian mountains accessible to Georgian alpinists and travelers.

The GSG's work in the following two years would even further strengthen the walls of Georgian alpinism. In 1927, the GSG conducted a number of expeditions, including three ascents

[142] Ibid, 86.
[143] Ibid, 95-96.
[144] Ibid, 99.
[145] Ibid, 99.

on Kazbegi, one ascent on Elbrus, and two ascents on smaller peaks.[146] Simon Japaridze, almost always aided by Kazalikashvili, continued to focus on meteorological observations on Kazbegi and his presence on the cliffs above the Gergeti glacier became so well known that the guides named the spot in his honor. In August, Japaridze would create a new and safer route to the peak, which the guides named "Japaridze's trail." [147] Like the trail marker named after Kazalikashvili, the personalized naming of specific places and trails illustrated the ongoing cooperation and respect between the Mokhevian guides and Tbilisi alpinists, as well the continuation of discursive conquest begun by Nikoladze in 1923.

In early November 1927, Japaridze led a daring "winter" summit of Kazbegi, proving that it was possible to conduct expeditions well past the normal alpinist season of August to early September. The eleven-person group was almost equally divided between participants from Tbilisi and local Mokhevians, and for two members of the expedition the climb marked their first summit.[148] In 1928 Japaridze and Kazalikashvili, among others, conducted expeditions in late September and early October to check on the meteorological instruments left at the peak, again pushing the bounds of the alpinist season. But perhaps the greatest success of 1928 was a "mass" expedition of forty-one people during August, which included a Russian group from SovKino in Moscow who recorded a film of the ascent. This film, "Gates of the Caucasus," was ostensibly the first film shot at such high elevation and a clear moment of pride for the GSG. Among the members of the expedition were seven Georgian women and a number of Mokhevians, in particular Iagor Kazalikashvili's son Stepan, for whom the expedition marked a first ascent.[149] In the five years since 1923, members of the GSG had an impressive list of accomplishments: two

---

[146] See *kavkazionze,* 306.

[147] S. Anisimov, "Simon Dzhaparidze" in *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al'pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze* ed. By V. Semenovskii (Moskva, 1930), 35.

[148] I. Aslanishvili, *mq'invarts'verze asvla shemodgomit* (Tpilisi, 1928), 55.

[149] Aslanishvili, *Al'pinizm v Gruzii*, 39.

summits on Elbrus and twelve summits on Kazbegi; in total twenty Georgian alpinists had reached the peak of Elbrus and 117 had reached the peak of Kazbegi. Out of the 137 total alpinists to reach these peaks twenty-six of them were women, nearly twenty percent. As Soso Aslanishvili pointed out, these numbers were even more impressive in comparison since there were only twenty-one total expeditions to the two peaks between 1923 and 1928, meaning that Georgians had conducted a full two-thirds of all expeditions to Elbrus and Kazbegi during this period.[150]

Ideas of Mountainous Space

The increased activity of the GSG in the latter half of the 1920s mirrored a larger attention to the status of mountainous space, especially in the Caucasus. Even before the first five-year plan in 1928, there was considerable tension over the meaning of mountainous space and mountainous peoples to the Soviet project, and the ways that Soviet development would affect places previously untouched by industrial modernity. Bolshevik officials were quick to highlight the "backwardness" of mountainous peoples, as well as the challenges that the isolation of mountainous regions poised to the goal of an interconnected and industrialized modern Soviet state. Doing so required not just the construction of new schools, hospitals, and factories, but also the destruction of traditional cultures and older forms of social organization. Soviet officials showed little anxiety over what such rapid change meant for local people, arguing instead that the various cultures of mountainous regions were simply an obstacle to the imposition of Soviet modernity.

For Georgia in particular, the region of Svaneti became a key focal point for these larger arguments about the transformative power of Soviet rule. Located in northwestern Georgia, the

[150] Ibid, 40-41.

rugged mountains of Svaneti meant that the region was historically isolated from the main Georgian regions of Imereti and Kartli until at least the nineteenth century and arguably later. This isolation resulted in the development of the Svanuri language, an unwritten language that, while part of the Georgian language family, is not mutually understandable with spoken Georgian.[151] Svans, as the region's inhabitants are known, also had distinct forms of material culture and social organization, a unique Svan "byt" or "way of life" that Soviet ethnographers argued separated the Svan people from the Georgian nation. The differences were so great that Soviet ethnographers initially considered the Svans to be a separate nationality in the 1926 census, a fact which was strongly contested by Georgian leaders who argued that the Svans were simply a sub-ethnicity of the main Georgian nationality.[152]

As a result of these larger political and ethnographic questions, Svaneti received a surprising amount of attention from Bolshevik officials, especially for a region that barely had over twenty thousand inhabitants.[153] In 1925, the Georgian Bolshevik Fillip Makharadze traveled extensively throughout Svaneti, recording his observations in a five-part installation in *Zaria vostoka.* Although Makharadze had previously argued for a more moderate imposition of Soviet power in the Caucasus, famously coming into conflict with Stalin and Orjonikidze in 1922 over the Sovietization of Georgia, his comments on Svaneti reflected a standard Soviet understanding of the backwardness of mountainous space.[154] Makharadze argued that the common idea of Svaneti as a place where medieval customs and culture still prevailed was in fact incorrect, not because Svaneti was more developed but because its development was still far behind that of

[151] There is some debate among Georgian linguists over whether "Svanuri" is a distinct language or merely a dialect.
[152] See Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 132-133, 136.
[153] *Zaria vostoka,* 3 October 1925.
[154] For more on this conflict see Suny, *Georgian Nation*, 209-219.

medieval times.[155] Makharadze contended that Svans were undoubtedly Georgian, "one of the oldest branches of the Georgian people," but noted the impoverished conditions of the region and the continued existence of blood feuds, clear markers of backwardness.[156] The solution to this situation was a combination of education, medical care, cooperatives, and especially roads that would end Svaneti's poverty and isolation, developments that, as Makharadze argued, would connect the Svans "with centers of culture and enlightenment (prosveshchenie)."[157] Makharadze concluded with a hopeful note that Soviet power would bring this development to Svaneti, work that would be best led by a cell of workers from Tbilisi.

Such ideas about a backward and isolated Svaneti in need of Soviet development were later represented in the 1930 documentary film *Salt for Svaneti*. Directed by Mikhail Kalatozov, *Salt for Svaneti* portrayed a "savage land" that was "cut off from civilization by mountains and glaciers."[158] The Svans meanwhile, were shown to retain a number of uncultured pre-revolutionary religious practices and superstitions and were so impoverished and undeveloped that they used sleds instead of wheels, a trope that would become common throughout the 1930s. The region's poverty was represented by the lack of salt, which could only be brought in sufficient quantities with the construction of a new road by Soviet workers, aided by Soviet mechanization. The final scene portrayed Soviet workers breaking through the rugged nature of the Caucasus, vividly illustrating the film's claim that "our economic plan is stronger than religion and old customs."[159] Although Kalatozov's depictions of Svan life and culture may have

---

[155] *Zaria vostoka*, 2 October 1925.
[156] *Zaria vostoka,* 3 October 1925.
[157] *Zaria vostoka,* 8 October 1925.
[158] *Salt For Svanetia,* Directed by Mikhail Kalatozov, Tbilisi: Gruziia Film, 1930. Quotation from edition produced by David Shepard, Los Angeles: Flicker Alley, no date given.
[159] Ibid.

been more critical than those in Makharadze's travel notes, both shared an enthusiastic belief that Soviet power would improve life in Svaneti.[160]

Others were not so sure. In a 1926 article titled "The Soul of Georgia," the Russian writer Vladimir Lidin argued that there was not one but two Georgias: a romantic mountainous Georgia connected to the poems of Rustaveli and the century of Tamar, with "wonderful castles on high," and an industrial Georgia of tractors and electrification which would ultimately destroy the former. The soul of Georgia was of course not to be found in Soviet progress, but rather along the Terek where there "was silence, mountainous cold, the sound of incessant waters, and the harsh lyrics of millennia." The rapid development of Soviet progress meant that the romanticism inherent in the works of Lermontov, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Rustaveli, and Sayat Nova would soon be erased, evidenced by the fact that the grave of Sayat Nova in Tbilisi now stood unceremoniously next to an electric transformer labeled "deadly!" Lidin was deeply troubled by this dizzying modernization and its irreversible effects. Guided around old Tbilisi, Lidin remarked: "These people showed me the city (Tbilisi), its wonderful and mysterious alleyways (zakoulki), squares with humble water buffalo, with steppe camels, the morning world, its real life, and these people said that all of this soon will soon go away, like much has already gone irretrievably (bezvozvratno)." Lidin certainly romanticized and the world of old Tbilisi and mountainous castles, but this romanticism suggested a real ambivalence about the meaning of Soviet progress.[161]

---

[160] Erik Barnouw has argued that despite the enthusiastic depiction of Soviet progress, the film was considered "unbalanced and unfair to Svanetia" by Soviet authorities. He notes, "The Stalin regime apparently felt that Kalatozov had been far too fascinated by the backwardness and superstition of Svanetia, and too perfunctorily interested in the socialist solution." Regardless of criticism from Soviet authorities, I would argue that *Salt for Svanetia* represented a common if not exaggerated understanding of the backwardness of mountainous space and peoples. See Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford, 1993), 69. Kalatozov would struggle in the following years, but would eventually gain widespread success with the 1957 Soviet classic The Cranes are Flying. For more, see: Josephine Woll, *The Cranes are Flying* (London, 2003), 22-23.
Zaria vostoka, 25 June 1926.

The Georgian mountaineering community rejected both Makharadze and Kalatozov's insistence on Svan backwardness and Lidin's ambivalence of the Soviet project. For Georgian alpinists, the lack of development in Svaneti did not necessarily mean that the Svan people themselves were hopelessly uncultured. But even as they found traits to admire in the resourceful Svans, members of the Geographic Society of Georgia argued that more development was necessary to help the Svans whose material conditions undoubtedly demanded improvement. Soso Aslanishvili in particular spent considerable time researching the causes of goiters in Svaneti, a major health problem at the time. And yet, as he traveled around the region in the mid 1920's he explicitly rejected the image of a superstitious and savage Svan in *Salt for Svaneti*. As he argued, "We knew one thing, however, that we were going among a sincere people, among a chivalrous people and not among savages… No, our hearts felt the majesty of Svaneti, the bravery of the Svans, the fortitude of the Svans, the Svan reason…"[162] Aslanishvili would go on to express astonishment at the comments of other Russian and European researchers who focused extensively on the uncivilized nature of the Svan people. For the members of the GSG, the modernization of Svaneti was a positive development that would help to solve entrenched health problems like goiters, relieve the endemic poverty, and provide new opportunities for local people, but this modernization should only take place with Svans as partners and with proper respect paid to local culture.

The House of Georgian Alpinism

By the first five-year plan in 1928 the GSG was the preeminent alpinist organization in the Caucasus and an increasingly important scientific society, both in the Soviet Union and abroad. In the five years since the first summit in 1923, the GSG developed its own alpinist

[162] I. Aslanishvili, *ekspeditsia svanetshi* (Tpilisi, 1926), 22-24.

traditions and practices that reinforced and expanded the goals of Nikoladze's first expedition to Kazbegi. In repeatedly climbing the mountain and creating local names for different places, trail markers, and paths, Georgian climbers ensured that Russian and European alpinists would encounter Georgian names and associate Georgian expeditions with Kazbegi. The placement of meteorological instruments at the peak likewise offered the GSG the opportunity to illustrate both the technical skill of its alpinists and the scientific expertise of its members. All of these developments helped the GSG claim mountainous space in the name of the Georgian nation while simultaneously offering evidence that Georgia was an "advanced" nation equal to that of Russia or nations in western Europe.

The GSG likewise developed a number of distinct practices that differed from those of Russian and European climbers. From the beginning, the GSG was interested in fostering "mass" ascents of regularly more than fifteen people, often with significant participation from Georgian women. The focus on women's participation undoubtedly has its roots in Nikoladze's own family history and participation in international gymnastics circles, but it would become a regular feature of the GSG in the 1920s, although the high level participation by Georgian women would decline in the 1930s for a number of reasons discussed in the following chapters. Today, Georgia is widely considered to be a deeply patriarchal society, and the Soviet past is often upheld as a time when gender norms were not so strictly enforced. This patriarchy is broadly considered to be a traditional and unchanging value of Georgian society by both liberal western NGOs and Georgia's own conservative Orthodox Church. And yet, it is important to remember that in the 1920s before the Soviet project had gained a strong foothold in the country, Georgians were articulating ideas of gender equality and Georgian women were participating in alpinism in numbers far beyond that of Russia or western Europe.

Perhaps the most enduring tradition that the GSG developed, however, was cooperation with local peoples. The reliance on Mokhevian guides like Kazalikashvili and Tsiklauri stemmed not just from necessity, but also from a profound respect for the mountaineering practices and the material culture of mountainous peoples. The relationships between local "peasant" guides and the students and professors from Tbilisi were remarkably positive and resulted in a number of deep friendships that would span into the next decade. The GSG sought more than just friendship with local guides; rather, it sought to promote alpinism among local people and to create a tradition of alpinism in the mountainous regions of Georgia. In the 1920s this meant including Mokhevians on the expeditions of the GSG, even Mokhevians without any mountaineering experience. More critically, as Aslanishvili's research on goiters in Svaneti in 1925 illustrated, it meant resisting the urge to orientalize and exoticize mountainous peoples as the backward other. These practices stemmed from the need to overcome the tension between the urban intelligentsia and mountainous populations of Georgia as a way to integrate mountainous space into the nation. This unique orientation meant that alpinist expeditions were a potent tool of Georgian nation building and helped to legitimate claims to mountainous space that, like Svaneti, were contested at the highest levels of the Soviet Union.

Some of these practices easily overlapped with the development of a more ideologically driven form of Soviet alpinism in the 1930s. The Georgian focus on large expeditions and mass ascents matched up well with larger ideas about a uniquely Soviet form of mountaineering, a style of climbing that rejected the individualistic, bourgeois form of the sport practiced in the west. And the Georgian insistence on women's participation easily dovetailed with larger Soviet ideas about the role of sport in gender emancipation. Nonetheless, the focus on developing alpinism among local people and insistence on respecting local values and traditions would

become a point of tension between Georgian alpinists and Russian tourist officials in the 1930s, especially as mountainous peoples were continually conceptualized as backward and hostile to the progress of an industrialized Soviet state. At the same time, it is important to note that at the beginning of the first five year plan in 1928 there was little sense of hostility between Georgian and Russian alpinists. Georgian alpinists may have had tense interactions with Preobrazhenskaia in 1923, but they had much better relationships with other Russian alpinists and researchers like Frolov and Anisimov. As the sport increasingly centralized in Moscow, Georgian mountaineers came into conflict with Russian officials about the limits of Georgian independence and into larger disagreements with Russian alpinists and tourists over the meaning of the Caucasus more broadly. If Georgian alpinism could be imagined as a house, as Simon Japaridze suggested, then the foundation laid in the 1920s would cement the principles of the Georgian climbing community for the following decades, even in the face of larger political changes.

CHAPTER 2: PROLETARIAN TOURIST OR GREAT-POWER CHAUVINIST?: SOVIET TOURING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CAUCASUS

Introduction

Georgian alpinists were not the only actors influenced by the imaginary geographies of the nineteenth century. During the Soviet period, the Caucasus was one of the most popular destinations for Russians seeking rest and became a key site for the emergent proletarian tourist movement in the 1930s. But these tourists were not traveling in unfamiliar territory. In the early 1800s, the region emerged as a premier destination for Russian officers to recuperate as the empire expanded south. Soon the Caucasus was widely known for its mountainous scenery and healing mineral springs, and spa cities like Piatigorsk, Essentuki, and Borjomi became popular destinations for affluent Russian tourists. The region was further popularized by the work of nineteenth century romantic authors like Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Alexander Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, whose writings created an imaginary Caucasus that functioned as Imperial Russia's own Orient. By the turn of the century, the Caucasus was as much a real place as it was an idea, both inextricably linked to empire. The legacy of the Caucasus as a both a place of rest and an exotic periphery proved remarkably durable during the Soviet period, especially in the sphere of tourism. Far from creating new paradigms about the Caucasus or Caucasians, Soviet tourists readily reproduced discourses from the past, envisioning themselves as enlightened givers of civilization not so different from the literary heroes of the nineteenth century.

This chapter examines the many connections between pre-revolutionary tourism in the Caucasus and Soviet tourist practices in the 1920s and 1930s to argue that it is impossible to understand either outside the context of empire. Tourists during the Soviet period remained

deeply influenced by the works of nineteenth century Russian authors, and continued to see the Caucasus through the lens of Pushkin, Lermontov, and others. Viewed from perspective of the center, these understandings of the Caucasus and Caucasians reflect the enduring power of romantic literature to shape the public imagination. But viewed from the perspective of the Caucasus, it is possible to see how such visions frustrated the work of Caucasian tourist administrators and local people. Here, the inability of Soviet tourism to adequately address harmful nineteenth century ideas about the Caucasus illustrates the larger failure of the Soviet project to create new, and more equal relationships between Russians and national minorities. Moreover, the invention of "sunny Georgia," in the Soviet period, an abundant land of wine and exotic fruits, was the result of this failure to challenge nineteenth century paradigms. Alpinism in the Soviet period was a part of the wider world of Soviet tourism, a specific subset of a larger discipline. This meant that while Georgian and Russian alpinists may have been climbing the same peaks, they were influenced by two radically different imaginary geographies and two different ideas about the relationship of mountainous space to the Georgian nation. Put another way, Pushkin's vision of mountainous space was fundamentally different from Chavchavadze's, and these competing ideas created conflict between Russian and Georgian climbers as Soviet alpinism centralized in the 1930s. In the following sections, I step away from mountaineering momentarily in order to examine the legacy of Russian tourism in the Caucasus, both real and imagined, to understand how this legacy influenced the development of Soviet alpinism beginning in the 1930s, a theme addressed in the following chapters.

The Pre-Revolutionary Tourist: the Spa and the Beach

The combination of southward imperial expansion and the increasing commercialization of Russian society during the nineteenth century helped make the Caucasus and Crimea into popular destinations for Russian tourists. Both regions offered potential benefits for the northern traveler – warm beaches, health-restoring mineral springs, picturesque mountain landscapes, and seemingly "exotic" cuisines and people. In the Caucasus specifically, the development of tourism accelerated in the second half of the nineteenth century when North Caucasian resistance to Russian rule was finally defeated, signified by the capture of Shamil in 1859, arguably the most successful leader of resistance against Tsarist rule in the nineteenth century. Soon, numerous commercial agencies and voluntary societies were organizing trips to the region, a reflection of the increasing accessibility and interest in travel by the urban upper classes. The mineral spas of the north Caucasus were made even more accessible when a rail connection was opened in 1875, offering Russian travelers easier access to some of the best resorts in the empire.[1]

These developments helped to refashion the Caucasus from a brutal site of Russian expansion into a luxurious playground for Russian tourists. Spa cities were not just places to restore one's health; they also became sites of leisure offering more than curative mineral waters. As Louise McReynolds has detailed, the development of Borjomi, located in a picturesque gorge in southwestern Georgia, illustrates some of these larger trends. The town's unique volcanic mineral springs and moderate climate made it an ideal place for recovering Russian soldiers, who began visiting Borjomi in the 1820s. A decade later more serious construction began and by mid-century administration of the mineral springs was transferred to the civilian authorities. By the turn of the century, Borjomi was one of the most popular destinations for Russian tourists in the

[1] Diane Koenker, *Club Red: Vacation Travel and the Soviet Dream* (Ithaca, 2013), 16-17.

Caucasus with numerous hotels, dachas, and royal estates. Borjomi offered a wide range of other activities apart from its now famous spas. As McReynolds notes, (c)limbing and horseback riding competed with bathing, and orchestras and touring stage companies played during the summer season."[2] In the 1890s, the Grand Duke Mikhail Romanov began to bottle Borjomi water for commercial sale, and the mineral water would soon become famous with Russian consumers for its distinctive taste and healthful properties, a popularity that continues today. What began as a military outpost was now a full-fledged resort.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Caucasus was filled with resorts like Borjomi catering to the needs of Russian tourists. Apart from North Caucasian mineral spring towns like Piatigorsk and Essentuki, villages along the Black Sea were soon sites for the development of resorts and medical facilities. Sanatoriums in Sokhumi, located on the Abkhazian coast, were initially built to treat lung diseases, but the facilities quickly outgrew this strictly medical purpose and became popular with Russians seeking both leisure and medical treatment. To the north, the coastal town of Sochi emerged as a luxurious spa built to compete with the French Riviera, a development only made possible by the Circassian Genocide which destroyed the local population. Between the two towns, Prince Alexander Oldenburg turned his family estate in Gagra into its own unique resort, replete with private zoo, telephone connections, restaurants, an orchestra, a stage, and beach facilities – an estate immortalized in the work of the popular Soviet-Abkhazian author Fazil Iskander. And although European spas remained more popular with Russian tourists than those in the Caucasus, the development of so many spas,

[2] Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (Ithaca, 2003), 173.

sanatoria, and resorts helped to fix the region as a place of luxury and leisure in the Russian imagination, only tenuously removed from the danger of local inhabitants.[3]

The growth of Caucasian resorts was certainly driven by the increasingly commercialized nature of Russian vacationing and better transportation connections, but it could not be divorced from the reality of empire. As detailed above, Russian spa towns were first built to serve soldiers at the edge of empire, and their further development was only made possible by the imposition of imperial violence and the destruction of indigenous Caucasian communities. But the connections to empire ran deeper than these physical manifestations. As Louise McReynolds argues, "(t)he politics of imperialism mandated that ethnic Russians come not simply to conquer, but also to improve the lives of the other peoples being incorporated into empire… Travel literature charted Russia's civilizing influence, highlighting integration, as opposed to conquest."[4] Resorts and spa towns helped to affirm Russia's civilizing mission, illustrating the many ways that empire functioned to improve newly incorporated lands, despite violent conquest.

This orientation would help to cement an imperial hierarchy that highlighted Russian superiority over the less "enlightened" peoples they encountered. Caucasian resorts were sites of modernity, represented by well-developed medical facilities, boulevards, parks, theaters, restaurants, and even telephones. But these resorts were largely not meant to be enjoyed by local inhabitants, a legacy that would continue into the Soviet period. Instead, such towns were made into islands of Russian culture in a non-Russian periphery. For instance, by the beginning of the twentieth century Borjomi had more Russian inhabitants than Georgian ones.[5] Russian dominance was sustained in other, more subtle ways. As Louise McReynolds points out,

---

[3] Koenker, *Club Red*, 16-17; McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 176-177. See also, Fazil Iskander, "Prince Oldenburgsky" in *Sandro of Chegem,* trans. Susan Brownsberger (New York, 1983), 36-54.
[4] McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 183.
[5] Ibid, 173.

"Russification through translation extended cultural conquest." Changing names like Besh-Tau to the Russianized Piatigorsk or naming mineral springs after Russian generals and their family helped to further the erasure of local culture and remake resort towns into places of familiarity for Russian tourists.[6] In all of these ways, Russian tourists were agents of empire, backed by an increasingly powerful discourse that placed Russians at the top of a civilizational hierarchy. As I explore below, this discourse was more fully expressed by nineteenth century romantic authors, whose stories about the Caucasus would have a lasting impact into and even beyond the Soviet period.

Literature and Empire

The "literary Caucasus" was a remarkably productive genre of nineteenth century writing involving some of the leading figures of the modern Russian canon. Russian authors, including both major figures and more minor ones, popularized the region as an exotic and often dangerous periphery, reproducing many of the major themes of western European Orientalism. As a result, the Caucasus became an important – perhaps the most important – textual site of Russian empire in the nineteenth century, where primordially violent mountain tribes, murderous seductresses, and luxurious gardens all enchanted the Russian reading public. These inventions would prove extraordinarily durable with numerous iterations that extended well beyond literature. As Thomas M. Barrett has argued, "the Caucasus has been for two centuries arguably the single most prominent symbol of empire in Russian culture – popular, middlebrow, and high. From

[6] Ibid, 156-157.

opera to circus, from romance to folk song, from canvas to woodcut, from literature to penny press, the Caucasus suffused Russian culture."[7]

The many connections between nineteenth century Russian literature and empire have only recently been explored, although scholars have not fully agreed on the exact legacy of such writing. The first major scholarly intervention was arguably Susan Layton's *Russian Literature and Empire,* which examined the works of both major writers like Pushkin and more minor writers that she terms the "little Orientalizers."[8] Layton's seminal work makes two major arguments. First, as she contends, Russian literature engaged in "metaphors of Asia's cultural infancy" in order to legitimate and lionize imperial expansion in the Caucasus.[9] In analyzing Pushkin's *The Prisoner of the* Caucasus, Layton shows how the construction of Muslim mountain peoples as the quintessential Asian other helped to satisfy Russia's own sense of inferiority with western Europe. Layton likewise illustrates how Bestuzhev-Marlinsky's *Ammalat-Bek* positioned the main character as "an intellectual child, asleep until European enlightenment woke him up."[10] In all of these ways, Russian literature was classically Orientalist and served as a form of discursive violence that helped to inform and legitimate the physical conquest of the Caucasus.

However, Layton also argues that nineteenth century writers had a deep ambivalence about the imperial project in the Caucasus, visible in the texts they produced. As she shows, Russian authors did not just create the Caucasus as Russia's own Orient, they also critiqued the physical violence that was intrinsic to both Russian society and Russian imperial expansion.

---

[7] Thomas M. Barrett, "Southern Living (in Captivity): The Caucasus in Russian Popular Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 31, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 75.
[8] Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 13.
[9] Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*, 289.
[10] Ibid.

Here, Layton contends that Pushkin's *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* does not just illustrate the uncivilized and violent nature of Caucasian tribes, but also reflexively turns this critique onto the Russian self. The Russian prisoner's introspections into Russian dueling, driven by the observation of the "'bloody amusements'" of Caucasian mountain peoples ultimately complicate the lines between "'their violence' and 'ours.'"[11] In this way, Layton shows how Pushkin highlighted the violence inherent to Russian high society, which brought out the contradictions fundamental to the civilizing mission of empire building.[12] This tension between European superiority and the violence that it engendered is present in other works as well. For instance, while much of Bestuzhev-Marlinsky's work can clearly be read as a classic Orientalist representation of European superiority, Layton argues that the author "was clearly plagued by grave doubts about the imperialist view of war as regenerative violence."[13] Meanwhile, Layton shows that both Lermontov and Tolstoy were even more direct in their condemnation of imperial violence. For Layton, the legacy of these author's texts is thus itself ambivalent, at least at the time they were written, vacillating between support for Caucasian conquest and criticism of it.

More recently, Harsha Ram has argued that the connections between Russian literature and empire run even deeper than the nineteenth century. For Ram, the "imperial sublime" represents "a specifically Russian tradition of relating poetics, rhetoric, and politics" that goes as far back as the early eighteenth century.[14] Regarding the nineteenth century specifically, Ram argues that the sublime shifted from an embrace of autocracy to a strong challenge of autocratic power that nonetheless remained dedicated to Russia's imperial projects in the south. In this sense, Ram sees less authorial ambivalence regarding empire. As he argues, "(e)ven as they

[11] Ibid, 95.
[12] Ibid, 289-290.
[13] Ibid, 131.
[14] Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: a Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison, 2006), 5.

were drawn to the mountain dwellers' libertarian spirit, Decembrist intellectuals, in fact, supported Russia's conquest of the Caucasus with great enthusiasm."[15] Yet, Ram nonetheless suggests that the images these authors produced had a complicated legacy, arguing that "the alpine sublime was to become a necessarily ambivalent symbol of resistance, a libertarian impulse that the poet could embrace as a disaffected member of the Russian gentry and yet also disavow as a Russian patriot for whom empire could nonetheless be distinguished from the evils of autocracy."[16] In this way, even if Ram argues more strongly for the ways that Russian literature supported empire building, his conclusion largely mirrors Layton's own about the alpine sublime reflecting the needs of the national self.

In contrast to both Layton and Ram, anthropologist Bruce Grant has largely ignored the question of ambivalence and instead looked at the way that prisoner narratives have served as a powerful legitimation of empire in the Caucasus. For Grant, Russian artists have "narrated a remarkably persistent story of kidnapping in the Caucasus" that has centered the Russian prisoner as a "noble victim."[17] As Grant argues, these stories are an inversion of the imperial storyline and are ultimately "not of activity but passivity, not of aggression but humility, not of sovereignty but of submission. The Russian is not captor but captive."[18] That prisoner stories have been continually reproduced from the nineteenth century to the present day reflects their consistent ability to, as Grant contends, "naturalize violence in ways that enable diverse Russian publics to frame their government's military actions there as persuasive."[19] In this sense Russian literature is not just involved in empire making, but is a generator of empire itself. Or, as an

---

[15] Ram, *The Imperial Sublime*, 130.
[16] Ram, *The Imperial Sublime*, 140.
[17] Bruce Grant, "The Good Russian Prisoner: Naturalizing Violence in the Caucasus Mountains, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Feb, 2005): 39, 51.
[18] Grant, "The Good Russian Prisoner," 45.
[19] Ibid, 40.

Azeri historian argues in Grant's article, "'These Russian fairytales, they are worse than the bombs!'"[20] Grant effectively argues that the discourse these authors generated ultimately helped to "cement control over their Caucasus" regardless of the author's position.

I would argue that Grant comes closest to capturing the powerful connections between literature and empire and some of the enduring ways that empire is narrativized, especially from the perspective of the Caucasus. Nineteenth century Russian authors may have been critical of the violence of imperial expansion. Indeed, this is not surprising, considering so many were sympathetic to the Decembrist cause and openly disillusioned with Russian autocracy. But the stories they created nonetheless helped to fix the Caucasus as a place of backwardness in the Russian imagination, where local peoples were fundamentally less enlightened than their Russian conquerors. As Grant argues elsewhere, this orientation reinforced an imperial relationship where Russians were not violent conquerors, but noble stewards offering the "gifts of civilization." But, as Grant accurately notes, "what so often gets lost in accounts of the gifts of civilization is that the givings – of religious salvation, of economic advancement, of cultural enlightenment – went very much in hand with the takings – of surplus value, lands, and bodies."[21] Nineteenth century literature was not the only genre promoting these civilizational myths, but it was one of the first and arguably one of the most powerful. Far from rejecting these discourses, ethnically Russian tourists and alpinists traveling to the Caucasus during the Soviet period reimagined them, offering the gift of Soviet industrial modernity instead of nineteenth century enlightenment. But no matter how different the gift of civilization, the imperial hierarchy remained.

---

[20] Ibid, 47.
[21] Bruce Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* (Ithaca, 2009), xii.

Geographies of Georgia in the Nineteenth Century

Nineteenth century literature did not just help to articulate an unequal relationship between Russians and Caucasians. It also helped to create an imaginary geography of the Caucasus divided between dangerous mountain landscapes and abundant lowland valleys. This binary would be particularly important in Georgia, where Russian authors conceptualized Georgia as a southern garden of Eden, a land plentiful with grapes, wine, and fruit, and not a wild, mountainous site of Oriental backwardness or primordial freedom. Russian writers consistently ignored the mountainous elements of Georgia's geography and instead highlighted its agricultural wealth, focusing on the eastern region of Kakheti and in particular the picturesque Alazani Valley. The fact that Russian travelers on the Georgian Military highway passed through mountainous Georgian villages is entirely absent in Russian stories, and Russian authors seem blind to the fact that different Georgian ethnic groups claimed the mountains as their home.

This conceptualization of Georgia as a southern clime is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Pushkin's famous travelogue *A Journey to Arzrum*. As Pushkin writes,

> "The instant transition from awe-inspiring Caucasus to pretty Georgia is enchanting. The air of the South suddenly begins to waft over the traveler. From the heights of Mount Gut the Kayshur valley opens out with its inhabited rock faces, its orchards, its bright Aragva, winding like a silver ribbon – and all this visible on a reduced scale, at the bottom of a two mile long abyss, along which runs a dangerous road." [22]

Here Pushkin is explicit, Georgia is not part of the mountainous, "awe-inspiring Caucasus" but rather a southern land filled with warm air and orchards. Pushkin continues his description, "We descended into the valley….. *Here Georgia begins.* Bright valleys, watered by the cheerful Aragva, replaced those gloomy defiles and the menacing Terek. Instead of bare cliffs I saw green

[22] Alexander Pushkin, "A Journey to Arzrum" in *Tales of Belkin and Other Prose Writings*, ed. Ronald Wilks (New York, 1998), 144.

hills all around and fruit trees" (emphasis added). [23] Pushkin's imaginary geography of Georgia excludes the possibilities of harsh mountain landscapes and instead foregrounds the importance of arable valleys. Georgia is fertile and lush, filled with fruit instead of dangerous and threatening. That the "menacing Terek" actually begins in Georgia and passes through the Georgian village of Stepantsminda along the Georgian military highway is something that Pushkin fully ignores.

Pushkin's exclusion of mountains from the Georgian terrain is prominent in other works as well. In the two-stanza poem "Monastery on Kazbek" Pushkin describes the Sameba or Trinity Church as "like an ark hovering in the sky" underneath the "eternal rays" of the Kazbegi mountain. But Pushkin leaves out the fact that the Sameba Church, which he incorrectly identifies as a monastery, is actually an important Georgian religious site and a material representation of Christianity itself located next to one of the most prominent Caucasian peaks. [24] In an interesting moment of self-plagiarism, Pushkin's observations at the end of *A Journey to Arzrum* reflect this indifference. As he notes, "In the morning I rode past Kazbek and witnessed a wonderful sight. Ragged white clouds were drifting across the summit of the mountain and a solitary monastery, lit up by the sun's rays, seemed to be floating in the air, borne along by the clouds." But the imaginary geography has already shifted here for Pushkin. He continues, "The Frenzied Gorge also appeared to me in all its grandeur: the gully, filled with rain water, surpassed in its ferocity the Terek itself which was thundering menacingly close by."[25] Pushkin ignores the Georgian identity of the church, the Georgian village below it, and the very Georgian name of the mountain itself because the "menacing" landscape does not fit with his

---

[23] Pushkin, "A Journey to Arzrum," 144.
[24] A.S. Pushkin, "Monastir' na Kazbeke" in *Russkie Pisateli o Gruzii,* ed. Vano Shaduri (Tbilisi, 1948), 165. See also, Michael Wachtel, *A Commentary to Pushkin's Lyric Poetry, 1826–1836* (Madison, 2011), 163. I use Wachtel's translation here.
[25]. Pushkin, "A Journey to Arzrum," 178.

conceptualization of Georgia as place of hills and valleys. In this sense, Georgia is constituted by hills, valleys, and the Aragvi River, while the North Caucasus is characterized by menacing mountains and the raging Terek.

Pushkin's conceptions of Georgia are likewise mirrored in works by Mikhail Lermontov, perhaps most prominently in his famous romantic poem "The Demon." The poem describes a fallen angel who attempts to steal an innocent Georgian bride, but ultimately loses her to God's final judgment leaving him alone once again, clearly a symbol for Lermontov's own Byronic suffering. But an overlooked aspect of the Demon is that, beyond all of its possible metaphorical meanings, the Demon is also a travelogue that in many ways reflects *A Journey to Arzrum*. Here, the Demon crosses the Caucasus mountains from the north (perhaps a not so subtle allusion to Lermontov himself) and describes "how savage was the whole divine landscape" while connecting the raging Terek, "Kazbek's diamond-faces" and the mountainous "towered castles," a reference to the ubiquitous defensive stone towers in regions like Svaneti, Khevsureti, and parts of Chechnya and Dagestan.[26] But once the Demon crosses into Georgia, the landscape immediately shifts. Lermontov notes:

> "Before him now the picture changes;
> A different scene, a brilliant hue:
> Luxurious Georgia's vales and ranges
> Are counterpaned-out for his view;
> Fortunate land, and sumptuous too!"[27]

Georgia is again placed in stark contrast to the harsh mountain landscape that preceded the Demon's travels and is presented as a land of plenty. For Russian authors, Georgia began where the mountains ended.

---

[26] Mikhail Lermontov, "The Demon," in *Narrative Poems by Alexander Pushkin and by Mikhail Lermontov*, trans. Charles Johnston (New York: 1983), 108.
[27] Lermontov, "The Demon," 109.

Both Pushkin and Lermontov highlighted Georgia's agricultural abundance, but others would emphasize this conceptualization much more strongly. In the poem "To a Kakhetian", Iakov Polonskii – a more minor Russian romantic poet in the tradition of Pushkin – romantically described Kakhetians as people that "love to drink with happy guests" surrounded by "curly vines" and "bouquets of roses." Polonskii's poem eventually collapses into Orientalist language about Kakhetians loving holidays and wine with all of the associated "revenge and hatred and violent dreams."[28] But Polonskii would repeat the reference to Georgian grape vines and roses in other poems.[29] Indeed, the Georgian love of wine, and ability to consume vast quantities would show up in other stories about the Caucasus, and Kakhetian wine would become the standard drink of Caucasian stories. As Pushkin notes in *A Journey to Arzrum*, "Georgians do not drink as we do and are amazingly strong. Their wines do not travel well and soon spoil, but are excellent where they are made. Kakhetian and Karabakh are as good as some burgundies."[30]

Kakheti was considered a site of agrarian abundance, but the Alazani Valley located in the region proved particularly memorable to Russian writers. Alexander Bestuzhev-Marlinsky noted in *Road to the City Kuba,* a collection of stories based on his travels in the Caucasus, "never will I forget you, landscape of the Alazani valley; never will I not remember without tender emotion" (bez umileniia, itself connoting a religious experience). He later goes on to describe his experience there in biblical terms, writing, "I stood spellbound, like Adam in a rented paradise on the first evening of his existence.[31] Alexander Griboedov's poem "There, Where Flows the Alazani" likewise highlighted Alazani's "bright flowers" and "glistening

[28] Ia. P. Polonskii, "Kakhetintsu," in *Russkie Pisateli o Gruzii*, ed. Vano Shaduri (Tbilisi, 1948), 325.
[29] For instance see Ia. P. Polonskii, "V Imeretii" and "Na puti iz-za Kavkaza" in *Russkie Pisateli o Gruzii,* ed. Vano Shaduri (Tbilisi, 1948), 344-347.
[30] Pushkin, "A Journey to Arzrum," 149.
[31] A.A. Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, "Put' do goroda Kuby," in *Russkie Pisateli o Gruzii*, ed. Vano Shaduri (Tbilisi, 1948), 138.

fruits." As John P. Hope argues, the poem illustrates how Russians understood the Alazani as a place offering its inhabitants "wine, fruit, flowers, languor, and comfort – without having to work for them, as through exempt from the Biblical decree delivered upon the Fall condemning man to eat bread by the sweat of his brow." [32] It is no surprise that Kakheti and wine production also figured strongly in Griboedov's Russian Transcaucasus Company project, a failed attempt to create a Russian version of the British East India Company in the South Caucasus.[33]

The way that Russian authors saw Biblical beauty and abundance in Kakheti was certainly a romantic construction, but it was also very much a real assessment of the material possibilities that eastern Georgia offered. Surrounded by mountains and filled with fertile valleys like the Alazani, Kakheti did produce the wine, roses, and fruits that Russian writers often ascribed to it. That nineteenth century Russian literature would initially conceptualize all of Georgia in this way seems unsurprising, given the fact that Russia's imperial expansion into Georgia first occurred in the eastern part of the country. What this suggests, however, is that Russians had a limited and particular understanding of what constituted Georgia and who was actually Georgian. That this construction was both romantic and real does not divorce it from empire. When Russian authors highlighted the abundance of Kakheti and connected it to the Georgian nation, they also saw this abundance in the service of imperial Russia. Griboedov in particular estimated that his planned Transcaucasus Company (of which Georgia made up a large part) could replace a quarter of Russia's yearly imports of fruit, olive oil, wine, and other

---

[32] John Hope, "The self in the other: Aleksandr Griboedov's Orient," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* vol. 57, No. 1-2 (March, 2015): 111.

[33] A.S. Griboedov, "Proekt Uchrezhdyeniia Rossiiskoi Zakavkazskoi Kompanii," in *Russkie Pisateli o Gruzii*, ed. Vano Shaduri (Tbilisi: 1948), 88. Griboedov notes the possibilities for wine production in the Caucasus to replace foreign wine and states that Kakheti itself produces up to 1,700,000 buckets of wine yearly (equivalent to 55 million gallons). This number seems to be hugely inflated by Griboedov, but reflects the centrality of wine to Kakheti. See also, Anna Aydinyan, "Griboedov's Project of the Russian Transcaucasian Company and the Ideas of the European Enlightenment" *Pushkin Review* vol. 15 (2012): 101-124.

goods.[34] As Bruce Grant suggests, the gift of civilization was subsidized through the cold logic of colonial extraction.

Ideas about Georgia as a place of lowland abundance and Georgians as prodigious drinkers were also part of a gendered expression of imperial power. As Susan Layton has noted, Russian writing about Georgia in the early-mid nineteenth century was "distinguished further by the systematic advancement of a metaphorical proposition about the land as a woman who must be protected and dominated by men stronger than those of her own country."[35] Layton illustrates how Georgian men were systematically written out of Russian stories about the Caucasus, despite the fact that Russian authors had obvious examples of Georgian bravery at their disposal, both from the distant past and more recent present. And the bifurcation of the landscape into highland and lowland categories easily translated into a gendered language about the people that lived in such places. Highland peoples might be presented as culturally backward by Russian writers, but they also represented the pinnacle of masculinity. As Layton argues, Pushkin, Bestuzhev-Marlinsky and Lermontov "invented Muslim tribesmen as shadow selves endowed with heroic machismo, a love of liberty, instinctual authenticity, simplicity and an aura of Homeric song."[36] The opposite was true of lowland peoples, meaning that Russians had enormous difficulty seeing Georgians as a brave or courageous people – a fact that Georgian alpinists would challenge in the Soviet period.

It is clear that these earlier understandings of Georgia as an abundant garden had a long afterlife in the Soviet period. Georgian food and wine dominated Soviet culinary culture and the republic was affectionately called "sunny Georgia" for its moderate climate and ample produce. In many ways, these were far better legacies to sustain than those ascribed to the North

---

[34] A.S. Griboedov, "Proekt Uchrezhdyeniia Rossiiskoi Zakavkazskoi Kompanii," 98.
[35] Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*, 193.
[36] Ibid, 192.

Caucasus, which retained its imperial reputation for violent resistance to centralized rule, whose many ethnic groups could not be trusted. Nonetheless, this conception placed narrow parameters on what constituted a Georgian landscape and who actually was Georgian. By the end of the nineteenth century, Russian authors had constructed a vision of Georgia that largely erased the mountains as part of Georgian geography and culture. These constructions conflicted with the works of Georgian authors in the second half of the nineteenth century, who, as Paul Manning and others have shown, increasingly incorporated mountainous regions in their stories as integral parts of the Georgian nation.[37] By the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian and Georgian literature had created two different imaginary geographies overlaid on the same physical space. The contradictions between these alternate visions of Georgia would ultimately create tensions in the Soviet period, especially in the sphere of tourism.

Soviet Tourism and the Project of Proletarian Touring

The Soviet tourist in the Caucasus was walking in the footsteps of their nineteenth century counterparts, both real and imagined. Certainly, not every tourist practice or literary invention from the previous century carried over into the Soviet period, which significantly changed tourist practices in the region. While spa towns like Borjomi or beach resorts like Sochi were largely destinations for upper class Russians in the nineteenth century, they became far more open to worker vacationers after the revolution, even if the Caucasus remained a favorite place of rest for the Soviet elite. And not every literary invention about the Caucasus crossed the revolutionary divide. Nineteenth century Russian literature often positioned Georgian women as dangerous temptresses, perhaps most famously illustrated by the murderous Zarema in Pushkin's

[37] Manning, *Strangers in a Strange Land,* 77-79. See also Rebecca Gould, "Aleksandre Qazbegi's Mountaineer Prosaics: The Anticolonial Vernacular on Georgian-Chechen Borderlands" *Ab Imperio* no. 1 (2014): 361-390. This theme is explored more in the introduction and chapter one.

Byronic poem, “The Fountain of Bakhchisarai” – a construction that was not picked up by Soviet writers.

But the nineteenth century proved formative in a number of important ways. The existence of a pre-revolutionary tradition of vacationing in the Caucasus helped make Russians feel entitled to the region as a space of leisure (a sentiment that arguably continues today). The Caucasus, along with Crimea, was *the* place to go on holiday for Soviet tourists, a fact that was undeniably tied to nineteenth century vacationing practices. These connections helped make the Caucasus into an exotic object of what John Urry calls the “tourist gaze,” ultimately a place where Soviet tourists could escape the banality of everyday existence. Urry suggests examining “the features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience” as a way to understand “the wider society with which they are contrasted.” [38] But here I would argue that pre-revolutionary vacationing and literature helped to flatten the entire Caucasus, and arguably “the south,” into a single object for Russian tourists. The result was that for Russians, the Caucasus became a playground where social norms were relaxed and mundane routines broken. The Caucasus was an object of desire and a place to develop oneself as an individual, but one that required little knowledge of local people, customs, or cultures, often to the frustration of those that lived there.

The afterlives of nineteenth century literature would likewise prove fundamental to the ways that Soviet Russian tourists saw themselves. As detailed above, the work of nineteenth century authors created an imperial hierarchy that placed Russians in the most enlightened category. In this framework, Russian rule was not simply about violent conquest, but rather a gift of European civilization to uncultured and often unthankful Caucasians. During the Soviet period

---

[38] John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London, 1991), 1-15, 143 (quote from 2-3).

the content of this formulation may have changed, but its underlying structure remained the same, especially before Great Patriotic War. Ethnically Russian Soviet tourists continued to see themselves as more European and thus more cultured than their Caucasian counterparts, even during a period when non-Russian nationalities were more likely to be promoted as a result of Soviet nationalities policies. As representatives of socialist modernity in the periphery, it was the job of Russian tourists to help "backward" peoples become more developed – a civilizational gift that likewise was often undesired. In terms of landscape, the continued insistence on seeing the Caucasus as either a site of pastoral abundance or as the mountainous sublime helped Russian tourists overlook local peoples entirely. As I explore below, these ideas were well represented in Soviet tourist periodicals and in the stenographic reports of tourist organizations, but they did not go unchallenged by local Caucasians who readily identified the legacies of nineteenth century ideas about the region.

Soviet vacationing practices developed along two distinct lines in the 1920s and 1930s. The first was the "kurort" or resort system, which was largely based on the pre-revolutionary spa culture and facilities. As Diane Koenker has detailed, tourist organizers and public health officials worked to repair damaged estates and sanatoria throughout the 1920s, a process that was haphazard and often underfunded. However, although the number of beds available in such facilities remained relatively constant throughout the 1920s, the number of vacationers continued to rise throughout the decade, illustrating the continued appeal of the spa vacation.[39] By the mid-1930s, Soviet planners began to develop new facilities to meet this growing demand, focusing on three major regions – the Caucasian Mineral Waters area located in the North Caucasus, Crimea, and the Caucasian coast along the Black Sea. The emphasis on pre-revolutionary sites of leisure – both in repairing old sites and constructing new ones – helped to reinforce the Caucasus and

[39] Koenker, *Club Red*, 19.

Crimea as prominent destinations for Soviet tourists seeking rest and recovery. By the mid-1930s these three regions accounted for two thirds of beds in the resort system, despite the desirability of constructing facilities closer to industrial sites and urban life.[40] In effect, the Soviet health resort system reproduced and even multiplied the pre-revolutionary appeal of facilities in the Caucasus and Crimea. But despite the emphasis on providing workers with vouchers to health resort facilities, there is little evidence these facilities served the local inhabitants where they were located, or that Soviet tourist officials had any real interest in specifically serving national minorities.[41] Soviet spa culture was certainly different from its pre-revolutionary antecedent in its willingness to provide services to the laboring classes, but it fundamentally did not upend the logic that Caucasian and Crimean resorts were places made primarily for the urban Russian tourist.

In contrast to the spa regime, a distinctly rugged and active form of proletarian tourism emerged at the end of the 1920s. This form of touring was represented institutionally by the short-lived Society for Proletarian Tourism and Excursions (OPTE), which existed from 1930-1936 before it collapsed due to mismanagement and underfunding.[42] Tourist activists in the late 1920s and early 1930s articulated a vision of Soviet touring that emphasized the importance of purposeful travel, whether it was searching for raw materials needed by Soviet industry, developing new skills like kayaking or map-reading, or providing their technical skills to less developed regions and peoples. This orientation made the proletarian tourist into a cultural ambassador who was supposed to respectfully aid "backward" peoples in the far-flung periphery, transcending the imperialism of the past. Instead of searching for adventure and exotic customs, proletarian tourists would bring news of Soviet construction in Moscow, help promote literacy,

---

[40] Ibid, 24.
[41] Ibid, 36.
[42] This is explored more in the following chapter.

and repair radio connections. But, as Diane Koenker has argued, "(from) the outset, there seemed to be a fine line, however, between proper touristic endeavors and the inappropriate pursuit of the exotic for its own sake."[43] Perhaps more importantly, the proletarian tourist as cultural ambassador, no matter how respectfully executed, positioned the traveler as a noble patron offering civilizational gifts like literacy and technology not so different from the nineteenth century.

These themes were reflected in articles published in tourist journals, which highlighted trip reports and tourist excursions to underline the proper behavior of proletarian tourists. In one representative example published in *On land and on sea (Na sushe i na more – hereafter NSNM)*, the main Soviet tourist periodical published from 1929-1941, the journal recounted the travels of a group of Stalingrad alpinists to the Caucasus taken during the summer of 1932. The fourteen-person group consisted mainly of shock workers from the Stalingrad tractor factory, who, as the article notes, collectively decided on the route and researched the region so that they could better aid the local population. Upon arriving in Nalchik in the North Caucasus, the travelers immediately met with local party leaders in order to better understand how they could help the local inhabitants. After summiting the Elbrus peak, the group published materials for local bulletin boards (stengazety) in the nearby village of Tegenekli before crossing the main Caucasian range into Svaneti where they arranged meetings between tourists and the local population and gave reports on socialist construction. In Mestia, the capital of Svaneti, the group spent five days repairing the power station and sawmill, which had long ceased to be functional, suggesting that there was no one in region with the technical skills to complete the much needed repairs. After traveling to Khevi in northern Georgia, the group summited the Kazbegi peak

---

[43] Diane Koenker, "The Proletarian Tourist in the 1930s: Between Mass Excursion and Mass Escape) in *Turizm: the Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism,* eds., Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca, 2006), 124.

before changing their itinerary to help search for Shota Mikeladze, a Georgian alpinist who tragically died trying to summit the mountain.[44] The group ultimately returned to Stalingrad in better physical condition than when they left, reinvigorated to fulfill the demands of factory work. After returning home, the group used their travels to popularize tourism among workers in Stalingrad, strengthening the local OPTE section in the process. As a result of their successful tourist activities in the Caucasus and advocacy for proletarian tourism at home, the Central OPTE awarded the participants individual rucksacks, while the group leader received a leather jacket and ice axe – impressive gifts that were in constant short supply at the time.[45]

The article did not just celebrate the work of the Stalingrad alpinists, it also illustrated the ideal practices of proletarian touring for an audience that still might not be sure what it meant to be a proper tourist. The Stalingrad group were model tourists as envisioned by the OPTE – they planned their trip carefully to strengthen the body and collective, utilized their technical skills to help develop the periphery, aided other alpinists in need, promoted tourism at home and away, and even made their own climbing equipment, all while finding time to summit the soaring peaks of the Caucasus. And yet, the article leaves out key details about the interactions between the tourists and local population, and the way that help was in fact received on the ground. Why were no local Svans able to fix the Mestia power plant and sawmill, as the article implies, and what does this suggest about the limits of Soviet power in the mountainous periphery? Did local inhabitants value meetings with tourists or were they frustrated by the mobility, privileges, and even attitudes of urban workers? These questions are left unanswered and ultimately unasked. But even an uncritical reading that accepts the article's description of the Stalingrad travelers as respectful cultural ambassadors offering genuine help illustrates some of the ways that tourism

[44] For more on the death of Shota Mikeladze, see chapter three.
[45] *NSNM* no. 5 (1933): 13.

reinforced imperial hierarchies. As the article details, aid only travels in one direction, from the tourists to the local inhabitants, even though the lack of infrastructure meant that tourists had to rely on local interlocutors to find housing, food, and transport. More importantly, as the article suggests, the help that tourists render is always linked to modernity, whether it is electricity or newspapers. Here, even in its most ideal expression, the project of proletarian touring placed tourists from urban centers, the majority of whom were ethnic Russians, at the top of an increasingly visible Soviet hierarchy of nationalities.

The proletarian tourist did not just bring modernity to less developed regions, they also served as a mediator between different ethnic groups with histories of conflict. In one example from 1929, the Moscow based tourist G. Bergman described the unique experience of traveling across the Tsaner Pass (or in Georgian Tsaneri) from Kabardino-Balkaria into Svaneti. In Kabardino-Balkaria, Bergman's group was surprised to meet two local guards with dogs defending the pass, a seemingly unnecessary precaution considering that Soviet power had by now been well established in the region, as Bergman noted. Soon the story became clear – seven years prior, a group of Svans conducted a night raid into the region in an apparently successful attempt to steal from the Balkar shepherds grazing their herd near the pass. Since then, the shepherds kept a guard at the pass, while the Svans refrained from crossing even for friendly purposes out of fear of revenge. But some time later a group of Svans, including one of the original participants in the raid, joined Bergman's group of tourists in an attempt to make amends for the raid. Bergman is not clear here, but it seems that this was a strategy to help lessen the possibility of violence. The strategy worked, and soon all three groups were cautiously warming themselves by the fire. When it came time to eat, everyone offered something, with the tourists' "Moscow rice" pairing nicely with the local lamb. The biting cold forced everyone

closer together, and old grievances were quickly forgiven. As Bergman noted, the reconciliation was aided in particular by a local Balkar tourist and party official, and in the morning everyone left on friendly terms. Bergman's story suggested the unique ability of tourists from the center, in collaboration with local party activists, to bridge old ethnic divides and fulfill the promise of friendship between national groups. Here, the Moscow tourist was a neutral arbiter of ethnic discord in the Caucasus, a fact that erased a much more complicated history of pre-revolutionary engagement with region.[46]

All of these stories positioned proletarian tourists as capable, resourceful, and adept at navigating local customs and challenges. But other stories suggested that the opposite was more often true. In one case, Lev Barkhash, a leading Soviet alpinist, recounted how his group accidently ruined a meal while staying with a family in upper Balkaria when one group member failed to butcher a chicken according to Islamic law, meaning that not a single Balkar could eat the meat. Barkhash noted how the group only wanted to help, but their ignorance of local customs ruined the interaction. In another example, Barkhash recalled how he and his colleagues secretly ate *salo* – cured pork fat – while in a Balkar village after an expedition, despite knowing that if the secret snacks were found, the "hospitable hosts would quickly kick us out in shame." Here Barkhash noted many tourists refused to respect such "superstitions" (predrassudki), especially those related to religious beliefs, but argued that even though it was often difficult it was ultimately more effective to try to understand and follow local customs. Nonetheless, there was always a tension between following local traditions and inculcating Soviet values, one that not all tourists managed well.[47]

---

[46] *NSNM* no. 11 (1929): 10-11. For more on the tourism specifically promoting friendship between Svaneti and Kabardino-Balkaria, see *NSNM* no. 8 (1936): 4-6.
[47] *NSNM* no. 10 (1930): 8.

It was also not clear that tourists, or even the OPTE, had the power to manage these interactions effectively. As one tourist named S. Penchalov recounted in *On land and at sea*, entire tourist itineraries were often in complete disarray, the result of less than ideal local management. Penchalov described how tourists trying to rent horses in the village of Kazbegi (also known as Stepantsminda) were given unreasonably high prices from the local mountain dwellers, despite the fact that there were fixed prices for such services. As he recalled, when the tourists complained about the situation to the leaders of the tourist base they were told that the prices were in fact not expensive. When they produced proof from their guidebook that they were being overcharged, one base leader dismissed them saying, "(T)hat is in Moscow, and here is Kazbek. We have our own rules," a not so subtle reminder about who really held power in this situation. The difficulties did not end there. When Penchalov's group attempted to secure a guide to summit the Kazbegi peak, they were met with gruff rebukes. The guide – a party candidate – criticized the tourists for interrupting his already made plans to celebrate a religious holiday: "Today we have the holiday of the Assumption (of Mary). I should have been at the sacrifice, to celebrate the holiday and ride on a horse. But thanks to you (iz-za) I am roaming the mountains. That is why I do not want to talk with you." As Penchalov noted, his group did not expect such attitudes, especially from a party candidate. The situation was not much better in the village of Passanuri, located south of Kazbegi along the Georgian Military Highway, where the tourists experienced equally "negative attitudes" (skvernoe otnoshenie). Tourists may have envisioned themselves as cultural ambassadors ready to show a willing periphery the values of socialist modernity, but on the ground they faced a much more difficult reality.[48]

Other times proletarian tourists simply had no idea what they were doing, proposing wildly improbable itineraries that may have mapped onto their romantic imaginations of the

[48] *NSNM* no. 22 (1930): 16.

Caucasus but in no way matched the real geography of the region. One writer for *Tourist of the Transcaucasus,* the OPTE's short-lived tourist journal for the South Caucasus, recalled a particularly telling interaction with a group of tourists traveling by boat to Batumi from a northern Black Sea port. Out of boredom, the writer decided to strike up a conversation with the tourists to find out where they were headed. The tourists claimed to be traveling to the North Caucasus before crossing the Caucasian range into Svaneti, a highly unusual and unlikely route considering they were moving in the wrong direction and their destination was far south of the Caucasus range. When the writer asked them how they were going to achieve this plan they answered, "It's very simple. We will cross the Caucasus, find out where Svaneti is, and go there" noting that they heard that "Europeans" had not yet been to Svaneti. Another member of the group added "we will eat grapes there and relax properly on mountain peaks" contrasting the "clean air" and "picturesque view" of the Caucasus with the dust in their workplaces. The writer offered the group of over packed and underprepared tourists a "small geography lesson" of the Caucasus, suggesting they change their itinerary, a recommendation they initially heeded. But when the boat stopped in Sukhumi, the group suddenly decided that they had to see the Sukhumi Monkey Nursery founded only a few years prior and departed the boat, abandoning the writer's advice.[49]

The whole account was clearly an attack on self-guided tourists who traveled haphazardly and without higher political goals. As the writer noted, these incompetent tourists were in fact members of the OPTE, but they only had a vague idea about the Society's objectives and seemed interested in membership solely for the travel discounts it offered. The article suggested some of the ways that the OPTE not only struggled to provide suitable facilities and resources to tourists, but also failed to inculcate the values of proletarian touring among its members, both of which

[49] *Turist Zakavkaz'ia* no. 5 (1932): 20-21.

were intimately tied to the OPTE's collapse. But more importantly, this article illustrates some of the visions that tourists had of the Caucasus.[50] Here, geographic distinctions were unimportant – the entire Caucasus was flattened into a singular object of the tourist gaze, a place of mountains and grapes and even monkeys, but crucially no people. It did not matter that the tourists could not differentiate the North Caucasus from the South, for this group and many others the entire Caucasus functioned as a destination of desire made up of beautiful landscapes, fresh air, and southern fruits. The fact that the tourists insisted that no Europeans had made it to Svaneti suggested that they saw themselves as Europeans, and thus more modern and cultured, inherently making Svaneti a place of backwardness. Regardless of how devoted a tourist was to the project of proletarian touring, the imperial hierarchy remained.

These romantic ideas about the Caucasus continued to be influenced by nineteenth century Russian literature, and tourists to the Caucasus repeatedly cited the importance of such literature in their own desire to travel. The Russian author and poet Rudol'f Bershadskii noted how as a child he was always drawn to the picture of the Darial Gorge included in a collection of Lermontov's writings, and used this as a comparison to his own travels through the Chegem Gorge in Kabardino-Balkaria, describing the landscape in language that had echoes of Pushkin or Lermontov.[51] N. Lebedev likewise described how the name of the film "Gates of the Caucasus," shot in 1928 with the help of Georgian alpinists like Simon Japaridze and Iagor Kazalikashvili, was inspired by Pushkin's descriptions of the Darial Gorge in "Travels to Arzrum," replacing the original but more staid title "The Georgian Military Highway." Not only did Lebedev cite the quote itself, to a large degree he reproduced Pushkin's imaginary geography of the Caucasus,

---

[50] The article notes that the tourists are from Khar'kov, Minsk, Odessa, and the Donbas, but does not note their national identities. These were all urban or industrial centers that were mainly Russian speaking, meaning that their understanding of the Caucasus was likely similar to that of tourists from Moscow or Leningrad.
[51] *NSNM* no. 1 (1931): 5-6.

noting that nature is "gloomier and more severe" the farther one goes into the mountains. The final part of the film likewise highlighted the propensity of Georgians living along the southern part of the Georgian Military Highway to drink, similar to Pushkin's own travel notes. The main difference between the film and nineteenth century literature was that progress was now represented by the newly established power plant near Tbilisi, which, would ultimately eradicate "the darkness of Caucasian gorges."[52]

The Georgian Military Highway was a particularly popular itinerary for Soviet tourists during this period due to its relative accessibility, scenic beauty, and abundant representation in nineteenth century writing. But physically traversing the route, which was typically taken from Vladikavkaz across the Caucasus range to Tbilisi, did not stop tourists from reproducing overly romantic images of the Caucasus that often strayed far from the reality on the ground, to the frustration of local tourist officials. In one example, the tourist M. Miloslavskii described how the highway could be divided into northern and southern parts within Georgia. Mirroring the imaginary geography in Pushkin's *A Journey to Arzrum*, Miloslavskii noted how the northern part of the route was "the most wild with harsh vegetation" (surovoi rastitel'nost'iu) while the southern part was instead characterized by "vineyards, gardens, flocks of sheep and herds of buffalo walking in green meadows." Miloslavskii's effusive descriptions of the landscape largely ignored the presence of local inhabitants, except to note how Soviet power helped improve their lives. As he explained, although the "mountainous tribes of Khevsurs" retained the culture of the twelfth century, the inhabitants of Kazbegi had access to electric lights and were leading a new life, all thanks to the revolution. He continued, "Now, among Georgians many have a middle and

[52] *NSNM* no. 11 (1930): 4-5. It is not clear if Lebedev was the film's director or involved in some other way (possibly Nikolai Ivanovich Lebedev – Soviet film director beginning his career around this time). As the article notes, most of the film was lost while when a horse fell off the path into a river, taking several cameras and a large portion of already shot material. The Geographic Society of Georgia was involved with the film expedition on Kazbegi, which I explore briefly in chapter one.

even higher education" (here meaning secondary and university levels), indicating that before the revolution Georgians were uneducated. Miloslavskii noted that the Georgian Military Highway ended at the ZAGES hydroelectric station, where on the opposite bank one could see the ruins of the Mtskheta castle.[53]

These descriptions of the Georgian Military Highway did not go unnoticed. Two unnamed authors – likely Georgian, although it is not clear – offered a harsh rebuke in the pages of *Tourist of the Transcaucasus*, an official tourist periodical published in Tbilisi, criticizing Miloslavskii for his overly romantic language and characterization of local people. While acknowledging the important progress made by the Sovetization of Georgia, they countered that his claim that no Georgians had a middle or higher education before the revolution "smells like a lie." They were equally critical of Miloslavskii's descriptions of pastoral abundance, suggesting that the images of vineyards and buffaloes were not actually real but rather imagined by the tourist. Miloslavskii's overly romantic comparison of the Mlety and Passanuri villages to the south of France were "already not fantasy" but "simply mockery of the reader" for their outlandish inventions. And as the unnamed critics noted, the inaccuracies did not end there. There were no ruins of the Mtskheta castle across from the ZAGES hydroelectric station. As the critics ironically explained, "we searched on a detailed map, looked through binoculars, we didn't find (it)… the castle hid itself after Miloslavskii's visit and put in its place the monastery 'Mtsyri,'" a reference the imaginary monastery in Lermontov's famous poem. Here the authors of the critical article were absolutely clear: Miloslavskii's descriptions of the Georgian Military Highway were not just informed by nineteenth century romanticism, they were also harmful and offensive to local Caucasians.[54]

---

[53] *NSNM* no. 26 (1931): 12-13.
[54] *Turist Zakavkaz'ia,* no. 1 (1931): 20-21.

It is not surprising that this criticism appeared in the Tbilisi based journal *Tourist of the Transcaucasus.* Although the journal represented the OPTE's official branch in the South Caucasus – the ZakOPTE or Transcausasian organization of the OPTE – many of its writers were native to the Caucasus and thus well placed to offer perspectives that differed from those in *On land and on sea.* Arguably the leading tourist journal published in the South Caucasus, the Russian language *Tourist of the Transcaucasus* was likewise joined by several other local journals, including those in Georgian and Armenian. But none of these journals lasted long. *Tourist of the Transcaucasus* published only five issues from December 1931 until October 1932. The print runs were equally low, never reaching more than 4000 issues. The Georgian language *p'rolet'aruli t'urist'i* (*Proletarian tourist*) published only four issues from February 1932 until November of the same year. At most it seems that the print run of *Proletarian tourist* reached only 3000 copies. In comparison to *On land and at sea*, which had print runs of 50,000 in 1932, the reach of local journals was miniscule.

This is not to say that the quality of South Caucasus journals was far behind that of *On land and on sea.* In many ways, the articles published by journals like *Tourist of the Transcaucasus* dutifully advocated for the project of proletarian touring, albeit with fewer pictures and less intricate designs. But the small print runs and uneven publication dates suggested that these journals were poorly funded, and although they were celebrated in *On land and on sea*, they were never really a priority of the Central OPTE in Moscow.[55] There was no official explanation for why the South Caucasus journals were shuttered, although it seems that by the end of 1932 most if not all of these local journals were no longer being published.[56] In the case of *Tourist of the Transcaucasus*, there were apparently plans to continue publication, since

[55] *NSNM* no. 7 (1932): 8-9.

[56] This would coincide with a dramatic decrease in the number of paid employees at the OPTE during 1933, an attempt to increase the efficiency of management. See Koenker, *Club Red*, 68-69.

the last issue included information on how to subscribe to the journal. But this advertisement also offered clues to why it may not have been able to continue. The advertisement included the promise of an award to anyone who could enroll at least ten subscribers and the possibility of three free issues if one could enroll at least twenty subscribers. The journal was, it seems, simply unpopular.[57]

I would argue that the failure of journals like *Tourist of the Transcaucasus* and *Proletarian tourist* reflected the larger disinterest in developing and promoting tourism for local Caucasians. The OPTE was certainly invested in developing tourism in the Caucasus, but largely for those from the urban and industrial centers of European Russian and Ukraine, and not local inhabitants. As a 1931 article summarizing trends from the 1930 tourist season made clear, the vast majority of tourists were in fact coming from Moscow (43 percent) followed by Leningrad (13 percent), the Urals (9 percent), Ukraine (8 percent), and the Voronezh region along the border with Eastern Ukraine (4 percent). But, as the article noted, there were almost no tourists from the national republics and autonomous regions – from the South Caucasus there were only thirty tourists compared to Moscow's 10,012 – a situation that required "the most serious attention." Tourists meanwhile were attracted by "the traditional pull 'to the south,'" with Crimea and the Caucasus representing the most popular destinations (36 and 35 percent respectively), followed by Moscow and Leningrad (18 percent combined). In the Caucasus, the Georgian Military Highway remained the most popular itinerary closely followed by the Black Sea coast – favorite sites of the pre-revolutionary traveler. These statistics should be treated carefully and likely only included official trips taken through OPTE organizations and not those on self-guided tours (the exact methodology for who was included in the statistics is unfortunately unclear). But the numbers do illustrate unmistakable trends that would largely

[57] *Turist Zakavkaz'ia,* no. 5 (1932): backcover.

continue throughout the decade – the vast majority of tourists came from cities or regions that were predominately ethnically Russian (and often from the center itself), and their favorite destinations were in the south.[58]

The OPTE was disbanded in 1936 for a number of reasons, including a lack of funding, flagging support from the Komsomol, and endemic mismanagement. But another key reason for the OPTE's failure was its inability to recruit qualified staff at bases in regions like the South Caucasus, and more generally to make the project of proletarian touring appealing to those that lived along the most popular routes in the Caucasus and Crimea. This was hardly surprising. Despite the revolutionary rhetoric, the OPTE largely reproduced the imperial hierarchy between Russian travelers and Caucasian locals that existed during the nineteenth century. Russian tourists arrived to the Caucasus often believing in their own civilizational superiority and looking for an exotic landscape that existed largely in their imaginations, which frustrated local people who encountered them. The fact that workers at tourist bases in the Caucasus felt little loyalty to OPTE directives, like the party worker in Kazbegi who willingly let Russian tourists get taken advantage of, suggests how little the OPTE's vision of touring resonated with those in the South Caucasus. At its core, proletarian touring was a fundamentally an imperial project that betrayed the Soviet promise of equality between nationalities, reimagining nineteenth century visions of the Caucasus through the language of Marxism.

Tourism After the OPTE: The Continuation of Problems

The liquidation of the OPTE in 1936 largely meant the end of the project of proletarian tourism but certainly not the end of Soviet vacationing. Here, Diane Koenker has suggested a helpful typology that distinguishes between two interrelated but distinct forms of tourism –

[58] *NSNM* no. 4 (1931): 8. This article is also discussed by Diane Koenker. See: Koenker, *Club Red*, 106.

proletarian and Soviet. The proletarian tourist focused on rugged, independent, and purposeful travel whether on foot, bicycle, or kayak, but rarely in a car. A proletarian tourist, at least in the 1930s, was not just a member of the working class, but one who ascribed to this particular set of values. Soviet tourism, in contrast, relied mainly on organized package tours that privileged comfort and rest over difficult conditions and strenuous activity. This form of tourism was still purposeful, but in a fundamentally different way – rest and recuperation were used to help make more productive workers, repairing the body so it could withstand the drudgery of the industrial workplace. As Koenker has shown, while the proletarian tourist might have been seen as more authentic, by the end of the 1930s this vision of touring was largely replaced by its Soviet counterpart, "a victory of comfort over purposeful leisure."[59]

This is not to say that the end of the OPTE marked a complete break in the sphere of tourism. Independent groups continued to eschew the more comfortable package tours while activists advocated for the values of proletarian tourism at the highest levels, criticizing the trade unions for failing to pay enough attention to the question of independent tourism. And instead of being shuttered, *On land and on sea*, managed to remain in print until the outbreak of war in 1941. Although the content of the journal changed to some degree, no longer promoting a single institution, it nonetheless remained a faithful companion for the independent tourist and an important venue for activists still devoted to the project.[60] Moreover, it is important to note that the values of proletarian tourism largely remained central to the project of Soviet alpinism, although the creation of alpine camps did help to introduce an element of comfort in the late 1930s. Nonetheless, despite the collapse of the OPTE, alpinists were still conceptualized as cultural ambassadors in a backward and uncultured periphery, even if the alpine camp changed

[59] Koenker, *Club Red*, 90-91.
[60] For more on the journal see Koenker, *Club Red*, 73-74.

the orientation of this outreach to some degree. As I explore in chapter five, this understanding of mountaineering only changed after the war, when a new emphasis on competition and sport achievement remade Soviet climbing into something fundamentally different than its pre-war form.

The transfer of tourist responsibilities to the trade unions and physical culture committees may have limited the mission of cultural enlightenment so central to the OPTE, but *On land and on sea* continued to dutifully advocate for tourists to act as ambassadors to national minorities whose villages were still seen as places of backwardness.[61] In this way, the collapse of the OPTE did not fundamentally change how tourists interacted with local inhabitants and Russian tourists continued to articulate a sense of civilizational superiority over Caucasians in ways that proved deeply frustrating to them. As one Georgian guide at the Batumi tourist house noted at a 1937 meeting of the Bureau of Caucasian Itineraries (UKM), the local branch of the Tourist-Excursion Bureau (TEU) formed by the trade unions after the liquidation of the OPTE, "people come to us who look at Georgia like an exotic country, populated by savages (dikariami)," adding that perhaps some films were to blame for these ideas. The guide, named Shervashidze, continued, recalling a chance encounter with a Khar'kov professor while traveling by train from Moscow to Georgia. When the train arrived in Baku Shervashidze eagerly bought the Georgian language newspaper "k'ommunist'i," having not been able to read a Georgian newspaper for six months. The professor, intrigued by the newspaper, asked, "What in the world is this Chinese newspaper?" (Chto eto za kitaiskaia gazeta?), a stunningly ill-informed question for someone traveling in the Caucasus. Shervashidze politely responded that the newspaper was in fact the official party newspaper of Georgia, an answer that provoked a frustrating response. As Shervashidze recalled, "he (the professor) began to give me a lecture: 'You see, he said, how

[61] *NSNM* no. 4 (1938): 4.

much the small peoples (malye narodnosti) received from the October revolution. Now Georgians have their own writing, their own newspapers."[62]

The interaction illustrated many of the chauvinistic attitudes of tourists in the Caucasus. Georgia has a long literary tradition, with a distinct system of writing since at least the fifth century, a rich body of medieval literature, and a well-developed print culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In light of this history, the professor's comment was deeply offensive, illustrating some of the ways that the category of "small peoples" was understood to be synonymous with the category of backwardness.[63] The interaction clearly frustrated Shervashidze, who considered the professor a "hopeless fool" for his ignorant beliefs. And, as Shervashidze concluded, these attitudes were all the more stunning since the professor was traveling to Borjomi for the fourth time and yet still did not know anything about Georgia. The fact that the professor's final destination was Borjomi is itself suggestive of some of the ways that Soviet polices failed to change the nature of tourism to the Caucasus. As noted above, Borjomi was made into a popular resort town during the nineteenth century where Russians outnumbered the Georgian population. It is telling that as late as the mid-1930s (the exact date of this incident is unclear, but likely 1936) tourists from industrial centers like Khar'kov could know almost nothing about the local population in Georgia is illustrative of the ways pre-revolutionary sites of leisure in the Caucasus continued to be places dedicated to serving Russians or the Russian speaking elite.

As Shervashidze's account also suggested, images produced in popular culture continued to incorrectly inform tourists about the Caucasus. Here, nineteenth century literature remained

---

[62] sakartvelos erovnuli arkivi (hereafter sea) p. 1862 a.1 saq. 4 p. 96-97.

[63] "Malye narodnosti" might also be translated as "small nations" or "small nationalities." Francine Hirsch has noted how by the 1939 census, this term caused confusion among respondents since the difference between *narodnost'* and *natsional'nost'* (nationality) was unclear. See Hirsch, *Empire of Nations,* 304.

formative, a development that only accelerated in the late 1930s. Alexander Pushkin in particular was celebrated for his wide travels across the Russian empire. As one 1937 article in *On land and on sea* noted, the writer did not travel for pleasure but was instead invested in exploring local histories and stories, a fact illustrated by his own search for materials and folklore in the Urals, Caucasus, and Crimea. This description of Pushkin's travels suggested that, far from being romantic inventions, the author's stories were accurate historical representations of these places as they actually existed.[64] Mikhail Lermontov was likewise celebrated in tourist literature, especially for his writing on the Caucasus. In commemoration of the one hundred year anniversary of his death, the Moscow branch of the TEU created a "Lermontov itinerary" to the Manor at Serednikovo outside of Moscow, an extensive family estate where Lermontov had spent multiple summers. The newspaper *Soviet tourism and alpinism* detailed the itinerary, recommending that it be taken on skis since the park and forest surrounding the manor offered a quiet beauty in snowy conditions. And as the newspaper noted, the sanatorium located on the estate was named "Mtsyri" after Lermontov's famous romantic poem, itself based on Georgian folklore.[65] The TEU likewise operated a Leningrad itinerary dedicated to Pushkin.[66]

By the late 1930s, nineteenth century romantic authors were increasingly praised as some of the first Russian tourists whose works would help aspiring Soviet tourists to better understand the regions they were traveling to. In a 1937 advice column in *On land and on sea*, a newly recurring section that solicited questions and feedback from independent tourists, the journal highlighted the rich body of literature related to the Georgian Military Highway and the Caucasus more generally. Here Pushkin and Lermontov were cited for their foundational works

---

[64] *NSNM* no. 8 (1937): 2.
[65] *Sovetskii turizm i al'pinizm* 8 June 1941; *Sovetskii turizm i al'pinizm* 12 January 1941.
[66] O. Arkhangel'skaia and N. Tiriutina, eds., *Puteshestviia po SSSR turistskie marshruty* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1938), 206.

on the region, including Pushkin's *Journey to Arzrum* and "Monastery on Kazbek'" as well as Lermontov's *A Hero of our time*, "The Demon," and "Mtsyri," among other prominent works by both authors. But there was a slight shift here as well. In addition to Pushkin and Lermontov, the article also highlighted the importance of Alexander Kazbegi and Ilia Chavchavadze, two of the most significant Georgian writers from the nineteenth century whose works helped to bring mountainous regions into the imaginary geography of Georgian intellectuals. And the article likewise included a surprising number of Soviet writers, including Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovski, and even Iagor Kazalikashvili, the mountaineer-poet from Kazbegi so central to the project of Georgian climbing.[67] Ultimately, however, it was the nineteenth century romantics who remained beloved of Russian tourists. As one alpinist from Moscow wondered while traveling to the Caucasus, "The best people of the last century – Griboedov, Pushkin, Lermontov – were one by one exiled to the Caucasus. With what eyes did they look at the mountains, arriving here?" The alpinist continued, noting that one hundred years later, Soviet alpinist camps now offered vacation to "20 thousand heroes of our time," a reference to Lermontov's famous novel.[68] Soviet tourists were not just informed by the works of nineteenth century Russian authors, they were also inspired to travel by such writing, imagining themselves as following in the heroic footsteps of writers like Pushkin, Lermontov, or Griboedov.

What accounted for this increasing emphasis on nineteenth century authors? First, 1937 marked the centenary of Pushkin's death, which was celebrated with a grandiose campaign to commemorate the author's contributions to Russian culture. As Terry Martin has shown, this campaign was part of a larger shift in nationalities policies that saw a greater emphasis on the importance of Russian culture and people after 1935. Russians were now seen as "the first

[67] *NSNM* no. 8 (1937): 2.
[68] *NSNM* no.9 (1938): 5-8.

among equals" who were the primary drivers of socialist modernity. Pushkin in particular was remade into a symbolic representative of all Soviet nations, illustrating how the categories of "Russian" and "Soviet" were increasingly seen as synonymous. David Brandenberger has likewise argued that there was a decrease in accusations of "great-power chauvinism" in the press by the late 1930s as Russians were re-conceptualized as "the most historic, heroic and revolutionary peoples of the USSR." Unlike Martin, Brandenberger sees the shift towards russo-centrism as more historically contingent and even accidental, a result of the upheaval of the purges and the desire for greater social mobilization among Soviet leaders. But regardless of what drove this shift, both agree that Russian culture was increasingly seen as central to the Soviet project, a fact that would only accelerate after the war.[69]

What this meant is that writers like Pushkin and Lermontov were now officially part of the Soviet canon, a development that curtailed any serious condemnation of their works. Susan Layton has shown how as late as 1936, Soviet literary scholars were publishing critical analyses of nineteenth century writing on the Caucasus, arguing that such literature was undeniably supportive of Tsarist violence though its infantilization of mountainous peoples. But, like Martin and Brandenberger, Layton observes a significant shift by the end of the 1930s, where Russian imperial expansion in the Caucasus was now seen as a "lesser of two evils," a necessary development so that Caucasians could be included in the Soviet project. As Layton argues, this meant that Pushkin was now framed as "a writer who wanted amical (sic) relations among all peoples of the Russian empire, regretted the oppression of Muslim tribeswomen and foretold the multinational state's 'joyful' life inaugurated by the Stalin constitution."[70] The elevation of

[69] See Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 432-461. For Pushkin specifically, see 456-457. David Brandenberger, "Stalin's populism and the accidental creation of Russian national identity," *Nationalities Papers* vol. 38, no. 5 (September 2010): 723-739. Quote from 727.
[70] Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*, 7-8.

Russian culture and uncritical appraisal of nineteenth century literature encouraged tourists to embrace the imaginary geographies of Pushkin, Lermontov, and others and reproduce the infantilizing tendencies inherent to their works. Ultimately, this meant that the grievances of Caucasian tourist officials, alpinists, and writers, who complained about the chauvinistic attitudes of Russian tourists traveling to the south, would go unanswered.

The uncritical celebration of nineteenth century authors also corresponded with a newfound embrace of what Terry Martin has called the "national exotic." As Martin has argued, by the late 1930s there was a greater emphasis on folklore and on the primordial roots of the Soviet nations, a significant shift from the beginning of the decade when such a focus was seen as anti-Soviet. A significant part of this shift involved the public celebration of national dances, songs, and costumes, the creation of national poets, and the use of research institutes to study national culture, all of which reflected the increased attention given to the primacy of national cultures. For Georgia specifically, these changes can be seen through tourist literature and tourist itineraries, which, by 1937, focused heavily on the medieval history, literature, and architecture of the republic.[71]

The turn to the national exotic was further illustrated through increasingly romantic descriptions of Georgian agricultural abundance along with emotive tales of Georgian hospitality. Similar to nineteenth century literature, such descriptions focused heavily on the eastern region of Kakheti and in particular the Alazani Valley. As two tourists noted after traveling through the region, Kakheti was "fertile, cheerful, rich" where the Alazani Valley contained "fields with abundant harvests of tobacco, corn, wheat, grapes, fruits and

[71] Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 442-451. In Georgia, extensive attention was given to the twelfth century poet Shota Rustaveli as part of the commemoration of national epics. See: Ronald Grigor Suny, "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations" *The Journal of Modern History* vol. 73, no. 4 (December 2001): 876; *Literaturnaia gazeta* 26 December 1937; *Pravda* 26 December 1937; *NSNM* no. 12 (1937): 14.

watermelons."[72] Other tourists echoed these impressions with their own romantic descriptions of Kakhetian abundance. One tourist traveling by bicycle through the Kakhetian village of Tsinandali noted how the balconies of simple homes "were wrapped with garlands of red chili pepper, purple onion, and amber-colored corn" and that the gardens were filled with trees whose branches "hung to the ground under the weight of huge bright green quinces and crimson pomegranates." These descriptions mirrored those by writers like Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, Griboedov, and Polonoskii examined above and again suggested that Kakheti was understood as a garden of Eden whose riches were simply available to its inhabitants, a place where labor was not a prerequisite to abundance. And like Pushkin's contention that Georgian wines were comparable to French ones, the bicycle tourist described how a French delegation graded wines made in Tsinandali as better than their own French ones.[73] All of these descriptions helped to bolster the image of the republic as "sunny Georgia," a place full of fruit, wine, and welcoming locals with a tradition of honor and a rich medieval history. To be sure, these stereotypes were far safer than those given to other national groups considered disloyal to the Soviet project. But at the same time, they helped cement an image of Georgia that could have been taken directly from Pushkin or Lermontov. In this way, the idea of "sunny Georgia" was as much a nineteenth century construction as a Soviet one.[74]

The legacy of Soviet tourism in the Caucasus

Soviet tourism to the Caucasus was inescapably linked to the sites and practices of Russian tourists from the nineteenth century. In the early 1920s, the Soviet Union began the

---

[72] *NSNM* no. 9 (1939): 10-11.
[73] *NSNM* no. 6 (1937): 4-7.
[74] For some descriptions of Georgian hospitality and honor see: *NSNM* no. 5 (1940): 16-18; *NSNM 1937* no. 12 (1937): 14.

process of reconstructing pre-revolutionary resorts and spa facilities, remaking towns like Borjomi or Piatigorsk into places of Soviet luxury. A decade later, Soviet planners had invested significant funds into these spa facilities and further developed resorts on the Black Sea, perhaps most famously illustrated by the transformation of Sochi from a small village into the crown jewel of Soviet vacationing. Despite problems with the distribution of vacation vouchers, this investment made it possible for more members of the working class to enjoy the benefits of a southern vacation, now in a sanatorium replete with Stalinist luxury. But, as I have argued, this did not change the fact that Caucasian resorts were largely utilized by Russian tourists from urban centers and functioned as islands of civilization in a backward periphery, thus reinforcing the idea of the Caucasus itself as an object of desire in the Russian imagination – an object that, perhaps ironically, required little actual knowledge of local culture, language, or customs.

In contrast to the spa vacation, a dedicated group of activists advocated for a more rugged form of vacationing known as proletarian tourism. The proletarian tourist was not just a member of the working class, but a traveler who embraced the hardships of the road, shunning comfortable resorts and travel by car in order to build knowledge of the Soviet Union, strengthen the body for industrial labor, and help build socialism in less advanced regions and locales. All of these goals offered the opportunity to transcend the imperial hierarchies of the nineteenth century, and activists argued strongly against continued expressions of "great power chauvinism" and an undue focus on the exotic over socialist aid. Nonetheless, proletarian tourists failed to uphold these lofty goals. Tourists may have envisioned themselves as cultural ambassadors bringing socialist modernity to the backward peoples of the USSR, but they regularly lacked knowledge of local customs and culture, ultimately causing tensions with the local inhabitants they encountered. As the accounts in journals like *On land and at sea* make clear, proletarian

tourists routinely focused on landscapes over people, reproducing ideas about the Caucasus from nineteenth century Russian romantic literature in ways that proved deeply frustrating to tourist activists from the Caucasus. The OPTE meanwhile was an organization that had little interest or ability in supporting local tourist initiatives in the Caucasus, and throughout its short tenure remained dedicated to serving mainly Russian tourists from urban centers like Moscow, Leningrad, or Khar'kov. The project of proletarian touring was an ambitious one, but it was not one that was invested in developing tourism for Caucasians. Indeed, since the overwhelming majority of tourists were ethnic Russians, the very idea of the proletarian tourist as a representative of socialist modernity offering civilizational aid to less developed peoples placed Russians at the top of an imperial hierarchy that was not so different from the nineteenth century.

The project of proletarian tourism ultimately failed, but larger social changes in the late 1930s reinforced many of the visions that proletarian tourists had of the Caucasus. The elevation of Russian people and culture, and specifically the promotion of nineteenth century writers like Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov into the Soviet canon, gave official support for clearly orientalist ideas about the Caucasus and Caucasians. By the beginning of the war, Georgia in particular was conceptualized as a place of lowland abundance, with valleys full of rich vineyards teeming with fresh fruit. Russians were welcomed to the "sunny" republic by hospitable locals, who were all too happy to share the agricultural wealth out of a sense of honor driven by their ancient history. If this sounds similar to ideas about Georgia in nineteenth century Russian literature, it is because the imaginary geographies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were fundamentally the same.

What I am trying to argue is that Soviet tourism, whether through the spa vacation, proletarian touring, or tourism after the OPTE, failed to transcend many of the more damaging

imperial legacies from the nineteenth century. The Soviet project entailed a massive and radical re-imagination of the relationship between Russians and national minorities that attacked great-power chauvinism as an unacceptable holdover from the Tsarist past. The attention given towards promoting national minorities, languages, and cultures, along with the creation of national republics undeniably began to address the uneven relationship of power between Russians and non-Russians. And yet, at the same time, an examination of experiences on the ground suggests that Soviet policies failed to eradicate a sense of Russian cultural superiority. The Soviet hierarchy of nations was based on Marxist ideas of cultural development, where those that had achieved the hallmarks of socialist modernity were ostensibly equal to Russians. As Terry Martin has argued, initially, only a handful of nations were considered advanced enough to meet these criteria, a group that included Georgians.[75] But as tourist accounts make clear, this did stop Russians from seeing Georgians as culturally inferior, whose social progress was due only to the support of the Russian center. It is important to note, that these beliefs existed before the reconceptualization of Russians as the "first among equals" and the greater emphasis on the role of Russians and Russian culture in leading the Soviet project that occurred from the mid-late 1930s. Even during its most progressive period, Soviet nationality policies failed to inculcate a sense of equality between Russians and national minorities.

This failure had lasting consequences that extended well into the post war period. In one poignant example, the Georgian alpinist Otar Gigineishvili openly complained about the attitudes of Russian climbers and tourists in the Caucasus at a 1951 meeting of the All Union Section of Alpinism in Moscow. Here, Gigineishvili criticized alpinists for their lack of knowledge about local culture and failure to respect local norms. As he noted, it was not uncommon to find even experienced alpinists traipsing around mountainous villages half-naked, offending local

[75] Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 23.

inhabitants in the process. And, according to Gigineishvili, such occurrences were far from rare or even isolated to mountainous regions. Instead, alpinists would walk “nearly stark naked” (pochti golyshom) along the main prospect in Tbilisi, asking where they could find the beach – a ridiculous question, considering the Black Sea is several hundred kilometers away from the Georgian capital. Gigineishvili’s criticisms mirrored those of tourist writers and administrators from the 1930s and spoke to the ways that Russian travelers continued to see the Caucasus as a playground for vacationers and not one where actual people lived. And as he noted, alpinists would not dare to walk around Moscow in their underwear, so why should it be okay to do this in Tbilisi or the Caucasus more generally.[76]

In another story, Gigineishvili illustrated some of the ways that the imaginary geography of Georgia as a place of pastoral abundance continued to frustrate Georgians. As Gigineishvili recalled, a group of Georgian scientists were conducting research near Elbrus, and had placed a sign at their camp noting that the group was part of an official expedition of the Georgian Academy of Sciences. The scientists were surprised when they were continuously interrupted by tourist groups who wanted to know if the Georgians had wine. According to Gigineishvili, the tourists’ reasoning soon became clear when one tourist exclaimed in exasperation after being told there was no wine, “‘What kind of Georgian expedition is this, if you do not trade wine?’” As Gigineishvili himself noted, the tourists think that “since this is the Caucasus, and since this (the expedition) is Georgian – it means also here is wine.”[77] The experience was frustrating not just because it reduced the scientists down to the most immediate stereotype about their nationality, but also because it demonstrated how being part of the educated cultural elite failed to insulate Georgians from such condescending attitudes. Gigineishvili further complained that

---

[76] Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter GARF) f. 7576 op. 14 d. 42 l. 94.
[77] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d 42 l. 95.

many alpinists saw Svaneti as separate from the larger Georgian nation, a grievance that illustrated how mountainous space continued to be understood as somehow not Georgian.[78]

It is not clear that in the post-war period, any of these attitudes fundamentally changed.[79] Part of the reason for this was that the source of many of these attitudes – nineteenth century literature – continued to inform tourists on their travels to the south, receiving official endorsement among tourist officials. By the mid-1950s, there was an excursion dedicated to Lermontov in Piatigorsk, which celebrated the author as one who "exposed serf slavery and political oppression, the tyranny of the church and national prejudices."[80] And as a Georgian guide noted in 1948, tourists continued to be drawn to in the Jvari monastery near Mtskheta, the physical site of the monastery in Lermontov's famous poem "Mtsyri." The guides described how tourists repeatedly requested unofficial expeditions to the monastery, and suggested that it be included as part of the official itinerary. In preparation for this, the guides also planned to prepare a lecture on the topic of "Pushkin and Lermontov in the Caucasus."[81] Instead of confronting how such authors contributed to harmful stereotypes about the Caucasus, tourist itineraries officially embraced them.

Georgians were far from the most persecuted nationality and in fact occupied a position of extraordinary privilege for most of Soviet history.[82] And yet, despite this privilege, they could never fully climb the ladder of Soviet hierarchy to be equal with Russians. Histories of Soviet

[78]GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 42 ll. 95-96. The incident regarding the Georgian scientific expedition and requests for wine was cited by Eva Maurer. See Eva Maurer, *Wege zum Pik Stalin: Sowjetische Alpinisten, 1928-1953* (Zurich, 2010), 422 (footnote 256).
[79] Gigineishvili's observations reflect Anne Gorsuch's examination of Soviet tourism to Estonia in the post-war period. See Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This is Your World: Soviet tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford, Eng., 2011), 49-78 (Chapter Two, Estonia as the Soviet "Abroad").
[80] GARF f. 9520 op. 1 d. 301 ll. 8-9. For information on the entire excursion see pages 1- 65.
[81] sea p. 1862 a. 1 saq. 41 p. 1-2b; 4b.
[82] For example see Erik R. Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire* (Oxford, Eng., 2016).

nationalities policies have often emphasized the constructive nature of Soviet rule; that is, the many ways that the Soviet federalism succeeded in promoting national identities and giving non-Russians considerable power in the project of socialist modernity. But as tourist accounts make clear, on the ground the effect of such policies was more complicated and circumscribed, even at the height of campaigns to eradicate Russian chauvinism. The Soviet Union promised equality between nationalities, but, at least in the Caucasus, this promise collapsed under the weight of pre-revolutionary ideas about the region and its inhabitants, even as these ideas were reimagined through the lens of Marxist cultural development. The inability to fully challenge these continuities constituted one of the most fundamental failures of the Soviet project in the Caucasus, frustrating local Caucasians who saw themselves as equal participants in the construction of socialist modernity. As I explore in the following chapters, these frustrations were central to conflict between Georgian climbers in Tbilisi and the institutions of Soviet alpinism in Moscow.

CHAPTER 3: GEORGIAN ALPINISM AT THE CROSSROADS OF PROLETARIAN TOURISM

Introduction

In 1923, the Georgian mathematician Giorgi Nikoladze led an expedition to the Kazbegi peak in northern Georgia in partnership with the well-known guide Iagor Kazalikashvili. The expedition marked the first large-scale Georgian alpine summit and was celebrated by its organizers as a unique national achievement.[1] The following year, these same organizers formed the Geographic Society of Georgia to support alpine research and expeditions, which served as the institutional home of Georgian mountaineering until the mid-1930s. In the first five years of its history, Georgian alpinists repeatedly summited the Kazbegi and Elbrus peaks, conducted extensive research in the alpine regions of Georgia, and formed important relationships with leading foreign alpinists and alpine organizations like Douglas Freshfield and the Royal Geographical Society in London. By 1929, the Geographic Society of Georgia was a leading sponsor of mountaineering expeditions in the Caucasus, making Georgian alpinists central figures in the small but influential community of Soviet climbing.

This chapter examines two key expeditions to the Svaneti region organized by the Geographic Society in 1929 and 1930 in order to better understand the relationship between Georgian alpinists based in Tbilisi and their rural counterparts in the mountainous periphery. Since 1923, members of the Geographic Society had argued for the inclusion of local people from the mountainous regions where they climbed and sought to develop climbing communities in Georgia's most prominent mountainous areas. The collective challenges to climbing in

[1] Nikoladze, *The First Georgian Ascent.* For the original version, see Nikoladze, "pirveli asvla." In total, the expedition had twenty-seven members, of which twenty-three were Georgian.

Svaneti created affective bonds and lasting relationships between Georgian alpinists and local hunters, marking the first steps in the development of alpinism in the region. These two expeditions, however, also prefigured the larger consolidation of alpinism in the Soviet center where the newly formed Society for Proletarian Tourism and Excursions (OPTE) envisioned alpinism as a sport for urban workers. By the early 1930s, the OPTE launched a full-scale assault on the independence of the Geographic Society, leading to conflict between Georgian alpinists and tourist organizers in Moscow. As I argue, this conflict was driven by two radically different visions of mountaineering – one that stressed the importance of local participation, culture, and knowledge, and another that identified worker-alpinists as a means to bring Soviet culture to the "backward" periphery.

1929 Expedition to Svaneti

In 1929 the Geographic Society of Georgia planned an ambitious expedition to the region of Svaneti in northwestern Georgia that entailed multiple ascents divided among three groups of alpinists. Members of the Geographic Society had been conducting research in Svaneti and trekking around the mountainous region since the mid-1920s and the expedition marked a more serious engagement with Svaneti's impressive and often dangerous range of mountains. Although the expedition included planned ascents on a number of peaks, Georgian alpinists remained fixated on one mountain in particular – the 4800-meter pyramid shaped Tetnuldi. The planned ascent would be led by Giorgi Nikoladze, who had only recently returned to Georgia after spending nearly two years abroad conducting research in Paris and London.[2]

[2] In 1928, Nikoladze defended a dissertation in geometry at the Sorbonne in Paris. For more on Nikoladze's work from 1926-1928 see: Bogoliubov, *Nikoladze*, 117-145.

Georgian alpinists were focused on Tetnuldi for a number of reasons. Apart from its towering height and scenic beauty, Tetnuldi offered a feasible challenge where Georgian alpinists could begin to test the limits of the climbing abilities they had been developing since 1923. The summit was a far more difficult challenge than anything they had climbed before. It had also been climbed several times by western European climbers meaning that there were already established routes to follow. The ascent is relatively straightforward, and offers fewer technical challenges than other Svanetian peaks like neighboring Ushba, whose sheer rock faces and sharply changing weather patterns continue to kill experienced alpinists even today. In short, a successful ascent on Tetnuldi would help cement the development of the sport in Georgia and illustrate the central role of Georgian alpinists in developing climbing in Svaneti, an increasingly important site for Soviet alpinism.

The 1929 expedition began with a number of difficult summits. A group led by Devi Mikeladze made a first ascent on an unnamed peak at 4330 meters high, which they later named Devasar-gvelsulabashi.[3] Devi Mikeladze's group subsequently made an ascent on the 4850 meter Lalver peak, which had only been summited twice previously. Devi's brother, Shota Mikeladze, led a second group to the summit of the 3698 meter Azau-bashi and a first ascent on the 4145 meter Kichkinekol peak. Georgian alpinists had previously only summited peaks that had been well traveled, but now they were demonstrating their abilities on peaks that literally had no name. The ascent on Devasar-gvelsulabashi and Kichkinekol proved that they were able to make first ascents on peaks that had yet to see any alpinist, whether Soviet or western European.[4]

---

[3] Here a "first ascent" refers to the first time a climber or group of climbers reaches a previously unclimbed summit. A first ascent is usually considered a significant accomplishment since the alpinist is climbing into unknown territory.

[4] For details on these ascents see: I. Aslanishvili, *Dostizheniia sovetskogo al'pinizma v Gruzii za 1923-1924 g.* (Tiflis, 1935), 42-43; K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze* (Tbilisi 1959), 307-308; *Na sushe i na more* (hereafter *NSNM*), no. 1 (1930): 17. The article in *NSNM* notes that it was Nikoladze who led the ascent on Lalver, however this contradicts with Aslanishvili's account and the list of ascents in *k'avk'asionze*. This is most likely a mistake by

The summit on Tetnuldi remained the only unclimbed peak to complete the main objectives of the 1929 expedition. Giorgi Nikoladze initially organized a group of six people including two women and aided by three Svan guides. Like his ascents on Kazbegi and Elbrus, Nikoladze was again walking in the footsteps of the famous English alpinist Douglas Freshfield, who was the first to summit Tetnuldi in 1887. Nikoladze and Freshfield exchanged correspondence about the planned summit, and Freshfield advised the Georgian to follow the route blazed by the German alpinist Gottfried Merzbacher along the southern side of Tetnuldi, which offered the most favorable opportunity for a successful ascent.[5]

Nikoladze's group began their attempt on Tetnuldi in late August. The group reached 3500 meters before setting their first camp, although not without difficulty.[6] Nikoladze had trouble finding a suitable place to camp and ultimately the place he chose was far from ideal, offering little protection from the weather. When heavy rain and snow fell during the night the group's tents were flooded and all of their warm clothing soaked. Nikoladze had planned an ascent that morning, but the wet clothing forced the group to abandon the attempt and descend from the mountain.[7]

The delay, however, allowed Simon Japaridze to reach Nikoladze before the group embarked on a second attempt. Japaridze had rushed to Svaneti from Upper Racha and searched for Nikoladze all over the region, eventually finding him at the base of Tetnuldi.[8] Sergei Anisimov, the Russian travel writer and friend of Japaridze's, later recalled meeting the Georgian by chance in Svaneti as he made his way towards Tetnuldi. Anisimov described how a

---

NSNM, although other details about Georgian ascents in *NSNM* largely match up with descriptions in *Doestizheniia sovetskogo al'pinizma v Gruzii* and *k'avk'asionze.*

[5] G. Nikoladze, "Poslednee voskhozhdenie Simona Dzhaparidze" in *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al'pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze* ed,, V. Semenovskii (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930), 43.

[6] Nikoladze, "Poslednee voskhozhdenie," 43-44.

[7] Ibid, 44.

[8] Ibid, 44.

tan and muscled Japaridze waved him down with his Svan hat, happy to see an old friend. Both stopped to talk and admire the beautiful panorama of mountains that was laid out before them, but Japaridze remained fixated on summiting Tetnuldi.[9]

The failure to find a suitable place to camp combined with Japaridze's arrival encouraged a reorganization of the expedition. Ultimately, Nikoladze decided to attack the mountain more from the west, which he thought would be easier than their first attempt.[10] Instead of six participants, the expedition now contained only Nikoladze, Japaridze, and Pimen Dvali, a well-liked Soviet administrator in Svaneti who became an official member of the Tourist Section of the Geographic Society of Georgia in 1929.[11] Dvali had in fact been involved with the Geographic Society well before this time, most notably offering significant help to Nikoladze during the 1925 expedition to Elbrus, and his participation suggested a promising relationship between Soviet administrators in Svaneti and the Geographic Society. After a bout of bad weather, the trio encountered strikingly clear conditions. By August 27th, Nikoladze was poised to make another attempt on the mountain. Aided by good weather and now led by one of the best Soviet climbers in Simon Japaridze, a successful ascent was almost assured for the small Georgian group.

From Nikoladze's account, it is clear that Japaridze was by far the strongest climber of the three. Nikoladze himself was still recovering from malaria, while Dvali struggled to walk on crampons and lacked the climbing experience of the other two. Nikoladze and Japaridze decided that Dvali would walk between the more experienced climbers, since he was having difficulty with the crampons. To lighten Dvali's load, Japaridze took the bamboo pole and red flag that

---

[9] *Vsemirnyi turist* no. 8 (1929): 350-351.
[10] Nikoladze, "Poslednee voskhozhdenie,"45.
[11] I.A. Aslanishvili, "Pimen Spiridonovich Dvali," in *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al'pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze* ed,, V. Semenovskii (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930), 13.

Dvali had brought along to place on the peak. All three remained in a good mood, but Japaridze was feeling best of all, telling Nikoladze, “Giorgi, now already no one will wrest the peak from us, it is in our hands!” Nikoladze noted how at the time he was encouraged by Japaridze’s excellent climbing and buoyant enthusiasm and that he had no doubt that they would reach the summit.[12]

The group made fast progress up the mountain and soon was nearing the peak. All that remained was one last slope before reaching the final ascent on the cone of Tetnuldi. The weather continued to be favorable, with no wind and a bright sun. But in the early morning the slope of the mountain was shrouded in shade and covered in ice that was, as Nikoladze noted, unusually hard. The trio’s crampons would not bite into the ice even after several strikes, so Japaridze began cutting steps with the group’s only alpinist ice axe. The work was especially challenging, and the ice broke off in large chunks that were not conducive to creating steps. Japaridze began to cut steps that were far apart from each other, which proved to be difficult for Nikoladze and Dvali who both had trouble with such large steps. Nikoladze told Japaridze to shorten the distance, but Japaridze “did not see the danger” and suggested that the steps were cut only for the right foot, since the slope was going from the left to the right. Nikoladze was further slowed where one of the bindings between his banduli and crampons came loose, and he soon fell behind the other two.[13]

From a distance, Nikoladze observed an increasingly dangerous situation. Japaridze was cutting steps that were so far apart that the shorter Dvali could not traverse them even by the method Japaridze intended (that is, placing the right foot in the cutout as the main support and the left foot on the hard ice). Dvali soon was placing both feet in the steps cut by Japaridze, and

[12] Nikoladze, “Poslednee voskhozhdenie,”49.
[13] Ibid, 48-50.

making a large effort to get to the next one. Nikoladze shouted to Dvali that such a method was dangerous, and yelled to Japaridze to increase the number of steps. As Nikoladze noted, the problem ultimately was that the group only had one alpinist ice axe (Dvali had a small ice axe that was unsuitable to such work), a fact that illustrated how difficult it was to procure alpinist equipment at this time. Nikoladze later explained that if the group had just two alpinist ice axes, then it would have been possible for Simon, with "his astonishing talent," to climb to the peak using steps cut only for the right foot while another climber could use the second ice axe to cut steps for the left foot creating a less dangerous path to the summit. But the group only had one ice axe and cutting the steps was a grueling process, so the group was forced to follow the one-step path blazed by Japaridze.[14]

Nikoladze remained behind the other two climbers and observed what happened next:

> "Our conversation (about cutting steps closer together) came to nothing. Simon all the same cut steps that were far apart, and Pimen stops in them in with two feet. A large part of the slope already passed, all that remains is two to three fathoms until the cliffs, where there danger would be over, when Pimen flinched: he stood with two feet in the step and began to slip with both feet, at first quite, quite slowly, almost unnoticeably. He tried to grasp the stick (his walking stick) strongly so that it was possible to lean on it, to strengthen the legs, but in vain. In fear I yelled to Simon, who, standing much closer than me with his back to Pimen, was cutting a new step. 'Pimen, Pimen'! – exclaimed Simon and hastily stuck the sharp horn of the ice ax under the knee of Pimen, since Pimen already reclined on one leg, but the ice axe did not hold Pimen. Then poor Simon grabbed Pimen by the shoulders, but Pimen was not able to hold on to anything already, – his fate was already decided and together with him the fate of Simon.
>
> The slip was so slow at first. Suddenly both, as if breaking away, rushed with great speed downwards. I only saw how the ice axes fell from both of their hands and fell in different directions. This all rushed with greater and greater speed to the right of me. Not one of us raised a single sound. We all three were numb. Pimen, Simon, the two ice axes, the banner – all slipped into the crater of the glacier, turned to the left and disappeared from my eyes. Immediately the noise ceased, all was silent and I remained alone in this terrible kingdom of ice and death."[15]

[14] Ibid, 50-51.
[15] Ibid, 51.

Nikoladze watched helplessly as his two friends plummeted to their deaths just as the group was about to take the peak. The incident left him in shock and he nearly dropped his walking stick in the moments after the fall, which would have certainly ensured he shared the same fate as his colleagues as he made his way down the mountain. Instinctively, he grabbed the stick out of the air as it slipped from his hands and held onto it tightly, taking extra caution during the now lonely descent even in areas that offered no danger.[16] As Nikoladze noted, "What happened next, how I was able to return to our camp, I remember vaguely, only in fragments – as if in a dream. My despair was limitless."[17] When he made it to the point where he thought his comrades had fallen, he called their names for a long time hoping for an answer. No answer came.

Nikoladze was met at the base camp by the two Svan guides who had remained behind.[18] Watching from afar, they surmised what happened when instead of three silhouettes there remained only one. Initially, the Svan guides thought that the solitary figure had to be Simon, yet another testament to his immense climbing abilities. The group quickly gathered their things and set out on a search for the bodies. Nikoladze thought that they would find their fallen comrades quickly, but the search proved fruitless. The group lacked the rope necessary to explore some of the more dangerous cliffs and Nikoladze himself was struck by another paroxysm of malaria that left him in a severely weakened state. Nikoladze and the Svan guides returned "almost in complete silence," to the village of Adishi where other members of the Geographic Society were staying, only to painfully inform their friends that Simon and Pimen had perished.[19]

---

[16] Ibid, 51-52.
[17] Ibid, 51.
[18] Nikoladze notes that these guides did not participate in the attempted ascent because they did not know the region well and lacked alpinist equipment for climbing on ice.
[19] Ibid, 53-54. Nikoladze's account here is particularly moving: "Happy and joyful they cried out "Giorgi arrived" but I immediately cut short their joy. 'I returned, but Simon and Pimen died!' That moment is very difficult, when

Members of the Geographic Society spent the night in talks with hunters from Adishi about organizing a search for the bodies. On the morning of August the 28th, only a day after the fateful accident, Nikoladze and a group of Adishi hunters set out from the village on a more sustained search. By the 29th, news of the tragic accident had spread throughout the region and hunters from all over upper Svaneti began arriving to aid in the search activities. The Svans were clearly shaken by the death of Pimen Dvali who was a well-known and popular administrator in the region. Nikoladze noted earlier how the Svan guides spoke "with extraordinary love" about Pimen when their learned of his death, but the arrival of so many Svan hunters seeking to aid the search left an even deeper impression on Nikoladze. As he recalled, "I now understood even more, how infinitely loved and respected Pimen was here."[20]

Despite the arrival of more hunters, the search was initially unsuccessful. Nikoladze once again succumbed to a paroxysm of malaria and was unable to participate fully due to a high fever, and the hunters were delayed by the lack of necessary alpinist equipment. Finally, late in the day on the 30th, the hunters found physical evidence of the fall – Pimen's hat and walking stick, Nikoladze's ice axe, and a pair of glasses – but still did not find the bodies. Any remaining hope that the two climbers might somehow be miraculously alive was extinguished when the hunters recovered a piece of Dvali's skull still containing part of the fallen climber's brain. For the Georgian climbing community and the Svan hunters who were aiding them, the romanticism of climbing was put into sharp relief with the brutal evidence of a Dvali's death.[21]

---

you inform a close friend such news and especially when everyone waited with such hope for news about our victory on Tetnuldi."

[20] Ibid, 53, 55.

[21] Ibid, 56-57. Sh. Mikeladze, "Poiski I pokhorony P. Dvali I S. Dzhaparidze," in *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al'pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze* ed,, V. Semenovskii (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930), 59.

It took another two days before a group from Mestia was able to locate the body of Dvali.[22] Removing the body from the cliffs where Dvali's remains were located, however, proved less than straightforward. When the group attempted to move the body their rope frayed and then broke, and the corpse tumbled from the cliff deep into a crevasse below them well out of sight. The Svans were forced to risk their lives climbing down dangerous cliffs to continue the search for the newly lost body. With great difficulty, the group, now aided by others from the village of Mulakhi, again found Dvali's body and finally raised it out of its icy grave.[23] Telemak Japaridze (unrelated to Simon) spent a full day exploring the icy crevasse where Dvali was found in hopes of discovering the body of Simon, to no avail.

After the extraction of Dvali's remains, the search for Simon Japaridze was called off.[24] All of the available evidence suggested that Japaridze's body was likely at the bottom of any number of inaccessible crevasses and that any further search would be senseless and extremely dangerous. Although the Svan hunters were well accustomed to traveling in the mountains, they were less experienced and more uncomfortable scaling the sheer cliffs that any continued search would require. Simon Japaridze's parents, however, sent a telegram imploring the Svans to continue the search. When news reached Svaneti that Japaridze's best friend, the widely respected guide Iagor Kazalikashvili, was planning to travel to Svaneti in order to find Japaridze's remains, the Svan hunters reconstituted the search for the fallen climber. A number of Svans felt that it was not proper that they had found the body of their "old friend" (Dvali), while leaving the body of a "guest" (Japaridze) in the mountains.[25] Although a number of senior

---

[22] This group was led by a young Telemak Dzhaparidze and included Rati Rationo, Kemet Nakani, Anton Khergiani, Gio Niguriani and Kosta Gvaliani. A number of these participants would go on to become important participants in Georgian alpinist activities in the following years. Rati Rationa had participated in the 1929 expedition, although it is not clear from the sources what role in played. See Mikeladze, "Poiski," 59.
[23] Ibid, 59-60.
[24] Ibid, 60.
[25] Ibid, 62.

hunters declined to participate, a young Telemak Japaridze vowed to continue the search and was joined by several others.

The search was soon successful. In a crevasse not far from where Dvali was located, the Svans found Simon Japaridze's body, upright but stripped naked from the force of the fall. The group carried Japaridze's body out of the crevasse to the fields, where they placed it on a sled and brought it to Adishi.[26] By September 8th, Japaridze's remains were transported to Mestia, nearly two weeks after the fateful accident. The search commission, organized by the Svaneti Executive Committee, planned to bury Dvali and Japaridze together, but Japaridze's parents requested that their son's body be sent to Tbilisi instead. Escorted by Shota Mikeladze, Japaridze made one final trip out of Svaneti, his caravan met fittingly at the Latpari pass by a powerful snowstorm. Dvali was buried in his beloved Svaneti on a hill outside of Mestia with a full view of Tetnuldi.[27]

Aftermath of 1929

The deaths of Simon Japaridze and Pimen Dvali were an enormous loss for the Georgian mountaineering community. By the time of his death in 1929, Japaridze was arguably the most promising Georgian climber, and he was poised to lead the Geographic Society on increasingly difficult expeditions well into the next decade. With his death, the Geographic Society lost one of its foundational participants who had helped transform the Society into a serious and respected alpinist organization. Japaridze was not just talented; he was also well liked in Soviet alpinist circles for his daring climbing and enthusiasm for the mountains. By the end of the 1920s, the sport was quickly centralizing through new institutions based in Moscow, and the death of

[26] Svans were often chided for their backwardness in using sleds, like in the film *Salt for Svaneti* as discussed in the chapter 1, but the method successfully carried a beloved climber out of the mountains.
[27] For a full account of the search see, Mikeladze, "Poiski," 58-64.

Japaridze meant that that the Geographic Society lost one of its most important allies who could authoritatively speak for Georgian interests in the Soviet capital.[28] The details of Japaridze and Dvali's death described above were in fact part of a collection of memories about the fallen climbers from leading Russian and Georgian alpinists that were published in Moscow in 1930.[29] The compilation, titled, *On the paths to the peaks: in memory of proletarian alpinists Pimen Dvali and Simon Japaridze*, was edited by Vasilii Semenovskii, a major figure in Soviet alpinism, and illustrated how central Japaridze was to the growing field of proletarian climbing. The Society of Proletarian Tourism, the precursor to the OPTE, likewise agreed to construct a mountain shelter on Kazbegi at 4000 meters in honor of Simon Japaridze.[30] *On the paths to the peaks* was published in Russian and although many of the contributors were Georgian alpinists, its intended audience was arguably tourist organizers in the Soviet center. Nonetheless, the text marked one of the last instances of amicable cooperation between Georgian climbers and tourist institutions in Moscow.

Pimen Dvali's death, meanwhile, meant that the Geographic Society had lost an important partner in Svaneti. Dvali had used his position as the Chairman of the Svaneti Executive Committee to offer critical support for the expeditions of the Geographic Society. In 1929, despite the doubts of other Society members, Dvali and Nikoladze managed to procure funding for the expedition from the Council of People's Commissars of Georgia, illustrating their influence at the highest levels of the Georgian government.[31] Perhaps more importantly, Dvali was also an old Bolshevik, whose party membership dated to 1905 after being introduced to

---

[28] This is explored further below. For more on the formation of a Soviet tourist industry see, Koenker, *Club Red,* 53-88.
[29] See: V. Semenovskii, ed., *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al'pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930). The compilation also included a number of writings by Japaridze himself.
[30] V. Semenovskii, ed., *Na putiakh k vershinam,* 109-111
[31] Sh. Mikeladze, "Vstrechi s Pimenom Dvali," in *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al'pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze* ed,, V. Semenovskii (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930), 28.

Marxist literature by other famous Georgian Bolsheviks like Joseph Stalin, Filipp Makharadze, Polikarp Mdivani, and Shalva Eliava in Tbilisi.[32] Dvali took part in a number of important revolutionary activities in the Caucasus and was even imprisoned by the Georgian Menshevik government from 1919-1920.[33] His biography was simply unimpeachable at a moment when the demands of ideological purity were beginning to reach the field of alpinism. At the time of Dvali's death, Soviet alpinism was increasingly articulated in terms that underlined its proletarian nature, a sport not for the bourgeois elite but for the Soviet working class.[34] Dvali's untimely fall left the Geographic Society without an important advocate who could ably defend the organization from accusations of ideological impurity, charges that became especially damaging to the Society in the following years.

Dvali also served as an important interlocutor between Georgian alpinists and the Svan people. Born in neighboring Racha (also a remote mountainous region), all accounts suggest that Dvali was at home in isolated Svaneti and respectful of Svan culture and traditions.[35] This orientation set him apart from other Bolsheviks who remained focused on Svan backwardness, and it made him an ideal partner for the Geographic Society, which had already established a practice of alpinism that emphasized the importance of local participation and the development of climbing in regional communities. In 1929, Dvali had been essential in securing local Svan porters and guides to aid the expedition, and was poised to become the key intermediary between Svan communities and the Geographic Society, which had few personal ties to the region.[36]

---

[32] Aslanishvili, "Pimen Dvali," 9.
[33] Ibid, 11.
[34] Koenker, *Club Red*, 72, Eva Maurer "Alpinizm as mass sport and elite recreation: Soviet mountaineering camps under Stalin," in *Turizm : the Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism,* eds., Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca, 2006), 142-148.
[35] Aslanishvili, "Pimen Dvali," 11-12; Mikeladze, "Vstrechi," 29.
[36] Mikeladze, "Vstrechi," 30.

Dvali's death left the Society without an important local contact in Svaneti just as the region was becoming central to the future of Georgian alpinism.

And yet, the events of 1929 helped to bring together members of the Geographic Society and the Svan hunters who participated in the search for the lost climbers. The deaths of Japaridze and Dvali had been horrific. Sergei Anisimov noted that when the Svans found the climbers' bodies they were little more than "bags of broken bones."[37] Alexander Japaridze, Simon's brother, explained that even the hardened hunter Telemak Japaridze was shaken when he found Simon's body and was deeply moved by the experience.[38] A year later, Alexander Japaridze met a group of young Svans in a canteen joyfully drinking wine and enjoying a supra, a traditional Georgian feast, while he was traveling in the region. When the Svans found out that Alexander was Simon's brother, they quickly stopped singing as a sign of sympathy for the dead, despite Japaridze's protestations that they continue with their festivities.[39]

Georgian climbers meanwhile expressed their gratitude to the Svan hunters who had risked their lives to recover the remains of their fallen comrades.[40] Giorgi Nikoladze was especially impressed by the 70-year-old Svan hunter who had no trouble keeping up with younger members of the search party and Shota Mikeladze wrote glowingly about the bravery of Telemak Japaridze, who did not hesitate to lower himself into dangerous crevasses.[41] In the following years, members of the search party like Goji Zurebiani, Gio Niguriani and others would become integral to the development of Georgian alpinism and participate in some of the most important and consequential climbs. The deaths of Dvali and Japaridze helped to foster

[37] S. Anisimov, ""Simon Dzhaparidze," in *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al'pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze* ed,, V. Semenovskii (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930), 40; also *Vsemirnyi turist* no. 8 (1929): 350-351.
[38] Alexander Japaridze, *Tetnuldi,* 10.
[39] Japaridze, *Tetnuldi,* 21.
[40] Mikeladze, "Poiski," 62, Japaridze, *Tetnuldi,* 9.
[41] Nikoladze, "Poslednee Voskhozhdenie," 54; Mikeladze, "Poiski," 59-62.

profound emotional connections between the climbers that transcended social class – affective bonds that would grow through the shared experience of risk, success, and further loss of life. In this way, the 1929 tragedy unexpectedly served as a catalyst for the Georgian climbing community's most successful project – the development of alpinism in Svaneti.

"Revenge" on Tetnuldi, 1930

The tragic death of Simon Japaridze affected the entire Georgian alpinist community but was felt most deeply by three people – Simon's brother and sister, Alexander (Alesha) and Alexandra, and Simon's closest climbing companion, Iagor Kazalikashvili.[42] In 1923 Kazalikashvili led the first group of Georgian alpinists to the Kazbegi peak and over the next several years became an integral part of the Geographic Society and a close friend to many of the Society's members. Kazalikashvili and Japaridze were often found climbing together and were a well-known pair even to Russian tourists.[43] Nonetheless, Simon's death revealed how close the two really were. When Kazalikashvili heard of Simon's fall, he immediately prepared to travel to Svaneti to find his fallen friend, but was told it was unnecessary by the Geographic Society, a decision that clearly bothered him.[44] Kazalikashvili, also a folk poet, wrote a moving poem in honor of the two climbers that was later published in a collection of his poetry – poetry that was marked with his distinct Mokhevian dialect.[45] Instead of being misunderstood by urban Georgians from Tbilisi like Lelt Ghunia as discussed in chapter one, Kazalikashvili's regional

---

[42] In the following section I will refer to many of these climbers by their first names, to make it easier to distinguish between the three Japaridze siblings. This is meant only to make the text more clear and readable, and not to suggest some sort of personal familiarity with these figures.
[43] See *NSNM,* no. 8 (1929): 12-13, see also the list of ascents in K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze,* 305-306.
[44] Japaridze, *Tetnuldi*, 8;, 322-323.
[45] See Iagor Kazalikashvili, *leksebi*, ed. Mikel Pataridze (Tbilisi, 1933), 17-18.

identity was celebrated and promoted to a wider Georgian audience, marking both as authentic interlocutors of the nation.

Alexander Japaridze, meanwhile, had heard secondhand while traveling from Leningrad that his older brother had been involved in an accident, but did not know that the accident had been fatal. [46] He only learned about Simon's death in Baku when he read in an issue of the Transcaucasian newspaper, *Zaria vostoka*, that Simon's corpse had been found.[47] As Alexander noted, Simon's death deeply upset not just him but also Alexandra, his sister. They both wanted to take "revenge" on Tetnuldi and see the place where the accident had taken place.[48] When Kazalikashvili learned of their plan to attempt a summit of Tetnuldi in honor of Simon, he wrote a letter to the pair, expressing his desire to take part in the expedition since he had not been able to participate in the search for Simon's body. As Alexander Japaridze recalled, it was an obvious choice to include "this noble man and Simon's favorite traveling friend" on the expedition, especially considering his prodigious climbing abilities.[49] The three were joined by another Georgian climber, Vasasi Kalandarishvili.

Of the four, only Alexander Japaridze had no real alpinist experience. At the time, Alexandra Japaridze was an accomplished climber who had made multiple ascents on Kazbegi, Kazalikashvili could count sixteen summits on Kazbegi as well as other peaks, and Kalandarishvili had twice been to the peak of Kazbegi.[50] Alexander Japaridze's plan to make a summit on Tetnuldi without first building his skills on easier peaks was daring and risky, but one that illustrated the bold fearlessness that would eventually characterize his alpinist career. Any doubts he did have were quickly dispelled on a final visit to Simon's grave before leaving for

---

[46] Japaridze, *Tetnuldi,* 9.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid, 11.
[49] Ibid, 12.
[50] Ibid, 12.

Svaneti, where he became further convinced a summit in Simon's memory, despite its dangers, was the correct decision.[51]

Alexander, Iagor, and Vasasi traveled to Svaneti in early July 1930. Alexandra had been summoned to the region earlier to conduct meteorological research for the Georgian Geophysical Observatory, which ran several meteorological stations in the region.[52] Here, the bonds forged between the Svan hunters and the Geographic Society during the previous year remained strong. The hunters that participated in the search for Simon and Pimen's body went to Alexandra to express their sympathy and when they learned that she planned another attempt on the peak a number of them asked her to inform them before she left so they could also participate in the summit.[53] When Alexander arrived a short while later, the brother and sister traveled out of their way to find the hunters in their village of Mujali, only to discover that the hunters were away working on constructing a tourist house at the Tviberi glacier.[54] They left a note in case the Svans returned, and continued on their way to the village of Adishi, where they found that Kazalikashvili had quickly become friends with the villagers – a sign of inter-regional cooperation.[55]

On July 10th, the group arrived at the base of Tetnuldi, where they planned to wait for the arrival of the Svan hunters. Although they had no way of knowing if the hunters had returned and found their note, they decided to wait despite the fact that the weather had cleared and offered an opportunity for an attempt at the summit the following morning, a decision that is again suggestive of how strongly they believed in the importance of local participation. Around midnight, the group was surprised to hear men's voices in the distance, and soon the "shining

[51] Ibid, 15-16.
[52] Ibid, 15.
[53] Ibid, 21.
[54] Ibid, 21-22.
[55] Ibid, 22.

faces" of Romanoz and Adsil Avaliani were peering in their tents. A few hours later a young Goji Zurebiani stunned the group with his unexpected arrival. As Alexander Japaridze noted, crossing the ice fields and navigating the dangerous ravines was difficult enough during the day; to do so on a moonless night and especially alone like Zurebiani was particularly impressive.[56]

The group, now consisting of seven members, began an attempt on the mountain the morning on the 11th. On the way they were joined by another Georgian alpinist, Levan Maruashvili and the Svan hunter Goji Khergiani, who were trying to make their own ascent on the peak. After several hours, the nine climbers reached an icy and impassable wall near the top of the mountain, which the hunters believed to be the peak itself. The others were not so sure and, led by Kazalikashvili, attempted to go around the impasse in search of another way to the peak. When they were unable to find an alternative route around the obstacle, the Svans became even more convinced that they had reached the summit. Soon the mountain was shrouded in a thick fog and the group was forced to abandon any further exploration.[57]

The group descended as if they had succeeded in reaching the peak, but Alexander Japaridze in particular harbored deep doubts that they had summited the mountain. Part of the problem was that the fog made the readings on the group's barometer unreliable, so they could not be sure how high they actually climbed. Japaridze was likewise disappointed that he had failed to place a special aluminum plate containing Simon's picture on the peak, which he had made in Tbilisi to mark the summit in honor of his brother. At their camp at the head of the Nagebi glacier, Japaridze raised the possibility of another ascent on the peak the next day. Kazalikashvili suggested that the group return to Adishi, where they could use their field glasses to check if they had in fact reached the peak by searching for their footprints in the snow. As

[56] Ibid, 25.
[57] Ibid, 26-30.

Kazalikashvili argued, if they found evidence that they had in fact not reached the peak, then they could make another attempt in a few days when everyone was well rested. But Japaridze was not convinced. Since the hunters had already left for Adishi and Alexandra, Iagor, and Vasasi were not ready to make another attempt so quickly after the first, Alexander decided to attempt the summit alone. After promising his companions that he would abandon the attempt at the first sign of danger, Japaridze set off once again, a mere twelve hours after returning from the last attempt.[58]

Japaridze's dedication to another attempt was unwavering. To make a solo ascent on Tetnuldi today is unadvisable; to do so with little rest and extremely limited alpinist experience is inherently dangerous. Japaridze's willingness to accept the huge risks associated with difficult climbs and his uncompromising pursuit of a successful ascent, no matter the conditions, would become a defining characteristic of the climber in the following years, but this trait was present from his very first climb.[59] Utilizing the steps that the group had cut the day before and benefitting from clear weather, Japaridze made quick progress up the mountain and soon realized that his doubts were in fact correct – the group, although quite close, had not reached the peak a day before. Forging his own path to the peak, the final 350 meters required nearly two and a half hours cutting hundreds of new steps in the ice, but by early afternoon Japaridze was standing on the peak of Tetnuldi. In doing so, he was the first Soviet climber to make the summit.[60]

In Adishi, the hunters still believed that they had reached the peak and decided to look for evidence of their successful ascent with field glasses. Having no idea about Japaridze's planned

---

[58] Ibid, 31-33.

[59] This unrelenting determination was the characteristic of many of the Soviet Union's elite alpinists during this period, who often attempted climbs that tested the boundaries of risk, not always successfully.

[60] Ibid, 33. For a full account of Japaridze's solo ascent see, Ibid, 31-37. See also, *Turist aktivist,* no. 1 (1931): 40. Japaridze was also the first one to reach the peak in twenty-seven years. Following Japaridze's summit, several other Soviet groups reached the peak as well in 1930.

summit, they were shocked when they unexpectedly saw a solitary man winding his way up the mountain. Japaridze's account suggests that they were also deeply fearful for the climber they observed, not just because he was traveling alone but also because of their belief that there was a spiritual force that resided at the peak, which would strike him down at any moment. Japaridze noted that many Svans believed the deaths of Simon and Pimen the year before were caused by the spiritual force, which was angered when the two climbers disturbed the peace. Earlier that year, there was a large earthquake in the region causing the top of Tetnuldi to collapse, dramatically changing the snowy peak into a rocky one, a fact that the population of Svaneti cited as more evidence of the spirit's anger.[61]

The lack of sources makes it difficult to know how deeply the Svan population believed in the idea of a spiritual force residing on Tetnuldi.[62] Japaridze argued that his ascent and safe return, which was viewed in real time by local villagers, helped to undermine this superstition. This was likely true, but it is also clear that such beliefs, no matter how widespread, did not discourage Svan hunters from participating in climbs on Georgian expeditions. What evidence does exist suggests that a belief in the supernatural or evil spirits in Svaneti were complicated and fluid at this time. Miron Khergiani, a post-war Georgian author from Svaneti who was well connected to alpinist circles in the region, wrote that "in olden times almost all of the hunters believed in the existence of evil spirits" (zlykh dukhov).[63] But as Miron Khergiani makes clear, these attitudes were changing and many hunters refused to believe in any such spirits in the early Soviet period. Miron Khergiani recalled how Beknu Khergiani, a famous Svan hunter and active member of the Georgian climbing community from the 1930s until 1960s, rejected any belief in

---

[61] Japaridze, *Tetnuldi*, 36; *NSNM* no. 9 (1930): inside cover; *NSNM,* no. 16 (1930): 7.
[62] Unfortunately, there are few other sources about the expedition and none from the perspective of the Svan population.
[63] Miron Khergiani, *Tigr Skal* trans. by Kamilla Korinteli (Moscow, 1989), 48. The original Georgian edition was published in 1975.

evil spirits, but did continue to believe in the existence of a "bird-beast" (ptitsy-zveria) – a figure that had no real basis in Svanetian mythology. The ostensible source of this strange belief was a fateful 1935 expedition to Tetnuldi, where Beknu Khergiani, together with Gabriel Khergiani and a Russian alpinist named Lesia Vol'skaia, heard a blood-chilling scream from the cliffs that was completely unrecognizable and beyond explanation. Despite the fact that the three of them did not believe in God, they all began to pray, even Vol'skaia who was conducting anti-religions propaganda in the region and who was a devout atheist.[64] This story suggests that there was some openness to believing in the supernatural among the Svan hunters, and Miron Khergiani's recollections suggest that the wider population likely did continue to hold on to some kind of belief in mountainous spirits. In the following years, Georgian alpinists would legitimate their expeditions to Svaneti as a form of anti-religious agitation, but such beliefs were arguably not a real obstacle to the development of alpinism in the region. In the case of Beknu Khergiani, the mythical bird-beast did not stop him from becoming one of the Soviet Union's most decorated alpinsits.[65]

Japaridze's successful ascent, however, definitively proved that the first attempt a few days prior had not been successful. Since the goal of the expedition was to honor Simon through a summit on the mountain that took his life, Alexandra and Iagor in particular were "tormented" by the thought that they had failed to reach the peak and properly honor their brother and friend.[66] Iagor soon articulated his firm desire to summit the peak, and was quickly joined by Alexandra. Despite having made two climbs of over 4700 meters in the last two days, Alexander also decided to join them. The trio also wanted a Svan hunter to reach the peak, so they asked a

[64] Khergiani, *Tigr Skal*, 48-51.
[65] Khergiani would we awarded the title of Honored Master of Sport in 1951, the highest title a Soviet alpinist could attain.
[66] Japaridze, *Tetnuldi*, 38.

willing Adsil Avaliani to join them, since Goji Zurebiani and Romanoz Avaliani had already left Adishi.[67] Iagor Kazalikashvili presented a daring plan: rest for a day in the Adishi and make an early morning attempt on the peak from the village itself before returning to the village without a camp, meaning over 30 kilometers of walking and 3000 meters of elevation gain in a single day. On July 14th, the group did just this, leaving at 4:15 in the morning and reaching the peak nearly 12 hours later in the late afternoon, before finally returning to the village late that night.[68] In a span of four days, the Georgians made three different attempts on the peak, two of them successful.

Alexander, Alexandra, Iagor, and Vasasi returned to the village of Mestia, where they rested for several days. There, their Svan friends, Goji, Romanoz, and Adsil, came to wish them farewell while another hunter, Pavle Zurebiani, came to express his disappointment that he was not able to take part in the ascent on Tetnuldi. The inclusion of Svan hunters during the expedition to Tetnuldi did not just help to cement important relationships from the previous year, it also generated interest in alpinism among the hunters and Svan population more widely. With several days remaining before they had to leave to region, Alexander, Alexandra, and Iagor decided to make an attempt on Ushba in hopes of connecting Simon's name with the first Soviet ascent on the dangerous mountain. Before doing so, they again sought out the participation of a Svan hunter, this time enlisting Almatskir Kvitsiani, who was well known in the area. Kvitsiani was joined by Ioseb Kibolani, also an experienced hunter whose father had participated in an expedition to Ushba led by Willi Rickmers in 1903.[69]

The group's attempt on Ushba illustrated some of the many ways that the mountain was much more challenging and dangerous than anything they had yet encountered. The group had

[67] Ibid, 38.
[68] Ibid, 40-41.
[69] Ibid, 44-45.

difficulty finding a place to make their first camp at 3500 meters, and was barely able to clear a small square that fit the five of them. That night, huddled closely together, the climbers were awakened by a terrible thunderstorm that violently shook the cliffs and caused several boulders to fall from the mountain. The alpinists took solace in the fact that their tent was not perched below any cliffs and therefore they were not in any real danger of being crushed by an errant rock fall, but the drastic change in weather startled them. The next day, Alexander and Iagor reached the saddle of Ushba, which, at nearly 4000 meters, separates the two peaks of the mountain. In less than an hour on the saddle, the two climbers observed at least six avalanches whose power and noise was terrifying. Alexander Japaridze described the view as “a world full of capriciousness, rage, and anger.”[70] There was also no obvious way forward and even the experienced Kazalikashvili could not solve the impasse. The climbers soon turned back, descending to the village of Becho. Although the group had enough supplies and equipment for another attempt, they were now pressed for time. Alexandra and Iagor had already overstayed their work leave, and the Svan hunters had to begin the process of mowing hay in order feed their animals during the winter season. The group’s attempt had come remarkably close to a successful summit, but it would be several years before Alexander, Alexandra, and Iagor had the opportunity to make another attempt on the mountain.[71]

The expedition to Tetnuldi and attempt on Ushba in 1930 reflected many of the practices that defined the Georgian alpinist community since 1923. At every opportunity, the core group of Alexander and Alexandra Japaridze, Iagor Kazalikashvili, and Vasasi Kalandarishvili, sought not just the aid but also the participation of Svan hunters on their climbs. Alexander Japaridze in particular articulated the need to include Svans even when it was not expedient to do so and

[70] Ibid„ 49.
[71] For details on the Ushba attempt, see Ibid, 44-52.

praised the impressive skills of Svan hunters as they traversed difficult and dangerous landscapes. Japaridze argued that the reason alpinism was slow to develop among the Svan people was the disdainful attitude foreign alpinists carried with them when they climbed in the region. As he noted, "the participants of those expeditions looked at the local population scornfully and did not consider them their equals."[72] Japaridze went further, arguing that Douglas Freshfield was "unable to see elementary human characteristics in the local population" during his travels in the Caucasus.[73] Instead, Japaridze posited a radically different vision for the development of alpinism in the region – encourage the participation of local residents and treat them with dignity and respect.

Japaridze's vision for alpinism in Svaneti mirrored the larger focus of the Georgian alpinist community. Georgian alpinists clearly saw their Svan counterparts as equals, an orientation that had its roots in Nikoladze's decision to enlist the help of Mokhevian guides like Kazalikashvili in 1923. Although Georgian alpinists highlighted local beliefs in supernatural forces residing on mountains like Tetnuldi, they did not use the language of backwardness to describe the local population and instead saw collaboration with local hunters as an essential method to combatting such beliefs. In this way, the Tetnuldi climbs in 1930 prefigured the development of alpinism in Svaneti more generally.

The victory on Tetnuldi and near success on Ushba also highlighted the increasingly important role of Iagor Kazalikashvili. Kazalikashvili was integral to the accomplishments of Georgian alpinists in the previous years but had largely participated in climbs in his native region of Khevi where he had intimate knowledge of the Kazbegi peak and surrounding areas. His decision to take part in the Tetnuldi climbs was driven by the desire to avenge the loss of his

[72] Ibid, 56.
[73] Ibid, 57.

friend Simon Japaridze and gave him the opportunity to spend significant time in Svaneti. Alexander Japaridze noted how quickly Kazalikashvili became friends with villagers from Adishi and the shared experience of climbs on Tetnuldi and Ushba helped to form relationships between the Svan hunters and the Mokhevian climber. In this way, Georgian alpinism was beginning to foster connections not just between urban centers and mountainous regions but also among mountainous regions themselves, connections that were fundamental to the creation of a cohesive national space in Soviet Georgia. Kazalikashvili would eventually return to Svaneti in 1934 where his camaraderie with the Svan hunter Gio Niguriani helped Georgian alpinists achieve even greater successes.

This account of the 1930 expedition was largely reconstructed from a Georgian language text written by Alexander Japaridze that was only published after his death in 1948. The book, titled simply, *Tetnuldi*, has its own curious history. The original text, written after the expedition in 1930, was much longer than the final publication and had multiple versions.[74] It is not entirely clear if the text was originally meant for publication or was written simply to have an official account of the expedition – the original audience is unclear. The style in the 1948 published version is itself quite inconsistent, ranging from typically Marxist language about the need to conquer nature and harness the power of Svaneti's rivers for hydroelectric power to deeply personal observations about the death of Simon and the meaning of climbing Tetnuldi in his memory. These inconsistences are almost certainly the result of the final, heavily edited product, which was published to honor Alexander Japaridze's impact on Georgian climbing and inspire a new generation of Georgian alpinists in the post-war period. But if we read past the often stark edits and unknown initial audience, it is clear that *Tetnuldi* is one of the most important texts of Georgian mountaineering, even if it never reached a mass audience or was translated into

[74] Alexander Japaridze*, rcheuli nats'erebi (Selected Writings)*, ed. D. Dondua (Tbilisi 1949), 475-476.

Russian.[75] The most difficult peaks in Georgia are located in the Svaneti, which meant that the region was always going to be a key site of engagement for the Geographic Society and Georgian alpinists more generally. In the post-war period, there are more abundant registers for understanding the development of alpinism in Svaneti, but Japaridze's text is arguably the most critical source for understanding how cooperation between Georgian climbers and Svan hunters operated on a personal level from the very beginning and helped to build affective bonds between the climbers that ultimately led to a cohesive national community of alpinists.

Taken together, the 1929 and 1930 expeditions also illustrated the continued involvement of women in the Georgian climbing community and their central role in many of its climbs. Among the members of the 1929 expedition were, as one Russian climber noted, "the best female alpinists in the USSR."[76] These included a number of participants from Nikoladze's 1923 expedition to Kazbegi, such as Maro Tkavadze, Asmat Nikolaishvili, Eliko Lotkipanidze, Lida Chkheidze, and Maro Bezhanishvili. Alexandra Japaridze could easily add her name to this list with the successful summit on Tetnuldi and valiant attempt on Ushba in 1930. And Japaridze's success on Tetnuldi was quickly repeated later that month when Asmat Nikolaishvili became the second woman to reach the peak. The extant sources are frustratingly thin regarding the work of these women, but Japaridze, Nikolaishvili and many others undoubtedly continued to be central figures in the development of Georgian alpinism, a fact that stood in contrast to alpinist communities in Russia and western Europe. In the following years, this extensive participation would wane significantly for reasons explored in the following chapter, but it is important to note that at the moment that Soviet alpinism was beginning the process of centralization and institutionalization, the Geographic Society of Georgia at the forefront of the campaign to make

[75] The print run was only 5100, which meant that the text was not very widely distributed.
[76] *NSNM* no. 1 (1930): 17.

alpinism accessible to Soviet women. In this way, the example of Georgian climbing did not represent the practices of a backward periphery, but offered a more "cultured" example to the Soviet center. The work of alpinists like Alexandra Japaridze suggest that ideas about the equality and involvement of Soviet women in tourist activities did not just emanate from Moscow, but also came from regional centers like Tbilisi. And perhaps more abstractly, the achievements of Georgian women offered a stark challenge to the pre-revolutionary emasculation of Georgian identity described in the previous chapter. As alpinism began to be conceptualized as the "school of courage," a place where one's true character is revealed, the impressive climbs of Georgian women illustrated that, despite the writing of Pushkin and Lermontov, Georgians exhibited the characteristics of highland bravery, regardless of gender.

The Stakes of Proletarian Touring

The expeditions to Svaneti in 1929 and 1930 took place just as the field of alpinism was being reorganized in the Soviet center, a reorganization that reflected larger ideological arguments about the goals of Soviet tourism as a whole. Georgian alpinists like Giorgi Nikoladze and Alexander Japaridze may have articulated a vision of mountaineering that sought to develop alpinism among the local population of Georgian peasants, but this vision was quickly at odds with an increasingly coherent ideology of Soviet touring that focused on the primacy of workers in industrial centers. These differing orientations meant that over the next three decades, the Georgian alpinist community and the institutions that governed the sport in Moscow repeatedly came into conflict over the development of mountaineering in Georgia. As I show below, the development of a specifically proletarian vision for Soviet alpinism entailed an increasing

centralization of control over climbing institutions that directly challenged the independence of Georgian climbers in the first half of the 1930s.

The question about the development of a specifically Soviet form of "proletarian tourism" was first raised by the Komsomol in 1926. A year later, Komsomol activists took over the pre-revolutionary Russian Society of Tourists (ROT) and began to build a burgeoning proletarian tourist moment. In 1929, tourist activists changed the name of ROT to the Society for Proletarian Tourism (OPT) to reflect the changing goals of the society. Made up of young students and workers, the new society soon began printing its own journal, *Na sushi i na more (On land and on sea*), opened a shop to sell tourist goods in Moscow, and began to develop bases for tourists to stay on popular routes. The OPT's vision of proletarian tourism included a form of purposeful and rugged travel that increased ones knowledge of the Soviet nation and offered help to the culturally backward people tourists encountered. The OPT sought to make tourism accessible to the masses through discounted rail tickets and access to tourist bases, as well as by publishing educational materials to help factory groups embark on independent touring.[77]

The OPT was soon challenged, however, when the Commissariat of Enlightenment created its own tourist organization, Sovetskii Turist (Sovtur), in 1927. Both Sovtur and the OPT argued for purposeful travel that would help to build the Soviet homeland, but Sovtur focused more exclusively on planned excursions instead of independent touring. The result was that few workers could afford Sovtur's excursions even with discounted pricing. In 1929, the two organizations were ordered to merge, yet it was unclear which form the new institution would take. As Diane Koenker has argued, "at stake was the soul of Soviet tourism: would it take on the socialist, voluntary form of the Society for Proletarian Tourism or the more commercial,

[77] This is explored in more detail in chapter four. For more details about the development of the OPT see *Tourist Activist* no. 4 (1932): 8-10, Koenker, *Club Red*, 54-59.

business-like functions of Sovetskii Turist?" Ultimately OPT's class oriented vision of mass tourism won out, and in 1930 the All-Union Voluntary Society for Proletarian Tourism and Excursions (OPTE) was created, which would lead Soviet tourism for the next six years.[78]

The institutional battles between the OPT and Sovtur in the late 1920s and the creation of the OPTE in 1930 cemented a vision of Soviet touring that was centered mainly on workers in factory cells. Mass tourism meant supporting tourists largely in urban industrial areas, meaning that tourism in the 1930s was mostly a process of ethnic Russians traveling south to the Caucasus and Crimea.[79] The OPTE did not just have control over tourist infrastructure, but could also dictate the ideological content of proletarian tourism through its journal *On land and on sea* and through organizational plenums and meetings in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Like in other aspects of Soviet life in the early 1930s, the sharp turn towards a class centered form of proletarian tourism meant that tourist organizers and tourists themselves could now be criticized for failing to fulfill the ideological goals that being a proletarian tourist entailed.

Nowhere were these changes more clear than in the field of alpinism, which was arguably the most prestigious branch of Soviet tourism.[80] Previously decentralized among local clubs and societies, alpinism was now organized under the control of the OPTE, which created a special "Mountain Section" in 1932 to lead the development of the sport. At the Mountain Section's first plenum the vice-chairman of the OPTE L. Gurvich argued for the creation of a mass movement

---

[78] Koenker, *Club Red,* 62. For more on the institutional battles between Sovtur and the OPT, see Ibid, 60-63; G.P. Dolzhenko, *Istoriia turizma v dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii i SSSR* (Rostov na Donu, 1988), 76-104.
[79] See for example *NSNM*, no. 4 (1931): 8. *NSNM* notes that during the 1930 season 56 percent of all tourists (13,472) came from Moscow or Leningrad, while less than 1 percent (30) came from the Transcaucasus. *NSNM* further notes that subscriptions were "weakly or totally not capturing the periphery" meaning that few non-Russians were signing up.
[80] Koenker, *Club Red,* 72.

of mountainous tourism led by the OPTE through local cells.[81] Gurvich made clear that there was no room for other mountain societies or independent sections of alpinists, an organizational restructuring that threatened the status of the mountaineering work conducted by the Geographic Society of Georgia. Soviet mountaineering was positioned in contrast to the apolitical work of bourgeois alpinists of western Europe who were interested only in individual glory and not collective action. Instead, Soviet climbing would aid in the national defense of mountainous regions and conduct important research to locate necessary resources for Soviet industry, all while increasing the health of the Soviet citizenry.[82] As one prominent Soviet alpinist argued, "We should untiringly fight for the political activation of our travels to mountains, for implementing in our travels elements of research, for the transformation of mountain tourism into a practical school for future fighters of special mountain troops. We should ensure the involvement in mountain tourism, in travels to mountains the widest mass of workers."[83] Alpinist expeditions were duly praised for having a high percentage of workers among their participants.[84]

Failure to live up to the clearly defined goals of Soviet alpinism as articulated by the OPTE could lead to serious reprimands. At the first plenum of the newly formed Mountain Section, Gurvich singled out a number of authors for "frequent manifestations of chauvinism, in particular great power (chauvinism), political apathy, aestheticism, distortions of Soviet reality, et. cetera" in their written work.[85] By the time Gurvich's speech was published in the journal *Turist aktivist*, one of these authors already had written a letter to the journal apologizing for his

---

[81] Gurvich used the term "mountain tourism" as a way to reject the "alpine aristocracy" that was focused only on ascents above 4000 meters, instead arguing that alpinism consisted of more than summits. See *Turist aktivist*, no. 7 (1932): 27.
[82] *Turist aktivist,* no. 7 (1932): 26-28.
[83] *Turist aktivist,* no. 5-6 (1932): 39.
[84] *Turist aktivist*, no. 2 (1932): 24.
[85] *Turist aktivist,* no. 5-6 (1932): 38.

"line of political mistakes," particularly his focus on individualism, lack of attention to the connection between alpinism and socialist construction, and uncritical attitudes towards bourgeois tourism in the west.[86] Gurvich likewise lamented the lack of available print materials that advocated for proletarian tourism and criticized both the Great and Small Soviet encyclopedias for failing to differentiate bourgeois alpinism from the proletarian form practiced in the Soviet Union.[87]

In some ways, the Geographic Society of Georgia was well positioned to respond to these larger changes. Since 1923, the Society had sponsored a number of research initiatives in Khevi and Svaneti, and Georgian alpinists played a key role in setting up meteorological stations and recording weather data in the two regions. With a large cadre of qualified and experienced women, the Geographic Society was also able to answer the OPTE's call to increase women's participation in tourist groups on mountain excursions to at least twenty percent of the group total.[88] In 1931 Alexander Japaridze led a group of OPTE members to research hydroelectric potential in the Kazbegi region and, together with Iagor Kazalikashvili, opened a new and safer path to the peak. In 1932, *Turist aktivist* reported that Asmat Nikolaishvili led an expedition of the mountain section of the Georgian OPTE to the Kazbegi peak, highlighting the important leadership roles that Georgian women took within the Georgian alpinist community.[89] And in the same year, Georgian alpinists organized a united expedition of the Georgian OPTE and the

[86] *Turist aktivist* no. 4 (1932): 28-29.
[87] *Turist aktivist,* no. 7 (1932): 26.
[88] *Turist aktivist,* no. 2 (1932): 24.
[89] *Turist Aktivist*, no. 1 (1933): 42; Nikolaishvili is listed only as a participant an official compendium of Georgian ascents published in 1959. Since the compendium was made by prominent Georgian alpinists using Georgian archival materials, it is likely more correct than the reporting of the Moscow based *Tourist Aktivist*. Nonetheless, the fact that the journal noted Nikolaishvili as the leader of the expedition suggests the widespread reputation Georgian women had for being leading alpinists. See K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze*, 311.

Geographic Society led by Soso Aslanishvili to research the source of the Rioni and Tskhenis-Ts’q’ali rivers and make a number of first ascents on neighboring peaks.[90]

Despite these expeditions, and a long list of other equally successful ascents in the Caucasus, the Geographic Society of Georgia was nonetheless in a weak position to defend itself from attacks by the OPTE. In February 1931, the founder of Georgian alpinism and indomitable gymnast Giorgi Nikoladze died suddenly of pneumonia at the age of forty-two. Nikoladze became sick while working at a ferromanganese factory in Tbilisi, where he was tasked with starting the factory’s smelting process late at night. When his ordered car did not arrive, he was forced to travel on foot four-and-a-half kilometers from his apartment to the factory in unusually cold weather. An icy wind ripped the roof off the factory, leaving Nikoladze further exposed to the elements. The following day he came down with a fever, but returned to the factory two more days before being diagnosed with pneumonia. A short while later, Nikoladze succumbed to the disease.[91] Nikoladze’s death was especially shocking considering his physical condition and young age, and meant that the Georgian alpinist community lost one of its most important and influential members.

In 1932, Georgian alpinism suffered another loss when Shota Mikeladze died tragically attempting a risky summit of Kazbegi. Mikeladze had been climbing with a less experienced partner, and the two barely averted a deadly fall when Mikeladze slipped from a cliff only to be caught by his rope. During the fall, however, Mikeladze broke his thumb, which greatly limited his climbing abilities and capacity to handle the rope effectively. On the descent, the duo should have reinforced the rope but Mikeladze decided to use the entire length to quicken the process due to his broken thumb. The decision proved deadly when Mikeladze slipped again. This time

---

[90] *Turist Aktivist*, no. 1 (1933): 44.
[91] Bogoliubov, *Nikoladze*, 157.

the rope did not hold – the single line of rope, unreinforced, stretched fully and snapped. Shota Mikeladze fell to his death on the Abano glacier, leaving his companion stranded on the mountain.[92]

Mikeladze's death was another blow to the Georgian alpinist community still recovering from the loss of Giorgi Nikoladze, Simon Japaridze, and Pimen Dvali in the previous years. Mikeladze was one of the Geographic Society's most experienced and promising members, who, at only 27, was already a key figure in the Geographic Society. His death was doubly painful, since at he was climbing Kazbegi in order to find a suitable place to build an alpine shelter that the OPTE planned to name after Simon Japaridze. Now both Georgian climbers were gone. Mikeladze's climbing partner, meanwhile, was only found when Iagor Kazalikashvili suspected that something was wrong after returning from the peak with a group of tourists and finding Mikeladze's tent empty. Failing to find traces of the climber on his descent and with no answer after shouting for Mikeladze, Kazalikashvili initiated a search with Gakha Tsiklauri and another climber. As Alesha Japaridze noted, this time, Kazalikashvili did not have to ask permission from the Geographic Society to go search for his friend, unlike in 1929 when he was denied permission to go to Svaneti to search for Simon Japaridze. Kazalikashvili's decision to immediately begin a search likely saved the life of Mikeladze's partner, who was found a short time later in a weakened state barely able to walk. Soon multiple groups arrived from Tbilisi and after a several days of searching, found Mikeladze's body. The group was tipped off to the location of the fallen Georgian when they stumbled upon a photograph of Giorgi Nikoladze, which Mikeladze had been carrying, yet another reminder of the enormous losses the Georgian

[92] A number of articles appeared on Mikeladze's death. See *Turist Zakavkaz'ia*, no. 5 (1932): 28-30; *Turist aktivist*, no 11-12 (1932): 40,43; *NSNM,* no. 7 (1933): 12-13.

alpinist community had faced in just three years. Mikeladze's body was found on an ice terrace 150 meters above the photo, at well over 4000 meters in height.[93]

Mikeladze's death was due to an unfortunate combination of faulty decision-making and sheer bad luck. The broken thumb and equipment failure were certainly outside of the climber's control, but Mikeladze had also chosen an especially difficult path to the peak with only one climbing partner who was also inexperienced in alpine ascents. The accident was another incident in a summer where several climbers died, prompting the OPTE to investigate the reasons for the deaths of so many climbers. In a telling article titled "Who is guilty" the OPTE laid the blame squarely on Mikeladze's own shoulders, arguing that he had "an extremely disdainful attitude towards observing the elementary rules of protection on difficult passages."[94] Leading Soviet climbers were just beginning to develop a set of safety standards and in the following years the OTPE and its successor institutions would use the failure to abide by such protocols as a way to impose centralized control over local mountaineering sections. In 1932 however, Mikeladze's death, combined with Simon Japaridze's deadly accident three years prior, was used as more evidence that the Geographic Society of Georgia was not committed to the principles of collectivism in mountaineering and was instead only interested in individual sport achievement.[95] This was a largely unfair assertion, considering how central the Geographic Society was to the early achievements of Soviet climbing and the attention that Georgian alpinists gave towards developing new routes and conducting research in the Kazbegi region in particular. But, as detailed above, such criticisms were not especially rare in the new world of

---

[93] *Turist aktivist,* no. 11-12 (1932): 40, 43; *Turist Zakavkaz'ia,* no. 5 (1932) 28-30.
[94] *NSNM,* no. 7 (1933): 12-13.
[95] *Turist Aktivist*, no. 11-12 (1932): 40,43. See especially the heading where the deaths of Japaridze and Mikeladze are grouped together.

proletarian climbing and were leveled equally at Russian climbers who challenged the OPTE's vision for the sport.

These criticisms built on an already established attack by the OPTE against the Geographic Society of Georgia. In February 1932, the journal of the ZakOPTE, the OPTE's regional South Caucasian branch based in Tbilisi, published a blistering critique against the Geographic Society by several tourist activists, which reflected the larger OPTE critique against the Geographic Society. Here, the authors argued that the deaths of Simon Japaridze and Pimen Dvali were not connected in any way to their research work, but were rather a result of their "aspiration towards a sport record." The article further contended that such an orientation defined the mountaineering work of the Geographical Society, arguing that its mountain-tourist section was "from the beginning until the end a sporting circle," which did not conduct any work popularizing alpinism among the working masses. The criticisms went further: the Geographic Society was indicted for publishing in the journal of the Royal Geographical Society, for conducting commercial activities by selling climbing equipment and running a photography studio, and for having its roots in the Menshevik gymnastics organization "shevardeni" founded by Nikoladze.[96] The Geographic Society was accused of conducting "bourgeois tourism under the mask of science," and taken to task for failure to publish any significant literature or develop new cadres of alpinists. And as the authors noted, the question about the liquidation of the mountain-tourist section of the Geographic Society was already raised during the organization of the Georgian council of the OPTE, yet for reasons unclear to them it was never fully carried out.[97]

---

[96] See chapter one for more on *shevardeni*. This criticism was a not so veiled attack on Nikoladze himself.
[97] *Turist Zakavkaz'ia,* no. 2 (1932): 10-12.

The critiques leveled against the Geographic Society reflected similar attacks on other tourists and organizations that failed to live up to OPTE's proletarian ideals. Interestingly, among the article's authors were two prominent Georgian alpinists, Levan Maruashvili and Sandro Gvalia, who were more closely connected to the activities of the OPTE.[98] Here it was clear that the changing organizational structure of Soviet tourism not only limited the resources of the Geographic Society and its authority to conduct alpinist activities but also helped to fragment what was once a unified alpinist community. The deaths of Simon Japaridze, Giorgi Nikoladze, and Shota Mikeladze likewise left the Geographic Society without three of its most active members who could ably defend the mountain-tourist section of the Society from the attacks of the OPTE. The loss of Nikoladze was particularly damaging, since he was the first to envision a nationally oriented mountaineering community under the auspices of the Geographic Society and the original leader of Georgian alpinism. The death of Pimen Dvali, as noted above, also left the Geographic Society without the support of an influential party member who might offer ideological cover for their work. In short, the Geographic Society was, at least in terms of its mountaineering activities, critically weakened at the very moment it came under attack from various OPTE organs.

Georgian alpinists fought back by offering their own criticisms of the OPTE, and especially its regional branches based in Tbilisi. Alexander Japaridze noted that he led eight OPTE members on an expedition to the Kazbegi region to research hydrological potential but of these only three reluctantly decided to make an attempt on the Kazbegi peak, a not so subtle indictment of the quality of OPTE tourists. Ultimately, even these three members were not able

[98] It's not clear why Gvalia and Maruashvili decided to attack the Geographic Society so strongly. Gvalia was an early proponent of skiing who wrote extensively in a number of OPTE journals and likely saw the OPTE as central to the development of the sport. Later in 1932, Maruashvili participated in an OPTE expedition to the Pamirs and was also more closely connected to the OPTE than many other Georgian alpinists.

begin the attempt due to the lack of equipment and were forced to return to Tbilisi. As Japaridze argued, "the absolute disinterest in alpine tourism and the full inattention to our undertaking from the side of all organizations of the OPTE made the difficulties of our expedition worse."[99] Japaridze went on to criticize the Tbilisi mountain council of the OPTE, which, as he claimed, offered "absolutely no kind of encouragement and no kind of sympathy" to the risky expedition. Left without any OPTE members to lead, Japaridze instead made a summit with Iagor Kazalikashvili and another local Georgian from the village of Stepantsminda. Faced with difficult weather conditions, the small group discovered a new and safer path to the peak that largely avoided any dangerous crevasses, which they named "the route in memory of Simon Japaridze."[100] The expedition suggested that the OPTE could not be counted on for material or organizational support, and that Georgian alpinists were better served relying on relationships formed before OPTE was created.

Even Sandro Gvalia, an early proponent of proletarian tourism, argued that the local branches of the OPTE in the South Caucasus had fully ignored the question of mountaineering. As he noted, although the Tbilisi mountain section of the OPTE could count over 100 members interested in becoming alpinists in 1931, the section was not able to carry out any alpinist trainings during the summer because of a lack of equipment and financial support. The greatest challenges to the implementation of proletarian tourism were ultimately not organizations like the Geographic Society of Georgia or bourgeois sympathies among Soviet tourists, but the endemic dysfunction and disorganization that plagued the OPTE itself.[101] As a result, the mountain-tourist section of the Geographic Society of Georgia was never fully liquidated. In 1932 the Geographic Society was forced to adopt a new charter that abolished the mountain-

---

[99] *Turist Zakavkaz'ia,* no. 1 (1931): 9-11.
[100] *Turist Zakavkaz'ia,* no. 1 (1931): 9-11.
[101] See Koenker, *Club Red,* 67-70.

tourist section and transferred all of its alpinists to the OPTE. But Georgian alpinists continued to participate in expeditions by both organizations and in 1934, despite the new charter, the Geographic Society created another section for alpinism and tourism.[102] Despite the immense structural and ideological upheaval of the early 1930s, the Geographic Society remained surprisingly resilient in the face of these larger changes and its leaders continued to articulate a vision for an independent Georgian climbing community.[103]

The First Soviet Ascent on Ushba

Georgian alpinists may have divided their institutional loyalties between the OPTE and the Geographic Society but they remained united in the next goal of Georgian alpinism – an accent on the crown jewel of the Caucasus, Ushba. Alexander Japaridze and Iagor Kazalikashvili had led a nearly successful attempt on the dangerous peak in 1930, but reached an impasse at 4000 meters and their expedition was forced to return to Tbilisi after running out of time and resources. The attempt suggested that, with better planning and more support, a successful summit was certainly within the reach of the best Georgian climbers. Ushba was attractive not just because of its stunning beauty and many technical challenges; the mountain was also one of the few major peaks that had yet to be taken by a Soviet expedition, a testament to its incredible difficulty. Since the first ascent in 1888, only five expeditions had reached the peak, all led by western European alpinists. In 1929 a Soviet climber, the renowned Russian alpinist Vasili Semenovski, finally reached the peak as a member of a German expedition, but Soviet alpinists

---

[102] Dav. Dondua, "Deiatel'nost' geograficheskogo obshchestva GSSR za vremia s 1924 po 1945 god.," in *saqartvelos ssr geografiuli sazogadoebis moambe,* no. 2 (1946): 64-65.

[103] See for Instance, Aslanishvili, *Dostizhenia sovetskogo al'pinizma*. Aslanishvili was the leader of the recreated section of alpinism and tourism within the Geographic Society of Georgia in 1935.

had failed to prove that they could reach the peak under their own leadership.[104] Climbing the mountain was so difficult that Georgian alpinists estimated for every one successful summit on Ushba, there were eight failed attempts, which often ended in death or serious injury.[105] In 1932, four Austrian alpinists died while climbing around Ushba, and, despite an intensive search, their bodies were never found.[106] As Alexander Japaridze noted, "the glaciers of Ushba's slopes became their grave," a stark reminder of the isolation and danger the mountain and its environs presented to climbers.[107] A successful summit on Ushba required excellent mountaineering skills, the best equipment, careful preparation, and good weather, but even if everything went in the climber's favor, the risk of death was always high.[108]

Despite the risks, or perhaps because of them, Georgian alpinists remained committed to a summit on the dangerous peak. In the early 1930s, Georgian climbers began to historicize the development of an independent "alpinist movement" in Georgia. As they argued, Georgian alpinism began with Giorgi Nikoladze's first summit on Kazbegi in 1923, after which followed an increasingly well defined list of successful ascents and a number of important tragedies. Key dates like the 1925 ascent on Elbrus or the 1930 expedition to Tetnuldi were now described as part of an official history of Georgian climbing. In 1933 Georgian climbers wanted to memorialize the ten-year anniversary of the movement with an ascent on Ushba, which would illustrate and celebrate the growth of climbing in the republic over the past decade. Normally, such an expedition would be organized and funded through the Geographic Society, but ongoing

---

[104] See Alexander Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby* (Moscow, 1940), 9-17; I. Aslanishvili "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," in *ushba*, no. 1 (October 1934): 8-11.
[105] I. Aslanishvili, "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," 21.
[106] Ibid, 11; *NSNM* no. 7 (1933): 12-13.
[107] See Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby*, 15.
[108] This is also true today, but was especially true in the early 1930s when the quality of equipment and weather forecasting was much lower.

pressure on the Society forced Georgians to work with the GruzOPTE, the Georgian representative of the OPTE based in Tbilisi.

In 1933, Georgian alpinists submitted a plan for a summit on the Ushba peak to the GruzOPTE, but the plan was not accepted due to “material and organizational” difficulties.[109] It is not clear from the sources why exactly the 1933 plan was rejected but it seems likely that the GruzOPTE was simply not prepared or able to fund and support such a large expedition, especially given the widespread dysfunction of OPTE institutions in the Caucasus. Undeterred, Georgian alpinists officially formed an “Ushba Committee” later that year to further research the possibility of an ascent on the mountain. In 1934, the Ushba Committee submitted a new plan that was finally accepted by the GruzOPTE, which released 8000 rubles for the planned expedition.[110]

The approval represented a major victory for Georgian alpinists, but, as Alexander Japaridze noted, the sum was simply not enough to support in-depth scientific research on the mountain, one of the major goals on the Ushba Committee. The lack of funds and especially the inability of Georgian climbers to receive more time off from work further limited the opportunities to scout new routes to the peak and forced expedition members to rely extensively on the accounts of foreign alpinists.[111] The failure to fully fund the expedition illustrated the lack of resources available to local branches of the OPTE and the difficulty of organizing expeditions on a local level. Nonetheless, the 1934 expedition was a large undertaking that involved nearly all of the best Georgian alpinists. Alexander Japaridze served as the leader of the expedition, which reflected his increasingly important role in the Georgian alpinist community. Japaridze’s deputy was Sandro Gvalia, who was quickly becoming one of the leading proponents of skiing in

---

[109] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby*, 27-28.
[110] Ibid, 28; Aslanishvili, “ushbis mts’vervalisak’en,” 20-21.
[111] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 42-43; Aslanishvili, “ushbis mts’vervalisak’en,” 8-12.

the Soviet Union. Other participants included familiar names like Alexandra Japaridze, Iagor Kazalikashvili, Mikel Pataridze, Levan Maruashvili and Soso Aslanishvili.

Although the expedition was approved and financed by the GruzOPTE, it continued to follow many of the practices developed by the Geographic Society in the previous years. The summit on Ushba was envisioned as a celebration of a specifically national community of climbers and even OPTE enthusiasts like Sandro Gvalia argued that expedition was organized to mark the history of Georgian climbing that began in 1923.[112] The expedition relied heavily on the expertise of Kazalikashvili, who had now been to the Kazbegi peak twenty-four times. In a letter to Sandro Gvalia, Alexander Japaridze demanded that all decisions by Gvalia be "personally approved by Iagor Kazalikashvili," a requirement that demonstrated the deep level of respect Georgian alpinists had for Kazalikashvili's climbing abilities.[113] And from the beginning, expedition leaders argued for the inclusion of a local Svan participant and identified a number of possible candidates. Among their choices were Goji Zurebiani, who was a member of the first attempt on Tetnuldi in 1930, and Almatskir Kvitsiani, who had participated in the attempt on Ushba during the same year. Ultimately, the Ushba Committee decided to include Gio Niguriani, who was widely known for his skills climbing dangerous cliffs. Niguriani had participated in the 1929 search for Pimen Dvali as well as the 1933 joint expedition to Svaneti organized by the Geographic Society and the GruzOPTE.[114] By 1934, Georgian climbers had no shortage of contacts in the region, a result of their decision to consistently include Svan hunters on their expeditions. And as Soso Aslanishvili made clear, Niguriani was not included as a guide, but "as

[112] Aslanishvili, "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," 19.
[113] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 34.
[114] Ibid, 30.

a genuine member of the expedition," a statement that illustrated the fact that Georgian climbers saw their local counterparts not as inferiors, but as equals.[115]

Niguriani's participation was in doubt, however, after he was delayed in getting to the base camp. The expedition members soon lost hope that Niguriani would arrive in time, but just as they were gathering their equipment to leave to the next camp the Svan hunter appeared in the distance. Both Mikel Pataridze and Alexander Japaridze noted how the arrival of Niguriani encouraged everyone and made them even more convinced of a victory on Ushba. Pataridze compared Niguriani's "strapping" appearance to that of the *Knight in the Panther's Skin*, a reference to Shota Rustaveli's epic medieval poem that is again suggestive of how deeply Georgian climbers respected the abilities of local hunters.[116] The expedition decided that Pataridze would remain below at the base camp, while a six-person group consisting of Alexander and Alexandra Japaridze, Kazalikashvili, Niguriani, Maruashvili, and Gvalia would make an attempt on the peak from an upper camp. The group set out from the base camp on August 27th, 1934, exactly five years after Pimen Dvali and Simon Japaridze perished on Tetnuldi, a fact that did not go unnoted by the expedition.[117]

Immediately, the group faced serious challenges. Two of the four Svan porters they hired refused to continue the dangerous path to the upper camp, which forced the members of the expedition to take on additional weight while traversing steep cliffs and slowed their progress. At the upper camp, Levan Maruashvili came down with a high fever, and was unable to participate in the final "storm" of the peak. Sandro Gvalia likewise refused to attempt an ascent, citing his intense fatigue from seven months of work at the meteorological observatory in Kazbegi, where he regularly stayed at 4000 meters in winter conditions. Gvalia's refusal was a shock to the

[115] Aslanishvili, "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," 15.
[116] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 43; Aslanishvili, "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," 27.
[117] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 56.

group since he had been one of the main organizers of expedition and had made it to the upper camp without any sign of physical weakness. Despite the group's protestations, Gvalia argued that he did not want to slow down the other members during their attempt or repeat the "reckless mistakes" of other expeditions that pushed onwards when they should have yielded.[118] It is clear here that the OPTE's recent focus on safety, and specifically on the individual responsibility of Soviet alpinists to make conscious decisions to avoid accidents, heavily influenced Gvalia's refusal. Maruashvili and Gvalia remained at the upper camp, and the remaining four climbers prepared themselves for an attempt on the peak.

The final climb from the base camp at around 4000 meters until the 4700-meter southern peak presented challenges more difficult than anything the alpinists had faced before. The group wrapped their way around the mountain from the upper camp until the southern peak's western wall before they ran out of daylight. The four climbers were forced to spend the night on the cliffs, where they wedged themselves into separate crevices in the rocks to sleep. Alexander Japaridze noted how his space was so small that he was not able to even turn from side to side, although Kazalikashvili and Niguriani found a spot barely large enough for two people.[119] The next day the group struggled to find a way to the peak and made only minor progress, gaining just 200 meters in elevation. Again they were forced to spend the night exposed on the rocks. Kazalikashvili and Niguriani decided to descend to their previous space 200 meters below, which offered greater protection from the cold. But Alexandra Japaridze refused to descend, arguing that it was better to conserve energy for an attempt the next morning. As Alexander Japaridze noted, the difficulties that lay ahead could cause any of them to waiver in their commitment to the ascent, but Alexandra's uncompromising decision to stay served as a "pledge" that the other

---

[118] Aslanishvili, "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," 29-30; Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 61.
[119] Ibid*,* 69-71.

three needed to return and make an attempt.[120] In this way, Alexandra Japaridze ensured the group would continue the ascent despite growing doubts that it was possible.

The next day the group continued their ascent. Soon, they faced a smooth cliff face ten meters in height that they proved impossible to circumnavigate. The climbers were at an impasse until the gifted Niguriani attempted the wall barefoot, which gave him just enough traction to climb several meters and drive in an anchor. As Alexander Japaridze recalled, Niguriani solved "one of the most difficult questions" of the ascent.[121] The climbers soon continued their way up the mountain increasingly assured of their victory. Despite the appearance of storm clouds, the weather held out and at 3:30 in the afternoon on August 31st, after several days of challenging climbing and several nights spent above 4000 meters, the alpinists reached the southern peak of Ushba.[122] In doing so they became the first Soviet expedition to reach the dangerous peak, an impressive accomplishment that marked the expedition as one of the most important alpinist events that year.

Georgian alpinists positioned their successful expedition as part of a larger Soviet project in upper Svaneti. After reaching the peak, the group waited until dark before lighting sparklers to signal to the villages below that it was indeed possible for humans to step foot on the summit and that spirits did not inhabit the mountaintop, an extension of the anti-religious work Alexander Japaridze began in 1930 with the ascent on Tetnuldi.[123] Key expedition members also argued the ascent on Ushba was part of a growing list of important Soviet achievements in the region including the opening of the first print house in Mestia and publication of the newspaper "New

---

[120] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 78.
[121] Ibid, 81. It is worth noting here how especially daring Niguriani's climbing was. From Japaridze's description, Niguriani was likely four to five meters high above a thin ledge, climbing without shoes in alpine conditions. Niguriani's ingenious solution and Alexandra Japaridze's insistent refusal to descend were cited by Miron Khergiani in the post-war period, illustrating the powerful memory of past climbs. See Khergiani, *Tigr Skal,* 77-87.
[122] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 84.
[123] The expedition used fire and sparklers extensively as a way to signal between the various camps. See for instance: Aslanishvili, "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," 35-36; Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 71 (footnote 1), 89-91.

Svaneti," the first flight through region, and the creation of regular air communication between Mestia and Tbilisi.[124] Expedition members worked closely with the Svaneti Regional Executive Committee and published their own bulletin about the successful summit, where they argued in Stalinist language that the successful expedition would help Soviet alpinists "catch up and overtake" the work of bourgeois alpinists in the west.[125] The integral participation of Alexandra Japaridze, the first woman to summit Ushba, likewise provided evidence that Georgian alpinists were committed to women's participation, a lofty and almost entirely unfulfilled goal of the OPTE.[126]

All of this should have meant that the expedition was widely praised by the OPTE. In fact, the exact opposite happened. In 1934, the OPTE created the title "Master of Alpinism" to award to the best Soviet alpinists, another key step in the centralization of the sport. The successful ascent on Ushba was recognized as one of the most important accomplishments of Soviet alpinism that year and immediately made Alexander Japaridze, Alexandra Japaridze, Iagor Kazalikashvili and Gio Niguriani candidates for the title. The OPTE, however, denied the four climbers the award until they provided materials proving their "active social work on alpinism in the system of the OPTE," clear retaliation for their continued work with the Geographic Society. The Georgian climbers were instead awarded a special pin, an insulting consolation considering the difficulty of their successful ascent. The award was not just symbolic either – in the coming years, failure to attain the title of master, or loss of that title, could severely limit the career of even a talented and accomplished alpinist. As if to drive the point home even more profoundly, Sandro Gvalia, who had not reached the Ushba peak but who was

[124] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 89-90,98-101. Aslanishvili, "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," 2-4. The Georgian climbers observed the first flight in Svaneti from Ushba. The plane itself was around 500-600 meters lower than them. See Alexander Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 58.
[125] *Izvestiia Ushby,* no 2 (1934), cited in Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 97.
[126] *NSNM,* no. 5 (1935): 3-4. The OPTE noted that out of a few thousand members, only 300 were women.

much more involved in promoting alpinism and skiing within the OPTE, was awarded the title of Master of Alpinism by the OPTE. The message was clear – work for the OPTE or suffer the consequences.[127]

The refusal to grant the titles illustrated both the ongoing centralization of the sport and the OPTE's own internal dysfunction. Georgian alpinists *had* worked closely with the GruzOPTE in Tbilisi to organize and fund their expedition. And yet, it is not clear that the GruzOPTE truly represented the larger interests of the central OPTE in Moscow. In 1934 the chairman of the mountain section of the GruzOPTE was Soso Aslanishvili, one of the original leaders of the Geographic Society and a regular participant on its many expeditions.[128] Although Aslanishvili framed the Ushba expedition in the language of proletarian tourism, he was clearly more invested in the development of an independent mountaineering community in Georgia as first articulated by the Geographic Society. There are few sources to understand the makeup of the GruzOPTE in 1934, but it seems that Georgian alpinists simply leveraged the resources of the GruzOPTE to conduct an expedition that more closely resembled the nationally oriented goals of the Geographic Society. Georgian alpinists like Aslanishvili or Alexander Japaridze proved adept at changing their institutional affiliations when necessary, illustrating both the continued independence of the Georgian alpinist movement and the failure of the OPTE to effectively maintain control of its local branches.

Despite the weakness of the OPTE in the periphery, the refusal to grant Master of Alpinism titles marked the first direct conflict between Georgian alpinists and those in charge of

---

[127] Central State Archive of St. Petersburg (TsGA SPb), f. 4410 op. 1. d. 1078 l. 1-2ob. See also Eva Maurer, *Wege zum Pik Stalin,* 304.

[128] Japaridze, *Shturm Ushby,* 28. In 1934, Aslanishvili gave a report on the history of Georgian alpinism at the all-union meeting of alpinists in Moscow, which published in Tbilisi by the Geographic Society of Georgia in 1935. It is clear that he continued to be involved with the Geographic Society while working with the GruzOPTE. See Aslanishvili, *Dostizheniia sovetskogo al'pinizma v Gruzii*.

the sport in Moscow. At the heart of this conflict were questions about the limits of centralized control and the proper role of Soviet alpinism in the mountainous periphery. By refusing to grant the titles the head of the OPTE Nikolai Krylenko, a well-known alpinist himself, made clear that failure to work closely with the OPTE would not go unpunished. The Ushba expedition was hardly noted in the pages of *On land and on sea*, and when an article did appear it was a dry report written by Levan Maruashvili, not Alexander Japaridze who had led the successful summit.[129] The archival record of OPTE meetings in 1934 also suggests that the decision to award Master of Alpinism titles was made without any input from local OPTE branches. Although Alexander Japaridze was invited to present a report on the Ushba expedition at a meeting of alpinists in Moscow, no Georgian alpinist took part in the discussion about awarding the first master of alpinism titles.[130] The tensions between the OPTE and Georgian alpinists that emerged in 1934 illustrated some of the ways that, from its initial organization, Soviet alpinism ironically mirrored the deeply unequal relationship between center and periphery that defined the sport in the west, despite articulating a radically different proletarian vision of climbing.

Krylenko's attempt to impose control over Georgian alpinists also highlighted two differing visions of alpinism in the mountainous periphery. Since 1923 Georgian alpinists repeatedly sought out local hunters and included them as equal partners on their expeditions. The Georgian mountaineering community explicitly rejected larger discourses of backwardness when talking about their regional counterparts and instead articulated a desire to cultivate climbing communities in the mountainous regions of the republic. By 1934 there was a burgeoning alpinist community in Svaneti as a result of these efforts. This vision however, clashed with the OPTE's larger goal for alpinists to bring Soviet modernity to the periphery. As Krylenko himself

[129] *NSNM* no. 21 (1934): 26.
[130] TsGA SPb f. 4410 op. 1. d. 1078 l. 1-2ob, 18-19.

argued, "(o)ur alpinists carry culture, political enlightenment to the low-cultured population of the outskirts of the Union."[131] In principle, this meant that Soviet alpinists were supposed to offer technical assistance to lesser-developed regions while respecting the local population, but in practice alpinists often could not escape the idea that the mountainous peoples they encountered were inherently "low-cultured" or backward.[132] This tendency to see themselves as more advanced helped to reinforce a form of Russian chauvinism that, despite relying on Marxist categories, was often reminiscent of nineteenth century imaginations of the Caucasus and Caucasians. In the following years, these tensions would only escalate as Georgian alpinists bristled at attempts to impose control over their alpinist activities and grew frustrated with the lack of attention towards developing alpinism among mountainous populations from the institutions of the sport based in Moscow. In 1934, Georgian climbers remained central actors in the wider world of Soviet alpinism and tourism, but it was increasingly clear that their nationally oriented vision of mountaineering and insistence on local participation was beginning to clash in fundamental and damaging ways with the goals of the sport as articulated in Moscow.

[131] *NSNM* no. 21 (1934): 4.
[132] For an example of how tourists were supposed to behave, see: *NSNM* no. 5 (1933): 13. The actions of Russian tourists in the Caucasus are explored further in chapter four.

CHAPTER 4: CONTESTED AUTHORITY: THE GEORGIAN ALPINE CLUB AND THE REORGANIZATION OF SOVIET ALPINISM FROM REPRESSION TO WAR

Introduction

In the early 1930s, the Geographic Society of Georgia came under attack from the Society for Proletarian Tourism and Excursions (OTPE) for the failure of Georgian alpinists to live up to the ideals of Soviet touring. In particular, the OPTE criticized the Geographic Society for its lack of attention to developing alpinism among workers, its focus on individual sport achievements, and suspect ideological connections to the Royal Geographical Society in London.[1] Key Georgian alpinists like Alexander Japaridze launched their own attacks against the OPTE, but ultimately Georgian alpinists were forced to work more closely with both the central OPTE and local OPTE branches in Tbilisi and Kutaisi. And yet, even as the work of the Geographic Society was curtailed and the Georgian climbing community became more fragmented in its institutional loyalties, Georgian alpinists remained committed to the vision of a nationally defined mountaineering community that was first articulated by the founders of the Geographic Society like Giorgi Nikoladze.

This chapter examines the continuation of conflict between the Georgian climbers and the Soviet center after the collapse of the OPTE in 1936. In the institutional reorganization that followed, Georgian alpinists created their own alpine club, a unique arrangement that reproduced the independence of the Geographic Society in a new form. But despite new institutional bodies, changing leadership, and the evolving goals of Soviet climbing, conflict between Georgian alpinists and the central institutions of the sport continued to escalate in ways that were not dissimilar from the previous years. As I illustrate, the newly formed All-Union Section of

[1] See chapter three.

Alpinism (Vsesoiuznaia sektsiia al'pinizma, hereafter VSA) begin to assert its right as the sole authority to lead all alpinist activities in the Soviet Union through a renewed focus on safety and stricter forms of route approval. This increasing centralization of control directly challenged the work of Georgian alpinists, whose goals remained uniquely national and who insisted on their own right to lead alpinism in the Georgian SSR free from interference from Moscow. While Georgian climbers managed to escape the worst excesses of political violence in the late 1930s, arguably the result of their peripheral status within alpinist organizations in Moscow, they consistently struggled to maintain their independence from an increasingly assertive leadership within the VSA. By the end of the war, the relationship between the Georgian Alpine Club and the VSA had reached a breaking point, the result of two tragic expeditions to Ushba led by Alexander Japaridze. As I argue, examining these expeditions from the perspective of the periphery illustrates how the VSA used often-dubious arguments about safety standards and the necessity of bureaucratic approval as a means to control republican level institutions that suggests some of the limitations of the larger project of Soviet national development and anti-imperialism.

New Institutions, Old Conflicts: Georgian Climbing after the OPTE

The OPTE had struggled since its foundation to create a well functioning tourist organization. Part of the problem, as Diane Koenker has shown, was that the OPTE received little support from both Komsomol and the trade unions, and as a result proletarian tourism failed to develop into a mass movement. The OPTE's problems were likewise complicated by underfunding, financial and organizational mismanagement, and endemically poor tourist facilities. In April 1936, the Soviet Central Executive Committee shuttered the OPTE and

transferred its responsibilities and property to the Central Trade Union Council, which shared some of its authority for leading tourist activities with the All-Union Council for Physical Culture.[2] The institutional foe of Georgian alpinists and the Geographic Society of Georgia was gone after just six short years, defeated by its own mismanagement.

The collapse of the OPTE opened up a space for Georgian alpinists to create their own alpinist organization in 1936. Instead of reviving the mountain section of the Geographic Society of Georgia, alpinist organizers chose instead to create their own alpinist club, the Georgian Alpine Club, based in Tbilisi. The Club was formed under the Georgian Committee for Physical Culture and Sport and at the time stood out for its unique organizational arrangement and relative independence from central institutions.[3] Although the Georgian Committee for Physical Culture was technically under the control of the All-Union Committee, it is clear that it had a significant degree of independence to organize physical culture within the republic without outside interference. Georgian alpinist organizers now had official state support for their activities, at least on a republican level. In organizing the Alpine Club this way, leading Georgian alpinists sidestepped ideological questions about the potentially bourgeois nature of the Geographic Society, while ensuring a much larger degree of autonomy than they had previously experienced under the OPTE.[4]

The formation of the Georgian Alpine Club was made possible by the larger reorganization of alpinist activities as a result of the OPTE's collapse. Soviet alpinism would now be led by the newly created All Union Section of Alpinism (VSA) established as part of the

---

[2] Koenker, *Club Red,* 64-70.

[3] There were other alpine clubs at the time, most notably the Kabardino-Balkar Club of Alpinists located in Nalchik, but none that shared the national history of climbing like the Georgian Alpine Club. See *NSNM* no. 4 (1938): 2.

[4] The Club's name has slightly different translations in Russian and Georgian. I have used the Russian translation here as it fits better into English (Gruzinskii Al'piiskii Klub). The Georgian translation would be the Alpine Club of Georgia (saqartvelos alp'uri k'lubi). In the following sections I often shorten the club's name to the Georgian AlpClub, which was common usage at the time.

All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sport. The VSA was created as the leading alpinist organization in the Soviet Union, tasked with "general instruction and control over the work in alpinism of all organizations and institutions."[5] Alpinist activities would be largely funded by All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (Vsesoiuznyi tsentralnyi sovet professionalnykh soiuzov, hereafter VTsSPS) with individual alpinist sections organized in the various Voluntary Sport Societies (Dobrovol'nye sportivnye obshchestva, hereafter DSO) of different trade unions.[6] A number of other administrative bodies were also created as a result of the reorganization, including the Tourist-Excursion Bureau (TEU). Formed by the Council of Trade Unions in 1936, the TEU was supposed to manage major tourist itineraries and further develop mass tourism by constructing tourist houses and camps, publishing tourist literature, and organizing conferences and lectures on key subjects, among other duties.[7] Within the TEU were also a number of regional bodies, such as the newly formed Bureau of Caucasian Itineraries (UKM), which was created to address these questions specifically in the Caucasus.

This large-scale reorganization of Soviet tourism unsurprisingly created conflict between the new administrative bodies, especially those connected to alpinism. As Eva Maurer has argued, "(n)ot only did this division of responsibilities lead to frequent friction, but the different aspects of Soviet al'pinizm – tourism, leisure, and sports – reflected in this arrangement were to remain in an often disputed balance."[8] Soviet alpinism was ostensibly led by the VSA within the Committee for Physical Culture, but most of the financing and material support for alpinist activities came from the Council of Trade Unions and their Voluntary Sport Societies (DSO).

---

[5] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 25 l. 2.
[6] Eva Maurer "*Al'pinizm* as mass sport," 148-150.
[7] GARF f. 9520 op. 1 d. 8 ll. 1-2, 9.
[8] See Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as mass sport," 148.

Although the VSA claimed the ability to regulate all alpinist activities, it was initially unclear how much power its leaders really had.

Nowhere were these conflicting responsibilities more apparent than in Georgia. Leading Georgian alpinists argued that the newly formed Alpine Club had a wide degree of authority, at least within the Georgian SSR. As Sandro Gvalia noted during a 1937 meeting of the UKM, "the Alpine club implements ideological and practical leadership, at the same time plans and controls all alpine activities on the territory of Georgia." As a result, Gvalia, one of the key organizers of the Georgian Alpine Club, encouraged the staff of the UKM to help the young AlpClub by sharing access to the tourist houses and mountaineering camps which the UKM controlled, noting that such important resources "should be closely connected with alpinist organizations."[9] Here there was an inherent contradiction. The Georgian Alpine Club claimed the authority to lead all alpinist activities within Georgia, but it required the use of camps controlled by the UKM to accomplish its goals. At the same time, the AlpClub had no authority over the UKM and no ability to force individual trade unions to share the camps they constructed within Georgia. Furthermore, the AlpClub had no real authority to regulate the alpinist activities of the trade union's own DSOs which used those camps. The situation was ripe for conflict.

More crucially, Gvalia's extensive vision for the AlpClub – a vision shared by leading Georgian alpinists – had the potential to create significant conflict with the VSA. The VSA was created to be the highest authority on alpinist matters, and its organizational structure reflected many of the same centralizing impulses of the OTPE. Although the VSA itself noted the importance of including leading alpinists from the periphery, its original formation was overwhelming comprised of alpinists from Moscow and Petersburg.[10] To some degree this

[9] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 4 p. 84-85.
[10] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 25 ll. 40a/b.

represented the logistical difficulty of bringing alpinists to Moscow, but it also reaffirmed the institution as one better able to represent the interests of alpinists from the center and not those from the mountainous republics. And in even more direct ways, there were continuities between the VSA and its predecessor. The VSA's first chairman was Nikolai Krylenko, the former head of the OPTE and personal adversary of Georgian alpinists. Like in previous years, Georgian alpinists claimed the right to organize their activities within Georgia free from interference, but were faced with a central institution which challenged that right.

Unsurprisingly, these institutional contradictions and overlapping responsibilities created immediate conflict between the VSA and Georgian alpinists. In 1937 Sandro Gvalia organized an "al'piniada" for a large group of Svans to summit the Tetnuldi peak in Upper Svaneti. The al'piniada (hereafter alpiniada) had emerged earlier in the 1930s as a distinctly Soviet method for conducting ascents with a large number of participants and was one of the preferred means for introducing those with little or no experience in the mountains to alpinist techniques. Alpiniada events generally ranged anywhere from several dozen participants to several hundred, and usually included training sessions combined with a guided ascent on a prominent peak. Gvalia's ultimately successful alpiniada saw 182 Svans reach the Tetnuldi peak over several days in difficult weather conditions, an impressive achievement considering the difficulty of the ascent.[11] As *On land and on sea* noted, "this figure significantly exceeds the total number of alpinists who climbed Tetnul'd in 50 years since the first ascent."[12]

Gvalia argued that the Svaneti alpiniada would not just help develop alpinism in the region, but would also serve as an effective means of antireligious agitation since many Svan

---

[11] The first Soviet ascent on Tetnuldi was made only in 1930 by Alexander Japaridze, and the mountain remained a difficult and often dangerous ascent. Organizing 182 largely inexperienced participants to safely reach the peak was certainly a notable accomplishment. For more on Japaridze's ascent on Tetnuldi, see chapter three. For details of the 1937 ascent, see NSNM no. 10 (1937): 32; NSNM no. 12 (1937): 24; K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze*, 320.
[12] *NSNM* no. 12 (1937): 24.

inhabitants believed that there was a spirit residing on the mountain's peak who would strike down any aspiring alpinist. As noted in chapter three, it is impossible to know how strongly Svans believed in the idea of a spiritual figure sitting on the peak of the mountain, although if such beliefs did exist they do not seem to have been a real deterrent to developing alpinism in the region. What is clear is that, at least in the 1930s, Georgian alpinists from Tbilisi legitimated their climbs on Tetnuldi through the language of antireligious agitation. In doing so, they argued that their work popularizing alpinism among local inhabitants supported larger Soviet goals in Svaneti. Whether this was a deeply held belief in the need for such agitation or an attempt to make their work in the region better reflect larger Soviet discourses is unclear. But the ascent, which mirrored the practices of other Soviet alpiniadas and which saw the participants leave a bust of Stalin on the peak, offered no suggestion of ideological or organizational impropriety.

Despite this, the alpiniada was condemned by Krylenko, who ordered Gvalia to stop the event. As Gvalia angrily explained at a 1938 meeting of UKM, Krylenko sent a telegram to him forbidding the climb, threatening that if he (Gvalia) conducted the alpiniada, Krylenko would consider it a crime. Krylenko further contended that if there were any casualties during the event, he would take Gvalia to court – an especially dangerous situation in 1937 considering that Krylenko was also the Commissar of Justice and held considerable power at the highest levels of the Soviet Union. Gvalia received Krylenko's telegram only on the Tetnuldi peak while the alpiniada was already in progress, brought to him by one of the many groups storming the mountain, and he subsequently ignored Krylenko's threats. As he later explained, the alpiniada was an important event that had "enormous meaning" for the region: "In this alpiniada 182 Svans climbed Tetnul'd. This is an unheard of and unseen thing. Svans never ascended their own

peak, and we did this and when these 182 people descended to their village… all of Svanetiia stood on its feet."[13]

Gvalia's refusal to heed Krylenko's order was not just based on his personal belief in the importance of the alpiniada. As Gvalia noted, he also possessed a decree (postanovlenie) from the Council of People's Commissars of Georgia (Sovnarkom) that gave him permission to conduct the alpiniada. Furthermore, the alpiniada was organized jointly by the Georgian Alpine Club and the Georgian Committee for Physical Culture and Sport and as a result was officially sanctioned by Georgian authorities. At the heart of this conflict was a question of authority – did Krylenko, as head of the VSA, have the right to forbid the AlpClub from conducting an alpinist activity in Georgia that had already been approved by Georgian officials? In this case, the answer was no. Gvalia seems to have suffered no consequences for his refusal to heed Krylenko's telegram, and the successful alpiniada was praised on the pages of *On land and on sea* "as yet another victory of Soviet alpinism."[14] The tensions between Krylenko and Gvalia were clearly personal, but conflict between the VSA and the Georgian alpinists would continue in the following years even after Krylenko was repressed and removed from the organization. Despite the reorganization of Soviet alpinism, questions over the limits of centralized power and the relative independence of Georgian alpinist organizations remained. In this way, the creation of the VSA did little to change the power dynamic between Georgian climbers and the center that existed under the OPTE.

Relations between Georgian climbers and the newly created TEU and its Caucasian branch the UKM were not much better. In the very same meeting where Gvalia pushed back against Krylenko's interference, the Georgian Alpine Club was accused of organizational

---

[13] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 91.
[14] NSNM no. 12 (1937): 24.

dysfunction rife with "constant arguments" by one of the UKM's leaders, Odishvili (first name unknown). When the AlpClub's representative responded that there was no such dysfunction and that the arguments were a natural result of conducting alpinist work, Odishvili accused the AlpClub of having done almost nothing since its foundation.[15] The criticism upset the AlpClub's representatives. Later that session, Gvalia reaffirmed that there was no dysfunction and that the question "what did you do?" should be turned around on the UKM itself, not so subtly intimating that the UKM had accomplished nothing since its own foundation. Instead, Gvalia highlighted the "grandiose" alpiniadas the AlpClub conducted in Khevi and Svaneti, their successful search for molybdenum (a necessary element for many steel alloys and required by Soviet industry), and their constant study of the peaks and valleys of the Caucasus ("we know the Caucasus like our own five fingers"), all with the support of only one paid position.[16] The next day Alexander Japaridze continued this criticism: "We are not receiving any kind of help not only from the TEU, but also from the UKM. They robbed from us everything that we arranged… I confirm that in the last year we received no kind of help and all the same we gave the country 50 alpinists. This we did with our own strength."[17]

Part of the problem was that the Georgian Alpine Club did not easily fit into the new institutional arrangement since it was not connected to any trade union. It seems that the AlpClub was even forced to receive approval from the All Union Council of Trade Unions just to have a representative sit in on the meeting.[18] And basic questions around payment for services remained unsolved. Leaders of the AlpClub wanted to provide their own qualified alpinists to the UKM's alpinist camps – an arrangement that would benefit both the AlpClub and the UKM – but

[15] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 80. The exact language used for this organizational dysfunction was "chekharda" (literally "leapfrog"), meaning constant turnover and confusion.
[16] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 90-91.
[17] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 124-125.
[18] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 124.

questions regarding food and stipends had yet to be worked out. As Japaridze noted, it was hard to recruit people to work in the camps if the working conditions were not clear, a situation Odishvili also lamented.[19] Japaridze likewise cited difficulties procuring equipment and transport, and the need for more "cultured" workers within the UKM. In one example, an UKM transport worker removed the good tires on the vehicle the AlpClub was using and replaced them with bad ones, delaying the climbers for several days.[20] Such complaints were common at the time, and reflected continued disorganization and corruption on the ground despite the restructuring of tourist work. But the exact relationship between the UKM and AlpClub was far from ironed out, causing frustrations on both sides. And although the AlpClub was formed with support from the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture and Sport, it is clear that at this point, procuring funding and equipment for their activities was a constant problem forcing the Club to rely on the UKM's resources.

Despite the tensions, Japaridze noted that the situation had improved under the new leadership and specifically under Odishvili. Japaridze contended that the AlpClub's problems lay with the old leadership, referring to Nikolai Krylenko and other key alpinist organizers who by now had been arrested in the purges – a common source of blame at the meeting.[21] Instead, Japaridze highlighted the important aid that the AlpClub had received from UKM workers in Svaneti, positively concluding that the AlpClub's work with the new leadership "gives us hope that something will be done."[22] Nonetheless, Japaridze had sharp words for the larger failure of the TEU to provide adequate funding for local initiatives. "We have large aspirations, but no possibility to expand work because of the centralization of funds. All the millions of rubles,

---

[19] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 140.
[20] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 126.
[21] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 125 In the closing remarks, Odishvili criticized the tendency to blame everything on Krylenko. See sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 142. I explore the purges in more detail below.
[22] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 125.

concentrated in Moscow and if they do not give the possibility to the local places to expand work then we are not able to do anything."[23] Despite the reorganization, tourist initiatives in the periphery were still left underfunded.[24] Japaridze was not the only one to make this critique. The UKM's own procurement agent argued that, "We all depend on Moscow. As long as Moscow does not send us the resources (fondy), we are not able to do anything."[25]

Japaridze's critique highlighted a larger struggle over the slow development of "local tourism" in Georgia, and ultimately throughout the Soviet Union. Georgian alpinists and tourist organizers hoped to expand tourism into a number of regions so far ignored by tourist institutions as part of their larger vision to develop alpinism for the local inhabitants of mountainous areas. But the UKM had so far failed to create new itineraries, save for a recently formed route to Gori in celebration of Stalin's birthplace. Gvalia lamented the lack of maps and tourist literature, concluding, "I am not able to say, that local tourism exists."[26] Gvalia's critiques were echoed by the director of the Borjomi Tourist House, Dzidziguri, who contended that when it came to local tourism "it is necessary to say directly… that absolutely nothing has been done in this respect."[27] And even though Odishvili pushed back on Japaridze's claims about the lack of funding, noting the 100,000 rubles the UKM had received from the TEU, he conceded that local tourism had failed to receive the attention it deserved.[28]

The TEU and its regional branches like the UKM struggled to operate effectively after the tourist reorganization in 1936. Initially, the TEU wholly ignored the question of independent tourism, that is, tourists who traveled without an official voucher and chose their own

---

[23] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 125.
[24] See sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 127.
[25] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 126.
[26] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 91-93.
[27] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 115.
[28] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 142.

destinations and means of travel. Instead, the TEU focused solely on already established itineraries, making it ill suited to create new ones as Georgian activists demanded. Despite a public rebuke published by *Pravda* in 1937, the TEU continued to largely ignore independent tourism and tourist consultation stations were closed, inventory of key tourist goods decreased, and tourist literature was no longer printed. As Diane Koenker has argued, "The activist core had disappeared, the new TEU devoted all its effort to promoting the expensive and profitable package tours on the traditional itineraries, and the proletarian mass had lost its access to independent, healthful, and self-actualizing tourism."[29] By criticizing the failure to develop new itineraries, provide maps and tourist literature, and fund the development of tourism among local inhabitants, the Georgian AlpClub was largely mirroring criticisms made by other tourist activists against the TEU.[30] Ultimately, the failure of the UKM to develop local tourism in Georgia was a result of the TEU's focus on providing resources for privileged Soviet citizens from urban centers and not those in the mountainous periphery, contradicting one of the foundational goals of the Georgian alpinist community.

Nonetheless, the critiques of Georgian alpinists suggested that their antipathy towards the TEU was driven by more than just disagreements over the development of local tourism. In 1937 the TEU sent a contingent of its workers to the periphery as part of a larger effort to help reorganize tourist work in its local branches. But, as Dzidziguri, director of the Borjomi Tourist House, noted, the TEU workers came for three months and left without leaving any materials behind for their local counterparts. Dzidziguri continued, "we even had entire brigades which were limited only to instructions on a few methodological deviations and did not provide any

[29] Koenker, *Club Red*, 73.
[30] For more see G.P. Dolzhenko*, Rekreatsionnaia geografiia turizm, ekskursionnoe delo* (Rostov-na-donu, 1989): 105-107. For an extended discussion about the development of the TEU, its commercial functions, and battle over independent mass tourism see Koenker, *Club Red*, 71-88.

kind of real help in the work."[31] When the TEU's own regional workers looked for guidance from leaders in Moscow, they found almost no support. Alexander Japaridze offered a more incisive description of the TEU cadres, arguing that such workers actively hurt the development of local tourism: "Last year Arte'ev, Karpov, Volkov, Taraskov arrived from the center with (their) black hundred great power attitudes (s chernosotenno-velikoderzhavnymi nastroeniyami). They in no way wanted to organize local tourism and instead of help destroyed this work."[32] Japaridze's stinging critique of the nationalist and imperialist attitudes of Russian administrators suggests that the AlpClub's problems with the TEU were not simply organizational, but rather reflected a much deeper problem of how tourist activists from Moscow interacted with their counterparts in the periphery.[33] As explored in chapter two, Georgian tourist organizers were repeatedly frustrated by the arrogant attitudes of Russian tourists and the ways that those tourists saw themselves as culturally superior to local Caucasians – attitudes that were clearly shared by many of the TEU's own workers. For Georgian alpinists, this sense of superiority was a constant frustration that would continue well into the post-war period, a sign that the Soviet commitment to combat Russian chauvinism and create equality between the nationalities remained unfulfilled.

By the late 1930s, Georgian alpinists had accumulated a long list of grievances against the central tourist institutions: In 1932, OPTE officials attacked the mountain section of the Geographic Society, starkly curtailing its independence in the process. Two years later, the head of the OPTE, Nikolai Krylenko, refused to acknowledge the successful ascent on Ushba by denying Master of Alpinism titles to the four Georgian participants. In 1937, Krylenko, now head of the VSA, personally threatened Georgian alpinists who organized an alpiniada in

---

[31] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 118.
[32] sea p. 1832 a. 1 s. 8 p. 127.
[33] "Black hundreds" refers to the group of ultra-right wing Russian nationalists who existed at the beginning of the twentieth century, while "great power attitudes" was a common Soviet indictment of Russian arrogance in relation to other nationalities. Taken together, they are an extremely harsh indictment of TEU officials.

Svaneti. The OPTE, VSA, and TEU, meanwhile, were uninterested in developing tourism and alpinism outside of urban centers and were often hostile to such a project. And, since 1923 when Maria Preobrazhenskaia arrogantly dismissed the capabilities of young Georgian climbers, the Georgian alpinist community was repeatedly frustrated by the condescending and often orientalist attitudes of the tourists, alpinists, and officials they encountered from the Soviet center. Instead of dampening such frustrations, the reorganization of Soviet alpinism under the VSA and TEU only reaffirmed them.

As a result, the liquidation of the OPTE had a number of contradictory outcomes for the Georgian climbing community. On one hand, the formation of new tourist institutions created the opportunity for Georgian alpinists to create their own Alpine Club, founded with support from the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture and Sport. The Georgian Alpine Club largely inherited the aspirations and nationally inflected goals of the mountain section of the Geographic Society, and once again gave Georgian climbers an independent organization where they could develop their alpinist work. On the other hand, the creation of the VSA reestablished many of the same centralizing principles that had frustrated Georgian climbers under the OPTE while work with the TEU and UKM exposed the limits of cooperation with the center. The TEU's emphasis on profitable package tours and the transfer of alpinist activities to the trade unions posed new challenges to the AlpClub's desire to develop mountaineering in Georgia's mountainous regions. At the same time, the growing emphasis on the importance of the trade unions' own alpine camps and growing regulatory power of the VSA forced Georgian alpinists to work even more closely with central institutions. Ultimately, the reorganization of Soviet alpinism had the paradoxical effect of making Georgian alpinists both more independent and more integrated into the central institutions of the sport than they had been previously under the OPTE, all while

failing to solve the fundamental tensions between Moscow and the Georgian alpinist community that existed previously.

Soviet Alpinism at the Height of Stalinist Repression

Soviet alpinists were not immune from the political violence of the late 1930s. Rather, as Eva Maurer notes, the often-privileged social status of alpinists, their extensive work in sensitive border regions, and their intimate interactions with foreign climbers and tourists made alpinists a particularly susceptible group to Stalinist repressions. Although there are no exact figures for how many alpinists were arrested, the numbers were high relative to the small size of the community.[34] Initially, leading Soviet climbers attempted to illustrate their loyalty by publically denouncing the so-called traitors and reaffirming the need to "defend the life of the leader" (oberegat' zhizn' vozhdei). In early 1937, Nikolai Krylenko, Vasilii Semenovskii, and Lev Barkhash – three of the Soviet Union's most elite alpinists – all penned letters in *On land and on sea* criticizing the counterrevolutionary actions of Trotskyist enemies and confirming that Soviet alpinists would be vigilant in their fight against the "agents of Japanese and German fascism."[35] The letters signaled that alpinism now reflected the larger paranoia against internal enemies, a paranoia that would soon turn against the letter writers themselves.

Events progressed quickly after these initial letters. In June 1937 Semenovskii was fired from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, although he participated in a major Soviet expedition to the Pamirs later that summer. Despite the reprieve, Semenovskii was arrested in November 1937 and accused of leading a counterrevolutionary group made up of alpinists and tourists with the plan

[34] See Maurer, *Wege zum Pik Stalin,* 194-196.
[35] *NSNM* no. 2 (1937): 4. There was also a resolution created at a gathering of Moscow alpinists and signed by Semenovski, E. Abalakov, and A. Poiasov along these same lines. This paranoia continued later in the year in an article detailing the work of German and Japanese spies. See *NSNM* no. 4 (1937): 4.

to assassinate political leaders. The accusation was clearly preposterous and was founded on invented evidence gained from tortured confessions, but the imagined conspiracy served as a convenient way to indict anyone connected to Semenovskii. Barkhash was alleged to be one of the co-conspirators who was instructed personally by Semenovskii to attack political leaders while they were in the North Caucasus on vacation and was likewise arrested. In January 1938, Krylenko was also arrested, initially for his professional work, although his alpinist activities eventually came under scrutiny. The three were not alone – among the repressed were a long list of some of the Soviet Union's most talented and active alpinists, both those who had helped shape the sport from before the OPTE and as well as the younger generation of Soviet climbers who came of age under the OPTE and VSA.[36] The consequences of these arrests were almost always tragic. Barkhash was sentenced to seven years in a labor camp and was freed only in 1946. Semenovskii and Krylenko were not as fortunate. The former was shot at the Butovskii Shooting Range (poligon) in February 1938, the latter shot a few months later at the Kommunarka shooting range in July 1938.[37]

By the spring of 1938, nearly the entire leadership of the VSA had been arrested and as a result the VSA was temporarily dissolved. Pavel Rototaev, an instructor of alpinism in the Red Army, was chosen as the new chairman to replace Krylenko – a selection that, as Eva Maurer points out, reflected the growing militarization of the sport and its increasing connections to the

[36] See Iu. I. Pustovalov, "Rasstrel'noe vremia (retro-obzor)," http://www.pugachev.kg/2008-11-03-17-39-13/20-2008-11-04-16-37-50/686-2010-10-30-17-24-50 (last accessed June 26, 2019). Eva Maurer cites this same list but at a different website that is no longer accessible. See Maurer, "Al'pinizm as Mass Sport," 148 (footnote 35).

[37] See: Pavel Pavlovich Zakharov, "Al'pinisty – zhertvy politicheskikh repressii," http://www.mountain.ru/article/article_display1.php?article_id=4954 (last accessed June 26, 2019). L. Golovkova, "Shpinazh na vershinakh," https://www.risk.ru/blog/6049 (last accessed June 26, 2019), E. Maurer, *Wege zum pik Stalina*, 192-198. Some sources note that Barkhash was arrested in 1937, others in 1938. I have not been able to find information for an exact date. Barchash was arrested again in 1950 for several years, and eventually spent the last years of his life in Moscow.

Red Army.[38] In an article printed in *On land and on sea*, Rototaev criticized the "Troskyist-Bukharinist band" that attempted to destroy the work of alpinism, which was "led by the traitor of the homeland Krylenko." Instead, Rototaev praised the new leadership and articulated a set of goals for the sport, reaffirming the need to fight against enemies and eliminate accidents from climbing. Rototaev likewise noted the fundamental role of the alpinist camp in the training and promotion of young alpinists, a subtle but important reorientation of the Soviet climbing in the wake of the purges.[39]

Georgian climbers were largely untouched by the political violence that consumed the lives and careers of so many other Soviet alpinists. This is not to say that they did not experience the same paranoia and personal denunciations that characterized tourist and alpinist institutions in Moscow. Stenographic reports of UKM meetings give a sense of the heightened stakes of tourist work in the Caucasus and the ways that personal grievances could dangerously take on a higher political meaning. In one example from November 1938, the director of the Devdoraki Alpine Camp, F. Davlianidze accused both N. Dzhaginov, a senior instructor, and Alexandra Japaridze, head of the instruction section at the camp, of having interfered with the work of the camp. It seems that part of the problem was that Davlianidze was not an alpinist, and both Dzhaginov and Japaridze refused to trust him to lead climbing activities. Davlianidze was likewise frustrated by their refusal to defer to his authority in administrative matters. For their part, Dzhaginov and Japaridze were critical of the poor state of the camp, including the lack of a shower, unsanitary conditions, and poor quality of food, which they attributed partly to Davlianidze. But this personal dispute quickly turned into a political matter when Davlianidze, a party member, reported Dzhaginov to the NKVD. Davlianidze accused the senior instructor of

[38] Maurer *Wege zum pik Stalina*, 197-198.
[39] *NSNM* no. 5 (1938): 12.

harboring “fascist ambitions” (zamashki), particularly in his ability to speak German. The accusation illustrated some of the unstable signifiers of being a loyal Soviet citizen during the purges, and the ways that alpinists were especially susceptible to such charges. But in this case, Dzhaginov strongly pushed back against the director’s criticisms: “Davlianidze hurled an accusation at me that I speak German. One of the main goals of our study is the knowledge of foreign languages. I should say to the attention of Davlianidze, that beside the German language I also speak French and understand English. I am more of a ‘criminal’ than he thinks.”[40] It appears that the NKVD did investigate Dzhaginov, concluding that although he had a tendency to overreact and act imprudently because of his youth, he had not committed any political crimes. Ultimately, the TEU representative leading the meeting reproached Davlianidze for his actions, noting that as a party member it was necessary to cultivate and teach young staff members instead of denouncing them.

In this example at least, it seems that Davlianidze was roundly disliked by other UKM staff and that his accusation against Dzhaginov was a naked attempt to settle a personal disagreement. But the episode illustrated the constant danger even for young alpinists who were new to the institutions of Soviet mountaineering. Soviet climbers could be accused and arrested for any number of potential “crimes” – contact with foreign climbers, previous cooperation with already arrested Soviet alpinists, knowledge of foreign languages or possession of foreign materials, and the death or injury of trainees under their care, to name just a few. Leading Georgian alpinists like Alexander Japaridze, Alexandra Japaridze, Sandro Gvalia, Devi Mikeladze, and Davit Tsereteli, among others, could have been easily implicated in such crimes and it would not have been difficult to fabricate evidence against them. In 1936 Alexander Japaridze and Davit Tsereteli participated in a key Soviet expedition to the Pamirs, and

[40] sea p. 1892 a. 1 s. 9 p. 110-111.

cooperated with a number of alpinists who would later be repressed, including Barkhash.[41] The fact that Georgian climbers were not arrested raises a larger question – why and how did Georgian alpinists largely avoid the political violence of 1937-38 when so many other Soviet alpinists were swept up in the repressions?[42]

The archival record offers a number of suggestions, although frustratingly no concrete answers. First, the repressions of Soviet climbers followed the personal networks of two key individuals – Krylenko and Semenovskii. Georgian climbers had publically feuded with Krylenko in the past, most recently in 1937 when he threatened to stop the alpiniada organized by Sandro Gvalia in Svaneti. As head of the VSA and OPTE, Krylenko had been a powerful enemy of Georgian alpinists, who challenged their attempts to develop an independent climbing community. But in 1938, this long record of personal conflict almost certainly helped protect Georgian climbers from accusations that they were part of Krylenko's made-up band of counterrevolutionary alpinists. It does not seem that there was such deep personal antipathy between Semenovskii and the Georgian climbing community, but it is clear that Georgian climbers were simply not part of Semenovskii's climbing network. Here, being members of the periphery with few direct connections to the leadership of alpinist institutions in Moscow offered a likely lifesaving advantage at the height of the repressions. And although leading Georgian alpinists participated in institutions like the OPTE, VSA, and TEU, they were never fundamental to the functioning of such organizations. Instead, by the late 1930s the principal network of Georgian climbers was closer to Mestia than Moscow, and Georgian climbers from Tbilisi were more likely to cooperate with their Svan counterparts than their Russian ones. As a result of their

[41] *NSNM* no. 2 (1937): 15-17.
[42] This is not to say that the Georgian alpine community did not suffer from the paranoia and constant uncertainty that existed at this time or that they did not have friends and family members who were repressed. Rather, to my knowledge, no prominent Georgian alpinist was arrested for alpinist activities, a fact that stood in stark contrast to other alpinist circles, especially those in Moscow.

class status and physical location, Svan climbers were even more peripheral to the sport's organizing bodies and thus less likely to be of interest to the state security apparatuses.

Georgian alpinists likewise began to praise Lavrenti Beria, since 1934 the ruthless leader of the Georgian Communist Party and, by late 1938, head of the NKVD. Beria, a close ally of Stalin, was one of the key proponents of political violence with a well-developed patronage network of supporters, especially in his native Georgia.[43] Beginning in 1937 and possibly earlier, Georgian climbers seemed to have developed a conscious strategy of honoring Beria at every opportunity. At one January 1937 UKM meeting, Sandro Gvalia ended his speech by hailing the "Bolshevik leadership" of Beria, who was the "best friend of the physical-culturists."[44] After the successful 1937 Svaneti alpiniada led by Gvalia, the participants elected to send a telegram to Beria informing him of their accomplishments.[45] That same summer, the Georgian Alpine Club led an alpiniada in Khevi, where they left a large portrait of Beria on the Shani peak, located near Kazbegi.[46] In connection with the alpiniada, Georgian alpinists eventually had a nearby, unnamed mountain officially designated "Peak Beria."[47] And in 1940, Georgian alpinists named an important and difficult traverse in Svaneti after the NKVD head.[48] More than Stalin, Georgian alpinists sought to curry favor with Beria at the height of political violence. To be fair, the strategy was not unique to alpinists or even to Georgia, and I have not found any evidence to gauge Beria's response to the flattery of Georgian climbers. But this extensive praise of Beria, which did not exist before 1936 and seems to end after the war, if not earlier, did help signal that

---

[43] See for example, Timothy Blauvelt, "Abkhazia Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era" *Nationalities Papers* Vol. 35, Iss. 2 (May 2007), 203-232.
[44] sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 4 p. 85.
[45] *NSNM* no. 12(1937): 24.
[46] Japaridze *rcheuli nats'erebi,* 227.
[47] See *Pobezhdennye vershiny: ezhegodnik sovetskogo al'pinizma* (hereafter PV), (1950): 417-418. It's not clear when this peak was renamed, although them idea was proposed as early as summer 1937. See sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 8 p. 126.
[48] See *Sovetskii turizm i al'pinizm* 27 October 1940; see also Japaridze, *rcheuli nats'erebi,* 255-256.

Georgian alpinists were loyal to one of the most important and dangerous Soviet leaders. Whether or not Beria offered direct protection for Georgian climbers requires further research outside the scope of this dissertation, but for several years the AlpClub's public flattery of Beria represented a key tactic for navigating the constant danger of political repression. In this sense, being only peripherally connected to the institutions and personal networks of Soviet alpinism in Moscow as co-nationals with the those leading the implementation of political violence, certainly helped to ensure that Georgian alpinists were largely spared the worst excesses of the repressions.

Safety in the Service of Centralized Control

The repression of key alpinists in 1937 and 1938 and the formation of new leadership at the VSA under Pavel Rototaev ushered in several important changes to Soviet alpinism. Among these was a renewed emphasis on safety and the role of the VSA in ensuring safety standards. Since the early 1930s, there had been an attempt to reduce the number of mountaineering accidents and evaluate the reasons for climbing injuries and deaths. In 1932, the alarming number of climbing accidents prompted an article in *On land and on sea* by the alpinist V. Vorob'ev about the need to know different types of distress calls in the mountains. The article detailed the importance of having a set of basic safety measures among Soviet alpinists and it described initial attempts by the OPTE to create rescue squads at key tourist bases, although it is clear that at this point these issues were far from worked out.[49] A year later, Vorob'ev wrote another article detailing several recent accidents in the mountains. Here, he argued that the majority of climbing accidents were caused not because the participants were new to the sport and lacked experience, but rather because they either overestimated their own skills or

[49] *NSNM* no. 22-24 (1932): 24-25.

underestimated the difficulty of their routes. Vorob'ev contended that mountaineering accidents largely occurred for "subjective reasons"; that is, the failure of an alpinist to obey the principal rules of safe mountaineering. "Objective" dangers, like fog, avalanches, crevasses, and steep cliffs, were, according to Vorob'ev, rarely the cause of most climbing injuries or deaths. This division between subjective and objective reasons for accidents placed a large responsibility on the individual alpinist for ensuring safety, and made it easy to assign personal blame when an accident occurred. Vorob'ev concluded that Soviet alpinists should not shy away from difficult ascents, but that they should eschew individualism and instead ensure a proper group selection and obey basic safety rules in the mountains, especially in regards to using climbing ropes.[50]

This general understanding of safety would continue in the following years. In 1934, Vorob'ev evaluated the accidents of the previous climbing season, recounting in often morbid detail the painful injuries and tragic deaths of 1933 and the subjective reasons that caused them. Even when it appeared that the individual alpinist was not to blame, Vorob'ev found guilt. In the death of one Leningrad alpinist, P. Berdennikova, who slipped on a relatively easy section of slab not requiring ropes, Vorob'ev nonetheless noted that the death was still not accidental: "The fall of Berdennikova could be considered a pure accident, if only at the heart of it did not rest subjective moments: nonobservance of the basic rules of climbing technique (skalovoi tekhniki), the relaxation of attention during transition from a difficult and dangerous section of the path to a less difficult and less dangerous (one), incautiousness (neostorozhnost')."[51] Vorob'ev was far from alone in his opinion. Several issues later, the alpinists O. Grinfel'd and A. Gushchin wrote a reply, agreeing with Vorob'ev's findings almost entirely. As Gushchin noted, "I do not

[50] *NSNM* no. 22-24 (1932): 24-25.
[51] *NSNM* no. 4 (1934): 6-7.

remember an incident of death in the mountains from causes not dependent on the alpinist themselves."[52]

The framework of subjective and objective causes for climbing accidents made it possible to almost always place blame on the individual alpinist and obscured the fact that mountaineering is an inherently dangerous activity where risk is only minimized but never eliminated. In the case of Berdennikova, it is entirely possible that she was observing due caution, but mistakenly misidentified a loose rock as a solid hold or that one of her foot or hand placements unexpectedly gave way (Vorob'ev noted that she was climbing on a section with loose rocks). Such falls happen to even excellent climbers who are paying full attention to their route and are part of the fundamental risk of climbing.[53] The attempt to develop a set of standards for safe climbing reflected the maturation of Soviet alpinism, but the instinct to place blame on the individual went beyond the need to catalogue incidents to ensure they were not repeated and offered yet another avenue for centralized control. As Gushchin suggested, alpinists who broke the rules of climbing should not be allowed in the mountains.[54] The OPTE never had the power to sanction climbers in this way, but this situation would change with the development of the VSA.[55]

The repression of alpinist cadres, including Vorob'ev himself, did not alter this fundamental understanding of individual responsibility and instead heightened the consequences for climbing accidents. Semenovskii was arrested for organizing a counterrevolutionary band of

---

[52] *NSNM* no. 14 (1934): 13.

[53] Today, a standard approach would be to always be tied into a rope system if there is a chance of a fall, usually with a belayer above or below the climber. For Soviet climbers in the 1930s, rope systems were often used only when there was readily apparent danger and not always then, a situation that Vorob'ev criticized. In easier sections it was generally accepted that rope systems were not necessary. The larger reliance on ropes today is certainly a result of better rope technology and the development of belay devices and harnesses, as well as the widespread availability of all three.

[54] *NSNM* no. 14 (1934): 13.

[55] Vorob'ev also published an account of accidents for the 1934 season, coming to the same conclusion that subjective reasons were to blame for the deaths or injuries that occurred that year. See *NSNM* no. 10 (1935): 10-11.

alpinists, but he was also deemed responsible for the large numbers of accidents that occurred in 1937.[56] Injuries or deaths, especially those of junior alpinists in the care of senior instructors, were now potentially serious political crimes, carried out not by careless climbers but by enemies of the people. In 1938, the VSA organized a commission to investigate the reasons for accidents in the previous years, concluding the leaders of alpine camps and other qualified alpinists or instructors were at fault for allowing inexperienced alpinists to conduct risky climbs.[57] The dramatic growth of alpinism in the previous few years ushered in a slight shift to Vorob'ev's original reasoning – the untrained novice was not at fault for lacking skills and falling into trouble, but the instructors and camp leaders who allowed that novice into the mountains were.[58]

As part of the renewed focus on safety, rescue stations were set up on key mountaineering routes. In principle, the stations were supposed to be stocked with essential equipment and staffed with well-trained rescue personnel, but initially they were plagued by a lack of funding and "uneducated" (malogramotnye) workers. Despite confirming the importance of rescue stations, neither the Committee of Physical Education and Sport nor the TEU was fully invested in making them function properly.[59] In its ideal form, the rescue station would have detailed explanations of the area replete with photographs and illustrations, offer consultations to alpinists before their journey, and have up-to-date weather information. For their part, alpinists were supposed to inform the rescue station of their departure and the date of their planned ascent, the places where they intended to camp, and provide a description of their route and information about their equipment and food stores.[60] Despite the lack of support and constant problems with

[56] Golovkova, "Shpinazh na vershinakh."
[57] *NSNM* no. 5 (1938): 20-21.
[58] A 1939 list of alpinist work in the committees of physical culture and sport societies illustrates this growth. In 1935 there were 3000 total participants in all activities, in 1936 – 10,000 participants, in 1937 – 14,000 participants, and in 1938 -20,000 participants. GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 105 l. 38 see also *NSNM* no. 5 (1939): 18-19.
[59] *NSNM* no. 11 (1938): 22-23.
[60] *NSNM* no. 11 (1938): 22-23.

equipment and qualified personnel, the rescue stations surprisingly began to work as intended and the number of accidents in 1938 decreased dramatically.[61]

A number of other changes accompanied the reorganization of the VSA in 1938. In 1935 the OPTE had begun to classify Soviet peaks by difficulty, adopting a system where the easiest peak was labeled 1A and the most difficult peak was labeled 5B, a system that is still in use today.[62] In 1938, the VSA further refined this system and published an extensive list of the "category of difficulty" of the main peaks in the Caucasus.[63] The newly approved classification scheme created a number of requirements for climbing at each category of difficulty. For example, to climb a peak rated at 4A, a climber had to be highly trained with at least four years of experience and two summits on peaks rated at 3A or 3B. Earning the badge "Alpinist of the USSR" (first or second level) or the title of "Master of Alpinism" were now more than just awards for alpinist accomplishments. Instead, they gave the alpinist the right to participate in climbs of various difficulties – a right that could be revoked for failing to obey safety protocols. Climbers also needed to have their ascents approved by a sanctioning institution, although who exactly had the right to approve a climb was far from worked out. Further safety measures were likewise adopted. In 1938, a new policy of "control times" was implemented, which set a limited amount of time for climbers to complete their route before returning to the rescue station or alpinist camp. If climbers did not return by the set date, a rescue team was immediately sent out in search of the missing group. Returning after the control time expired was a potentially serious violation.

All of these changes reflected a real attempt to make the sport safer, but they also illustrated the growing power of the VSA to control alpinist activities. Perhaps more importantly,

---

[61] *NSNM* no. 5 (1939): 18-19.
[62] This system is still in use today.
[63] *Shkola muzhestva,* July 1938 (Prilozhenie k gazete).

they demonstrated the growing authoritarianism of the Soviet system as a whole and its inability to share power with local institutions or local actors, a development which clearly stood in contrast to promises for Soviet national equality. In the wake of the purges, alpinism became more tightly regulated and independent mountaineering was largely discouraged, a development that, as Eva Maurer argues, "clearly reflected the period's obsession with control over its subjects and their movement."[64] The VSA now claimed the ability to sanction climbers over safety violations, an ability that was quickly tested. In 1938, a group led by Evgeni Beletskii, one of the Soviet Union's top alpinists, made the first recorded traverse of several peaks of the Bezengi Wall – an incredible accomplishment over some of the most difficult terrain in the Central Caucasus – but in doing so broke the control time by eight days. The violation was investigated fully and resulted in several meetings at the VSA regarding the fate of the alpinists in question.[65] Beletskii was accused of ignoring the ethics of Soviet climbing in a "vivid example typical of the bourgeois mania for setting records (rekordsmenstvo)."[66] Ultimately, the VSA removed Beletskii's title of Master of Alpinism and disqualified him and other members of the group from climbing activities, a stunning rebuke and potentially career ending penalty to several top climbers. In doing so, the VSA asserted its claim as the highest authority on alpinist matters with the full ability to regulate and punish Soviet climbers.

The VSA was not necessarily wrong in accusing Beletskii of being in pursuit of a sports record, although the line between bourgeois record setting and Soviet sport achievement was never clearly defined. Soviet alpinism, like climbing in western Europe, was inherently focused on the pursuit of increasingly difficult and dangerous climbs, and the line between bourgeois

[64] Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as Mass Sport," 150.
[65] This is by far the most well represented case of a safety violation, with two large folders of information over several years regarding the incident. See GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 72 and 73.
[66] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 72 l. 2.

individualism and Soviet collectivism was often little more than executing a safe climb within the control times. A traverse of the Bezengi wall had in fact been tried several times by Soviet climbers throughout the 1930s and still remained an elusive goal. In 1938, several groups attempted the traverse, including one that successfully accomplished the difficult climb immediately after Beletskii's group.[67] For the accused climber, it was obvious that to abandon the traverse after being delayed by weather would likely mean giving up the chance to be the first to accomplish such a difficult climb, or even the opportunity to complete the climb that season. In principle, Beletskii was engaging in practices that were common to Soviet alpinism at the time, pushing the limits of risk in ways that were certainly dangerous, but not foolish.[68] But by returning late, Beletskii was blamed for endangering the lives of the rescue teams sent after him and hindering the work of other alpinist groups in the region who paused their own expeditions to search for the supposedly missing climbers. Beletskii pushed back against these accusations, insisting his group had "not violated the spirit of Soviet alpinism" and that the delay had been caused by poor weather conditions and not their lack of qualifications. And while he thanked the rescuers for their attention, he insisted that the claim he had ruined the plans of other groups was in fact "exaggerated."

Beletskii's protestations were ultimately unsuccessful and it is clear that he had few defenders even among alpinists not connected to the VSA. But the proceedings raised an interesting question about the increasingly regimented nature of the sport. Beletskii's group was charged with failing to receive approval for the route from the proper authorities, but as Beletskii

[67] On the competition for this traverse, see: German Andreev and Iurii Stroganov, "Pervomu traversu Bezengiiskoi steny – 70 let," http://www.alpklubspb.ru/ass/a408.htm (last accessed June 26, 2019).
[68] The question of foolishness is undoubtedly subjective, but alpinism during this period, both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, involved enormous amounts of risk. To be an elite climber meant constantly testing these boundaries. I would argue that the deaths of most Soviet climbers had less to do with "subjective" failures, and were rather connected to their acceptance of high levels of risk that meant an unexpected storm, torn rope, or broken carabineer came with the highest possible consequences.

pointed out it was not possible for them to get the route approved in time because they had originally been given permission for an expedition to the Pamirs that was canceled at the last moment. As another member of Beletskii's group bluntly argued, "I, as a master of alpinism, had the right to this ascent by all provisions of the committee and every physically healthy and experienced person in alpinism can and should strive to the highest achievements in the field of alpinism otherwise he is not a sportsman and not an alpinist."[69] And in defense of Beletskii, a participant at the proceedings likewise noted that if a group has two alpinists at the rank of Master of Alpinism and informs the authorities of their planned climb, as Beletskii did, then they did in fact have the full right to conduct their climb.

The whole affair was enormously complicated and clearly driven by personal animosities between Beletskii and the leader of the second group to complete the traverse, who felt wronged that his traverse was second only because of flagrant rule breaking – a position that was certainly ironic considering Beletskii was charged with an undue focus on record-setting. And the punishments, while extreme, were soon overturned. In 1940, all of the participants of Beletskii's group were allowed to again participate in alpinist activities and their right to lead alpinist work and act as instructors was restored, with the possibility to reinstate their titles of Master of Sport in Alpinism if they once again fulfilled the requirements. In the following years, Beletskii again emerged as a leading Soviet alpinist, eventually achieving the title of Honored Master of Sport in Alpinism in 1946, the highest title a Soviet climber could receive. The punishment of Beletskii, however, had the contradictory effect of both reaffirming the VSA's power to discipline alpinists while never clarifying the question of approval that was one of the major reasons for the discipline. During the hearings, Beletskii himself noted that the VSA did not have the sole right to approve climbs, and that regional or local sections could approve routes of any difficulty. And

[69] GARF f. 7576 op. 14. d. 72 ll. 9-11.

other alpinists pushed back against the full exclusion of Beletskii and his group from Soviet alpinism, noting that while it was necessary to punish the offenders, barring them from alpinist work would hurt the development of the sport.[70]

The long investigation and harsh punishment of Beletskii's group was clearly meant as warning to other climbers to obey the VSA's new safety protocols. Despite the new regulations instituted in 1938, control times were regularly ignored and rule breaking was an endemic problem at alpinist camps. As a group of climbers from the camp "Nauka" lamented, not only were the guilty not held accountable, neither were the leaders of camps, DSOs, or heads of the local committees of physical culture. As they contended, control times should only be broken when "caused by the objective impossibility to descend and return in time," an argument that essentially made breaking the control times always the fault of the alpinist considering the general impulse to see only "subjective" reasons for accidents or delays.[71] Nonetheless, safety violations and especially the death of alpinists under one's care had the opportunity to lead to serious punishment. In 1938, three alpinist-students died in the Caucasus after their DSO failed to send a rescue group to search for them when they did not return by the control time. After a well-publicized trial in 1939 by a Moscow court, representatives of the alpinists' DSO, the TEU, and even the VSA were found guilty of deliberately causing physical harm and given serious punishments for failing to prevent the students' deaths.[72]

In the post-1938 reorganization, the VSA had created a number of potentially fraught unanswered questions. What violations would be punished and which ones would be overlooked? Perhaps more importantly, who had the right to approve a climb – a Master of

---

[70] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 73. ll. 29, 114-115b.
[71] *NSNM* no. 11 (1938): 22-23.
[72] *Shkola muzhestva* 19 July 1939. Eva Maurer also discusses this event. See. Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as Mass Sport," 150 (footnote 48).

Alpinism who had qualified to climb at that level of difficulty, a local section, DSO, or Committee of Physical Culture and Sport, or only the VSA itself? What would the VSA do when local authorities approved a dangerous climb that resulted in an injury or death and would it be possible to exclude the leader from all alpinist activities? These questions would soon be tested by Georgian climbers, who remained markedly independent from the VSA due to the creation of their own AlpClub and close cooperation with the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture and Sport. The VSA's renewed emphasis on safety undeniably reduced the number of accidents in an increasingly popular sport, but it also served as a vehicle for the further centralization of the Soviet alpinism that had begun under the OPTE. In claiming the unprecedented right to completely exclude leading alpinists from all climbing activities for safety violations, the VSA gained a powerful weapon against the independence of local sections in a sport where risk is only ever minimized and the understanding of accidents almost always focused on the "subjective" reasons of personal culpability.

Remaking the Center in the Periphery: Alpine Camps in the Late 1930s

The reorganization of the VSA brought about other significant changes to Soviet alpinist practices. Throughout the 1930s, Soviet mountaineers had created their own "wild camps" where climbing itineraries and camp activities were controlled by the alpinists themselves. In 1938 the VSA banned such unregulated spaces and instead devoted considerable resources to developing official camps operated by the trade unions.[73] As Pavel Rototaev, the new head of the VSA, argued, the alpine camp would become the "forge of young alpinists" and the center for both practical and theoretical training.[74] The camps would also serve as a key space for the political

[73] *NSNM* no. 5 (1938): 3; *NSNM* no. 6 (1938): 4.
[74] *NSNM* no. 5 (1938): 12.

education of Soviet citizens and a physical representation of cultured modernity the mountainous periphery.[75] All of these changes were meant to further tighten control of what had once been a largely unregulated sport and illustrated the growing power of the VSA.

By 1938 there were 43 such camps serving over 12,000 tourists, over double the number of camps that existed just two years prior.[76] The establishment of so many camps likewise marked an important reorientation of the cultural project of Soviet mountaineering. Since the creation of the OPTE, alpinists traveling to the rural periphery were supposed to act as cultural ambassadors, aiding the local population with their technical skills when possible and sharing information about important Soviet achievements with villages that rarely received news from the Soviet center.[77] Even when alpinists failed to fulfill such lofty goals, they were often forced to interact with the local population because of the lack of developed facilities. The new system of camps upended these unsupervised and sometimes hostile interactions. In her work examining the development of alpine camps, Eva Maurer argues that, "(a)s mountaineering camps became permanent, the agency of this cultural mission was transferred from the mountaineers to the camps, which were to serve as cultural outposts – replicating the Stalinist power-relation of center and periphery."[78] The camp would now be the means through which alpinists interacted with the mainly non-Russian local population, but instead of challenging Soviet climbers' sense of superiority as representatives of socialist modernity in the undeveloped periphery, the camp system reinforced this bias. The orderly and clean alpine camp, connected to the outside world with a radio station and stocked with newspapers from Moscow and Leningrad, stood as a shining example of Soviet civilization against the "remnants of the past" that defined the nearby

---

[75] *NSNM* no. 5 (1938): 12; *Shkola muzhestva,* 10 June 1939.
[76] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 105 l. 38.
[77] See *NSNM* no. 5 (1933): 13.
[78] Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as Mass Sport," 151.

villages.[79] And although the VSA planned for the camps to be "closely connected with the local population" problems with local inhabitants and organizations remained unsurprisingly widespread.[80]

The increasing centrality of alpine camps and their often hostile relationship with the local population offered a challenge to the Georgian Alpine Club's focus on developing climbers in mountainous regions of Georgia. The AlpClub was an independent organization formed under the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture and Sport and not connected to any trade union, thus it did not inherit any of the OPTE's camps that were redistributed after 1936. The AlpClub was likewise ill placed to make a claim on one of the many newly built camps, which were mostly funded and operated by the trade unions. Even if a camp was on Georgian territory, Georgian alpinists had to procure hard-to-obtain vouchers from the corresponding trade union in order to use the camp facilities. Despite the VSA's supposed commitment to developing alpinism in the national republics, the new camp system was simply not designed to develop mountaineers outside of industrial centers, and in particular Moscow and Leningrad.[81] As Eva Maurer notes, "(t)he Moscow-based mountaineering system, catering to the big cities in European Russian and focused on the Caucasus, was a standard imposed on all other regions in the Soviet empire and modified only slowly during the 1950s."[82] The expansion of alpine camps in the Caucasus paradoxically made it even more difficult for local Caucasians to become alpinists.

The Georgian Alpine Club's solution to this problem was to organize regional alpiniadas, which would both subvert the need for a camp and encourage large-scale participation among the

---

[79] *NSNM* no. 4 (1938): 4; see also Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as Mass Sport," 148-152.
[80] *NSNM* no. 5 (1938): 12; *NSNM* no. 4 (1938): 4; GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 l. 152.
[81] The VSA regularly noted the importance of developing alpinism in the national republics, but until the 1950s failed to support this materially. For an example of support, see Rototaev's doklad at a 1938 meeting of senior instructors. GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 l. 153.
[82] Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as Mass Sport," 155.

local population. At a 1938 meeting of senior instructors, Alexander Japaridze defended this method for developing new alpinists arguing that it was in fact more effective than the camp system. As he suggested, in only five days participants in an alpiniada were more prepared than their counterparts in the camp and ready to conduct independent treks. Japaridze contended the alpiniada was also a far cheaper method for developing alpinists, noting that it was possible to train alpinists for only 200 rubles, a fraction of the cost of the camps. This offered important savings for Georgia, where alpinism was left underfunded.[83] And yet, despite the many positive benefits of the alpiniada, Japaridze was frustrated that other senior instructors "looked negatively at this matter."[84] Later in the meeting, another alpinist questioned Japaridze's conclusions, arguing that if the alpiniada worked better it was because of Japaridze's own "personal pedagogical abilities" and not the superiority of the alpiniada as a means of instruction.[85]

Despite questions about the efficacy of the alpiniada, by late 1938, the Georgian AlpClub successfully carried out several such events in Georgia. Perhaps the best known of these was the 1937 Svaneti alpiniada where 182 Svans reached the Tetnuldi peak. As discussed above, this event was criticized by the then head of the VSA, Nikolai Krylenko, but ultimately praised in the pages of *On land and on sea*. Although the Svaneti alpiniada was organized by Sandro Gvalia, it relied heavily on the contacts that Georgian alpinists had made in the region since the early 1930s. Among the instructors guiding the many groups up the mountain were a number of familiar names – Besarion Khergiani, Gio Niguriani, Ramin Kvitsiani, and Goji Zurebiani. By 1937, Goji Zurebiani and Gio Niguriani in particular were solid fixtures in the Georgian

[83] Japaridze's quote here is especially telling: "The schools exist for such happy people, who have money, hundreds and thousands of rubles, but a central region, such as Georgia, more often than not, where the whole population is interested in alpinism, there we do not have much money… and therefore we are compelled to resort to this method of work, like the alpiniada…" GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 l. 196.
[84] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 l. 196.
[85] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 l. 205.

climbing community. Zurebiani took part in the first attempt on Tetnuldi in 1930 and Niguriani participated in the 1934 summit on Ushba, and both had participated in the search for Simon Japaridze and Pimen Dvali in 1929. In this way the successful 1937 Svaneti alpiniada did not just illustrate the organizational capabilities of the Georgian AlpClub, it also demonstrated the maturation of a local climbing community in the region, a community that arguably only began to exist since 1930. In the following years, Svan climbers like Zurebiani would be recognized by the VSA for their prodigious climbing abilities, and Svaneti would soon be known not just for its mountains but as the home of some of the Soviet Union's best alpinists.

That same summer in 1937, Alexander Japaridze led a similar regional alpiniada in Khevi consisting of 250 participants. The Khevi alpiniada entailed summits on several different mountains, including multiple ascents on the Kazbegi peak with groups as large as 88 people.[86] And although it is not entirely clear from the sources which instructors were themselves from Khevi, at least one of the instructors, Niko Kirikashvili, was a local Mokhevian who was a longtime partner on climbs in the region. Most notably, Kirikashvili famously helped discover a safer route to the Kazbegi peak in 1931 along with Alexander Japaridze and Iagor Kazalikashvili.[87] It also seems clear that Japaridze's long record of climbing in the region and personal relationships with local climbers helped him recruit such a large number of participants.

In 1937, the Georgian AlpClub also conducted a research expedition to the region of Tusheti, one of the most remote mountainous areas in eastern Georgia. The expedition was organized in connection with the Geological Faculty of Tbilisi State University and involved ascents on a number of prominent mountains in the region, in particular the nearly 4300-meter Komito peak. Komito had been first climbed by the famous German alpinist Gottfried

---

[86] K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze*, 319-321; Japaridze, *rcheuli nats'erebi,* 225-229.
[87] See *Turist zakavkaz'ia* no. 1 (1931): 9-11

Merzbacher in 1892, but since then had received little attention from either western European or Soviet climbers. Georgian alpinists were surprised then when they met a young shepherd named Ekvtime Tavberidze, who claimed to have summited Komito just two weeks before the arrival of the AlpClub's expedition. As Levan Maruashvili strikingly detailed in *On land and on sea*, Tavberidze was grazing his herd near Komito when he decided to make an attempt on the towering peak. Encountering favorable weather, the shepherd stunningly reached the summit where he found the note left by Merzbacher in 1892 that had been hidden under a pile or rocks for 45 years. Tavberidze replaced Merzbacher's note with one of his own, which the AlpClub later recovered during their own ascent. Maruashvili's positive account of Tavberidze's daring solo climb, along with glowing accounts of aid rendered to the AlpClub by local inhabitants in the region, illustrated a growing interest in developing an alpinist community in Tusheti like those in Svaneti and Khevi, and reflected the long standing practice of Georgian alpinists to highlight the contributions and achievements of local partners. Instead of adopting the role of cultural ambassador and assuming a position of superiority as a member of the urban intelligentsia, Maruashvili instead highlighted the high level of literacy in Tusheti and praised Tushetians as a "courageous (muzhestvennyi), industrious people," noting the essential help they provided to the expedition.[88] Even as the project of Georgian alpinism gained authenticity through a growing cadre of Mokhevian and Svan climbers, leading Georgian alpinists continued to insist on the need to treat mountainous populations as equals as they engaged new regions.

The positive encounters in 1937 created the possibility for the AlpClub to organize a Tusheti alpiniada the following year, involving participants from both the regional center of Telavi and villages in Tusheti. Conducted in cooperation with the Telavi Komsomol, the 1938

[88] *NSNM* no. 12 (1937): 19-21. Maruashvili worked in pedagogical institutions in Kutaisi and Sukhumi before receiving his doctorate in geology in 1954. For example, see his biography at the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia: http://www.nplg.gov.ge/bios/ka/00007854/ (last accessed June 26, 2019).

Tusheti alpiniada saw 44 people reach the Komito peak in celebration of the twentieth year anniversary of the Komsomol. The participants received special political instruction from the secretary of the Telavi Komsomol and left a bust of Stalin and a red banner at the summit. As *On land and on sea* noted, among the 44 participants was the first Soviet climber on Komito, the shepherd Ekvtime Tavberidze, who recited the poems of Iagor Kazalikashvili as the group made their way up the mountain. Tavberidze likewise expressed his dream to climb Ushba, Tetnuldi, and Elbrus – goals clearly informed by the earlier successes of Georgian alpinists, and especially Kazalikashvili. Whether or not Tavberidze achieved this dream is unclear, but it does speak to the unique ability of the Georgian AlpClub to inspire and recruit alpinists from the mountainous regions of the republic.[89] Leading Georgian climbers were not just open to cooperation with shepherds, collective farmers, and hunters, they also had a nearly 20-year history that spoke to the importance of such partnerships. When young shepherds like Tavberidze looked for examples of successful climbers that came from a rural background like himself, he could easily cite dozens of alpinists among the larger Georgian climbing community who mirrored his background. Whether it was Kazalikashvili's daring summits and folk poetry written in a regional dialect, or newer leaders like the Svans Goji Zurebiani and Besarion Khergiani who were now alpine instructors, Georgians in the mountainous periphery encountered a national community of climbers that saw them as equals and helped promote them to leadership positions, a fact that stood out in a sport largely dominated by the urban intelligentsia and focused on the centrality of workers in industrial centers.

By the late 1930s, the alpiniada became the AlpClub's primary method for developing young climbers and a new expression of an old idea. Since 1923, Georgian alpinists articulated

---

[89] Tavberidze is mentioned in a 1941 article in the newspaper Soviet Alpinism and Tourism but I have not been able to find any other archival traces of him. See: *Sovetskii turizm i al'pinizm,* 5 January 1941.

the need to make alpinism a national sport, making the mountains of Georgia accessible to Georgians and especially those that lived in mountainous regions. In a sport focused on the development of worker-alpinists in official camps, the alpiniada cleverly utilized what Georgia had in abundance – mountains and people that lived near those mountains – to compensate for what they lacked – their own training camp and dismal funding. In 1938, the AlpClub likewise conducted another alpiniada in Kazbegi consisting of around 200 people, a Svaneti alpiniada of 114 people, and the first "All-Georgian" alpiniada of 61 people on the Dzhimara peak near Kazbegi.[90] By this time, the AlpClub operated official "branches" (filialy) in Mestia and Kazbegi (Stepantsminda), with plans to open more regional affiliates in Sukhumi and Kutaisi.[91] In the following years, the AlpClub would conduct even more alpiniadas in Abkhazia, Upper Racha, and Lower Svaneti in an increasing attempt to develop alpinism in even more remote regions.[92]

Despite the overwhelming success of the alpiniada model, the Georgian AlpClub still insisted on the need for their own alpine camp, arguing that the lack of such facilities hurt their ability to train new alpinists.[93] The absence of a camp would be a consistent complaint for Georgian climbers into the post-war years, and illustrated another line of conflict between the AlpClub and central authorities. The leaders of the sport in Moscow repeatedly argued for the need to make alpinism a national sport in the mountainous republics, maintaining that the inclusion of local inhabitants was one of the key differences between Soviet and bourgeois alpinism. Georgian alpinists, especially those from Svaneti, were specifically praised as being representative examples of this goal.[94] Nonetheless, despite such proclamations, Soviet alpinism

---

[90] *NSNM* no. 10 (1938): 12.
[91] *NSNM* no. 7 (1938): 2. The secretary of the Telavi Komsomol also called for the creation of an alpinist club in Telavi as the result of the successful alpiniada on Komito. See *NSNM* no. 10 (1938): 2.
[92] *Sovetskii turizim i al'pinizm*, 12 January 1941.
[93] *Sovetskii turizim i al'pinizm*, 12 January 1941.
[94] *Sovetskii turizim i al'pinizm,* 15 December 1940.

remained primarily focused on sending members of trade unions to alpine camps run by the trade unions' own DSOs. The Georgian AlpClub would be criticized in the following years for its failure to support alpinism in trade union organizations in the largest cities of Georgia, despite its long history of developing alpinism in places like Mestia and Kazbegi. In this case, the worker simply retained primacy over the peasant. The lack of a camp though, made it difficult for the AlpClub to address these criticisms and left it without a central training facility, forcing it to rely even more heavily on the alpiniada as the principal means of promoting alpinism in Georgia.

The Construction of a Soviet Alpine History

In the late 1930s, leading Soviet alpinists did not just redefine the practices of the sport, they also began the process of creating an official history of Soviet climbing. The recent repression of key alpinists like Krylenko and Semenovskii, who were clearly central figures in the development of proletarian climbing, created challenges for how to conceptualize Soviet alpinism after the implementation of new leadership at the VSA in 1938. In the previous decade, repressed climbers had led some of the most important climbs and written a number of influential books that were difficult to ignore and even more difficult to acknowledge. Perhaps more importantly, larger questions about the periodization of Soviet climbing were still up for debate. Most notably, Soviet climbers were divided over when exactly Soviet alpinism began, a question that was fraught with political meaning.

These questions were vigorously debated at a late 1938 meeting of senior instructors. There, Boris Delone, a professor of mathematics and top Soviet alpinist, argued that the key break for Soviet alpinism was the 1928 German-Soviet expedition to the Pamirs and thus this date should be considered the beginning of Soviet climbing. The claim drew rebukes from

several instructors, who accused Delone of failing to highlight the difference between Soviet climbing in the Caucasus and the Tsarist politics in the region, in addition to not having a critical enough attitude about the dangers of foreign climbers. But the strongest reproach came from Sandro Gvalia, who was incensed that Delone overlooked Giorgi Nikoladze's 1923 expedition to Kazbegi. As he argued, the expedition occurred even before the Society for Proletarian Tourism was founded (the predecessor to the OPTE) and was "accomplished by Soviet students under the leadership of Soviet people and with Soviet funds." 1923, in Gvalia's opinion, should be counted as the beginning of Soviet alpinism. Gvalia further argued that it was wrong to highlight the accomplishments of Nikolai Krylenko, who had led the Soviet side of the joint 1928 Pamir expedition, since he was now a well-known enemy of the people. Others at the meeting likewise condemned the written work of repressed alpinists like Semenovskii and Vorob'ev.[95]

These debates over the history of Soviet climbing highlighted the fact that, as one instructor noted, "we do not have a history of alpinism."[96] This was to say that, in a sport driven by officially acknowledging first ascents, key expeditions, and leading personalities, there was still no common narrative to define Soviet climbing. Professor Delone suggested 1928 as the fundamental point when Soviet mountaineering began while Gvalia contended this break happened with Nikoladze's expedition in 1923. Later, a third climber argued that 1917 was the real beginning of Soviet alpinism since after the revolution, all climbs were accomplished by Soviet people.[97] Ultimately, the instructors concluded that it was difficult to answer these questions because they lacked materials from the various climbing organizations about important expeditions. As a result, they decided to create a brigade to request the necessary documents,

[95] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 ll. 1-16. For Gvalia's response, see pages 4-8. Delone's report is not included in the stenographic account, but the general content of what he said was summarized by several climbers and included in the report.
[96] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 l. 10.
[97] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 l. 11.

after which they planned to form a special commission to further discuss the matter. One climber raised the possibility of creating an "anthology" (sbornik) of climbing materials detailing the history of Soviet alpinism, along with a compendium of key dates. It is unclear what happened to these early efforts, although it seems a nine-person commission headed by Pavel Rototaev and including Sandro Gvalia was formed. The proposed history though, was delayed by the onset of war, and an anthology of Soviet alpinism was only published in 1949.[98]

Although important questions about the history of Soviet alpinism were pushed back until after the war, it is clear that from the very beginning Georgian alpinists like Gvalia were intent on making sure that Nikoladze's 1923 expedition was considered the beginning of Soviet climbing. On one level, Gvalia was right that this Nikoladze's first expedition reflected the values of Soviet alpinism as they existed in the late 1930s. The expedition was a "mass ascent" and not an individual undertaking, it included important cooperation with local people, promoted the inclusion of women as equal partners on the climb, and was accomplished without any accidents or injuries. And yet, Gvalia intentionally failed to highlight the fact that, according to Nikoladze's own account of the expedition, the summit was considered a national success and not a Soviet one. This omission was part of a larger process to merge the history of Georgian climbing into a Soviet narrative and reflected the growing integration of Georgian climbers into the institutions of Soviet alpinism. Gvalia was joined by other leading Georgian alpinists like Alexander Japaridze and Levan Maruashvili who argued that the origins of both Georgian and Soviet alpinism dated to 1923.[99] These efforts were soon successful. After one journalist visited the headquarters of the AlpClub in the center of Tbilisi in 1941, he published a positive overview of the history of climbing in Georgia in the newspaper *Soviet Tourism and Alpinism* under the

---

[98] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 70 l. 12-16. The anthology was published as: *K vershinam Sovetskoi zemli* (Moscow, 1949).
[99] *NSNM* no. 7 (1938): 2; *Sovetskii turizim i al'pinizm,* 12 January 1941.

title “The homeland of Soviet alpinism.” Here, the author praised Nikoladze’s expeditions to Kazbegi and Elbrus in 1923 and 1925, highlighted how these exploits garnered positive attention from the “alpmaster” himself Douglas Freshfield, and noted the tragic deaths of climbers like Simon Japaridze and Pimen Dvali, concluding that “(e)ighteen years ago our Georgian brothers laid the foundation for alpinism in the USSR.”[100] The account marked a significant shift from how these events were understood just a few years prior, where Nikoladze was criticized for holding Menshevik sympathies, correspondence with Douglas Freshfield was considered an affront to proletarian touring, and the deaths of Georgian alpinists were blamed on a reckless desire for bourgeois record-setting.[101] The new emphasis on the centrality of Georgian climbing in the 1920s to the development of Soviet alpinism illustrates both the successful ability of Georgian alpinists to remake their early history into a more palatable Soviet narrative and also the continued importance of this history to the Georgian climbing community. Georgian alpinists were invested in two projects that they did not see as mutually exclusive – the national idea of mountaineering as envisioned by the Nikoladze in 1923 and the larger goals of Soviet alpinism that emerged after the liquidation of the OPTE. The contradictions between these two projects would soon become apparent.

The “Al’pinistka” and the Challenges of Women Climbers

Under the OPTE, proletarian touring was envisioned as part of the battle for women’s equality and articles promoting the inclusion of women in tourist sections and activities regularly appeared in the pages of *On land and on sea.* As one 1931 article argued, “We must begin a decisive fight with the prejudice about the unfeasibility (neposil'nost') of tourist travels for

[100] *Sovetskii turizim i al’pinizm*, 2 March 1941; For a positive account of Georgian alpinist history, see also: *NSNM* no. 2 (1941): 8-9.
[101] See chapter two.

women" adding that the question of whether or not women had the right to participate in tourism itself "provoked laughter" for its sheer absurdity.[102] Women's involvement in alpinism was considered an important part of this battle, and the same article praised the work of Georgian "al'pinistki" (women alpinists) like Alexandra Japaridze and Asmat Nikolaishvili, among other women climbers.

All of this meant that women should have been central to the project of Soviet alpinism. Nonetheless, despite the extensive rhetoric advocating for equality, the sport often remained hostile to the inclusion of women climbers and misogynistic attitudes about women's physical abilities remained endemic. The case of Irina Korzun, a talented Russian alpinist who began climbing while still a student, illustrates some of the difficulties that Soviet women faced when trying to become alpinists. Korzun's climbing career started at an alpinist camp in the North Caucasus, where at the end of the summer she hoped to be included on a planned ascent on the neighboring Belalakaia peak. Despite her obvious skills, her candidacy was rejected because the doctor judged the difference between her resting and active heart rate to be too great; in short, she could not handle the physical stresses of the climb. Undeterred, Korzun cleverly inserted herself into the planned ascent, separately telling both instructors that she had received permission from the other. Soon it was too late to force her back, and Korzun became part of the first Soviet summit on the Belalakaia peak – an impressive achievement that involved considerable danger. But instead of being encouraged along the way, she was taunted by other climbers, who told her that she "plods, like a donkey" and that she would "make a mess of things" – insults that were clearly driven by gender. In the following years, Korzun would become one of the Soviet Union's leading alpinists making a number of impressive first ascents while also taking a leadership position at the VSA before being swept up in the repressions. But

[102] *NSNM* no. 5-6 (1931): 1-3.

the initial refusal to acknowledge her climbing abilities and the gendered ridicule she received from her colleagues speaks to the difficulty that Soviet women faced when trying to break into a sport still dominated by men.[103]

These contradictions between rhetoric and reality were on full display in a March 1935 issue of *On land and at sea*. The issue, published to celebrate International Women's Day, contained several articles about the contributions of women to tourism, including a full page on Maria Preobrazhenskaia, the first Russian woman alpinist. Another article strongly criticized the belief that women alpinists were not as physically capable as their male counterparts as a "disgusting attitude," but one that, the authors claimed, "is rarely observed," a view that was undoubtedly optimistic.[104] Despite praising the contributions of women to the OPTE, the journal presented a clearly sexualized vision of the woman tourist in its images. The front cover contained the close up of an attractive and well-dressed woman trekking in a forest with bamboo poles, unmistakably wearing lipstick, an unusual accessory for the proletarian tourist. Meanwhile the inside cover included a picture of a woman standing in a snowy field with a towering mountain behind her, wearing only a tank top, shorts well above the knee, hiking boots, and sunglasses – an outfit that was scandalously at odds with the snowy landscape portrayed behind her. The two images offered an alternative vision of the woman tourist not as an equal member

---

[103]*NSNM* no. 11 (1936): 14; see also Iurii Itskovich, "Irina Korzun, k stoletiiu so dnia rozhdeniia," http://www.alpklubspb.ru/ass/a643.htm (last accessed June 26, 2019). The account in the Saint Petersburg AlpClub gives more details of Korzun's first ascent taken from her memoir. Although repressed, Korzun continued to participate in alpinist activities in the following decades.

[104] The small size and "fragile" stature of women was often noted in contrast to their alpinist achievements. Although meant as a compliment, such descriptions often underscored that women climbers were physically weaker than men. See for example, the description of the Master of Sport E.A. Kazakova in *On land and on sea: NSNM* no. 3 (1941): 19.

of the collective but as a potential sexual partner, an attitude that would plague alpinism in the post-war era.[105]

The failure to fully remake alpinism into a sport that welcomed men and women equally would only worsen after the liquidation of the OPTE. As Eva Maurer has argued, the increasing militarization of the sport during the late 1930s and during the war meant that mountaineering was increasingly considered a "male sphere of action" that helped to reinforce already existing stenotypes about the superiority of men's abilities. Maurer notes that before the war women were even barred from becoming instructors.[106] Despite these challenges, the number of women alpinists continued to increase across the 1930s. By 1938, there were 5580 women participating in alpinist activities, making up over 20 percent of the total number of participants.[107] But these numbers hid the fact that, despite increasing participation from women, at its highest levels the sport was dominated by men. In 1939, there were only eight women who held the rank of Alpinist of the USSR Second Level, whereas there were 122 men that held the title.[108] Two years later, four of these women were awarded the title of Master of Sport in Alpinism, one of whom was Alexandra Japaridze.[109] But the number of top ranked women alpinists remained low. By 1948, only two more women held the title of Master of Sport, meaning that out of the 87 active climbers who held the rank of Honored Master of Sport or Master in Sport in Alpinism, only six of them were women – less than seven percent.

---

[105] *NSNM* no. 5 (1935): 3-4, 7-9; John Hope has noted how men alpinists often believed that women came to the camp in search of a husband. John Hope, ""Vot eto dlia muzhchin – riukzak i ledorub: Soviet Mountaineering, Popular Culture, and the Question of Gender" paper presented at the Central Eurasia Studies Society (CESS) 2017 Annual Conference, Seattle Washington, October 2017.
[106] E. Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as Mass Sport," 157.
[107] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 102 ll. 6-7, 38. Maurer cites a different set of statistics form 1939-1941, where women's participation was also 20 percent. E. Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as Mass Sport," 157.
[108] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 105 l. 7, 38.
[109] Japaridze *rcheuli nats'erebi*, 368-370; *PV* (1948): 422-436

Until the post-war period, Georgian alpinism stood out from these overall trends in a number of unique ways. Since Nikoladze's first ascent on Kazbegi in 1923, Georgian alpinists had insisted on the need for women's participation in climbing activities. Nikoladze rejected a belief in women's inherent physical weakness and explicitly argued that the physical abilities of women climbers were equal to that of their male counterparts, a conviction that was almost certainly a result of his own career as a gymnast. This initial orientation would have lasting effects on the Georgian climbing community, which was regularly celebrated for its large cadre of women climbers throughout the 1930s. And yet, by the late 1930s, most of the women who participated in key expeditions from first decade of Georgian climbing disappear from the archival record for reasons that are not entirely clear, but seem to suggest their decreased importance to Georgian climbing. Nonetheless, the participation of Georgian women climbers during this early history was a powerful symbol that continued to be important to the Georgian climbing community even after the war. In one undated photo likely taken sometime in the mid-1950s, participants from the first expeditions to Kazbegi in 1923, like Alexandra Japaridze, Asmat Nikolaishvili, and Maro Tk'avadze, are flanked by a younger generation of women climbers, a clear linkage between past and present.[110]

Of these early climbers, Alexandra Japaridze in particular would be central to the Georgian climbing community for at least four decades. Japaridze's climbs on Tetnuldi and Ushba, along with a long list of other daring summits and traverses, were frequently celebrated by the Soviet press and placed Japaridze as one of the Soviet Union's leading alpinists.[111] Japaridze was one of the first women to receive the title of Master of Sport before the war, and

[110] Ivane Japaridze, *mq'invarts'veridan everest'amde* (Tbilisi, 2010): 150. Maro Tk'vadze was listed as an active climber in a 1959 compendium of Georgian climbers, but I have unfortunately not been able to find any sources that speak more broadly to her climbing career. See *k'avk'asionze, 297.*
[111] For instance, see *NSNM* no. 3 (1939): 7.

one of only two women to hold the title of Honored Master of Sport in 1945 – the highest title a Soviet climber could achieve.[112] More than these awards, Japaridze's commitment to difficult ascents and unyielding approach to impasses almost certainly inspired an entire generation of Georgian climbers, both men and women.[113] In one of the best-known examples recounted in *On land and at sea* in 1939, Japaridze refused to descend off a sheer cliff face near the Ushba peak during the 1934 expedition, preferring instead to spend the night hanging from her rope on the exposed wall in order to save her strength for another attempt in the morning. The decision ensured that the other members of the expedition would not give up the attempt and was a critical turning point that ultimately led to a successful summit – a key event in Soviet alpinist history.[114]

The centrality of women to Georgian climbing history and the reliance on the alpiniada meant that the Georgian AlpClub was arguably more open to women's participation than other alpinist organizations, even as they failed to live up to Nikoladze's lofty and unfulfilled goal of equality. As Korzun's account makes clear, the official alpine camp was often a hostile place for Soviet women, who were frequently refused the opportunity to develop their climbing skills because of a supposed lack of physical ability. This trend only intensified after the war, where several DSOs set upper limits on the number of women who could train at their camps, ensuring

---

[112] *PV* (1948): 425. There were eleven total alpinists holding the title of Honored Master of Sport in 1945. See also GARF f. 7576 op. 1 d. 570 l. 52.

[113] Otar Gigineishvili, one of the leaders of Georgian alpinism in the post-war period, noted how Giorgi Nikoladze, Alexandra Japaridze, and Alexander Japaridze would visit his school to share details of their exploits with the schoolchildren, and how this tradition was kept alive by Alexandra Japaridze after the deaths of Giorgi Nikoladze and Alexander Japaridze. The visits clearly help inspire Gigineishvili to become an alpinist. See *PV* (1970-1971): 359-378.

[114] *NSNM* no. 3 (1939): 7. See also Japaridze *Shturm Ushby*, 76-79. Although sleeping on the wall is now fairly common, especially among "big-wall" rock climbers, this was not a typical practice for Soviet climbing. Today climbers utilize specialized equipment that makes this practice safer and more comfortable, but in 1934 Japaridze was relying only on her climbing rope. The decision was one that came with a good deal of risk, especially if the weather conditions deteriorated.

that the majority of participants were men.[115] In contrast, the alpiniada had the potential to ensure that more women would summit peaks at the first and second level of difficulty, the first step in becoming an alpinist. Since the alpiniada was focused on mass ascents of novice alpinists and gained prestige the higher the number of participants, there was no reason to turn away potential climbers, especially those that could partially fund their own participation in the summit. This often resulted in a large number of women participants. For example, out of the 250 participants in the 1937 Khevi alpiniada, 50 of them were women.[116] The 1938 Tusheti alpiniada likewise counted ten women out of 44 total participants, still over twenty percent. Perhaps more importantly, the Tusheti alpiniada resulted in four of the participants becoming alpinists, two of whom were women.[117] Nonetheless, the alpiniada did not guarantee that women would be involved – the celebrated 1937 Svaneti alpiniada on Tetnuldi included only three women out of 182 total participants, a dismally small number.[118] Unfortunately the lack of sources makes it difficult to trace the exact extent of women's participation in alpiniadas organized by the Georgian AlpClub, but this form of training was arguably far more open to cultivating women climbers than the trade unions' alpine camps – a fact that was related much more closely to nature of the alpiniada than the organizers' own attitudes about women climbers.

Alexandra Japaridze's leadership likewise helped to recruit a younger generation of Georgian women into the sport. In March 1941, Japaridze led a ski-ascent on the nearly 4100-meter Alagez peak in Armenia to celebrate International Women's Day. The nine-person group was made up entirely of women, and included both junior and senior members of the Georgian climbing community. Japaridze was aided by the Latvian alpinist Selma Bilkhen, an

---

[115] Maurer, "*Al'pinizm* as Mass Sport," 157.
[116] Japaridze, *rcheuli nats'erebi,* 225.
[117] *NSNM* notes that these four climbers participated in the first All-Georgian alpiniada later in 1938. *NSNM* no. 10 (1938): 24-25.
[118] *NSNM* no. 12 (1937): 24.

ethnographer who had been climbing with Georgian alpinists in the Caucasus since at least the mid-1930s and one of the Soviet Union's top women alpinists. Among the other participants were Nata Tsnobiladze and Deniza Gozalishvili. Tsnobiladze herself noted earlier in 1941 how the Georgian AlpClub had helped her summit Kazbegi in 1940, almost certainly as part of an alpiniada led by Sandro Gvalia.[119] As she detailed, her next goal was to master skiing, one that was now achieved under Alexandra Japaridze's tutelage during the Alagez expedition. Deniza Gozalishvili, meanwhile would become an integral part of the Georgian AlpClub in the post-war period and published a number of important texts on Georgian climbing.[120] Both would participate in important climbs on the Chaukhi massif in 1943, led by Alexander Japaridze.[121]

In the post-war period, Marine Utmelidze emerged as one of the leading Georgian alpinists, taking part in a daring traverse of both of Ushba's peaks in 1952. Utmelidze was eventually awarded the title of Master of Alpinism in 1955, becoming the second Georgian woman to achieve the honor behind Alexandra Japaridze.[122] But despite these examples, the participation of Georgian women in alpinist activities continued to decrease, and by the mid-1950s was a fraction of the first decade of Georgian climbing. As one report detailing the work of the AlpClub from 1951-1955 noted, besides Marine Utmelidze's participation in the record 1952 Ushba traverse, Georgian women were completely excluded from the most important expeditions. The report noted that the reason for this was that the men believed they could not feel "free" or unrestricted if women were included, suggesting that despite an earlier history of women's participation, Georgian men came to embody the same misogynistic beliefs about

---

[119] K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze*, 328, *Sovetskii turizm i al'pinizm,* 12 January 1941.
[120] See Japaridze, *mq'invarts'veridan,* 152-153
[121] K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze,* 331.
[122] Japaridze, *mq'invarts'veridan,* 148-150; *PV* (1957): 430.

women's abilities that permeated Soviet alpinism as a whole.[123] It does not seem that this situation changed markedly in the following decades, even if the AlpClub argued in official reports for the need for more women's participation.

Georgian Alpinism During the War

The onset of war in 1941 initially shifted the work of the Georgian AlpClub towards the defense of the Caucasus. Hitler's focus on capturing the Caucasus placed Georgian alpinists at the center of the war effort in the region, and the Georgian AlpClub participated widely in preparing specialized units to fight in mountainous zones. Alexander Japaridze's 1945 report on the work of the club during the war gives some telling figures: in 1941, the club created a 50 hour program for recruits across Georgia, mobilizing the best alpinists the club had to offer, Japaridze included. This work ultimately trained 1000 recruits. In 1942 the club conducted a thirty-day preparatory course for Komsomol snipers and special units. In winter of 1942-1943 the club trained 2500 Red Army fighters in mountain skiing. Georgian alpinists likewise were not just involved in training, but actively "fought with (against) the best German and Italian alpine divisions."[124] Svan alpinists created their own partisan detachment and Beknu and Gabriel Khergiani took part in the celebrated 1943 expedition to remove the Nazi flag on the Elbrus peak placed there by German troops as part of operation Edelweiss.[125] The AlpClub likewise engaged in cartographic work, guiding, and providing weather forecasts for the Red Army. In short, the club was instrumental in aiding Soviet war efforts in the region and Georgian climbers were

[123] sea. 1744 1 1330 19
[124] sea, p. 1744 a. 1 s. 291 p. 2a.
[125] 1943 g. Zapiska s vershiny Elbrusa, voennoe snariazhenie, dokumenti https://www.risk.ru/blog/197609 (last accessed June 26, 2019).

awarded numerous medals for their part in the defense of the Caucasus.[126] As Pavel Rototaev himself noted, "The Georgian Al'pklub made a great contribution in the cause of the defeat of the German-Fascist invaders," both in aiding the Red Army and in preparing the population of Georgia for national defense.[127] If there was any question about the loyalty and dedication of Georgian climbers to the Soviet project, these doubts were fully dispelled by the middle of the war.

By early 1943, the Red Army began to push Nazi troops out of the Caucasus and the immediate danger to the region lessened significantly, essentially ending by the fall of that year. As a result, the Georgian AlpClub began to restart regular alpinist activities, beginning with a large expedition to explore the Chaukhi massif in August 1943. Alexander Japaridze in particular articulated the need for Soviet alpinists to renew their focus on challenging summits, in order to prove the superiority of Soviet climbing even during a period of war. To this end, Japaridze organized a traverse of the Ushba-Shkhelda peaks, a goal that he had held since at least 1941. The expedition was likewise intended to celebrate 20 years of Soviet alpinism and initiate a new "era" of Georgian climbing. Originally planned to begin in August, organizational delays pushed the traverse back until the end of October – well into the winter climbing season. The delay made already challenging summit of the Ushba's twin peaks followed by Shkhelda's six peaks even more difficult.[128]

Undeterred by the delay, Japaridze's group of six alpinists reached the southern summit of Ushba in early November, a substantial achievement and first winter ascent on the peak. Japaridze's group was made up of a number of familiar names, including Goji Zurebiani and Telemak Japaridze, both key participants in the search for Simon Japaridze and Pimen Dvali in

---

[126] For Japaridze's report, see sea p. 1744 a.1 s. 291 p.1-8a. See also *Krasnyi sport,* 24 October 1944.
[127] sea p. 1744 a.1 s. 292 p. 1-2.
[128] P.S. Rototaev, *Pobezhdennaia Ushba* (Moscow 1948), 100.

1929. Other climbers included Grigorii Raizer, Nikolai Mukhin, and Keleshbi Oniani, a local Svan. The group's success was quickly threatened, however, when an unforeseen storm gathered and stranded the group on the summit at well over 4600 meters. Japaridze was forced to abandon the traverse and wait for better weather, but the storm only got worse. For seven days, the six alpinists took refuge in their small tents in freezing weather and biting wind. The group's situation further deteriorated when a gust of wind blew their rucksack filled with food reserves off the mountain, and the alpinists had nothing to eat for four days. Zurebiani described how the intense hunger tormented the group, giving them vivid hallucinations of feasts taking place in the villages below them.[129] When the weather finally broke, the group faced additional challenges when Telemak Japaridze and Grigorii Raizer began to suffer from frostbite. Ultimately, everyone descended safely, but not before the frostbite had become quite advanced. Alexander Japaridze had led a remarkable summit but at a significant cost: Telemak Japaridze needed to have his leg amputated and Raizer died of gangrene from the frostbite shortly after the decent.[130]

The death of one climber and the serious injury of another were taken seriously by the VSA, whose leaders concluded that the expedition had failed because of Japaridze's leadership, poor organization, and hasty selection of group members. At the heart of this criticism was again the issue of control. Japaridze received permission for the climb from the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture and Sport as well as the All Union Committee of Physical Culture and Sport, but not from the VSA. Since questions of approval had never been fully worked out after the punishment of Beletskii in 1938, is not clear that the VSA actually had the power to forbid this climb, but alpinists at the VSA were incensed that the heads of both the All Union and Georgian Committees of Physical Culture and Sport would challenge their authority. The VSA demanded

[129] Khergiani, *Tigr Skal,* 89-90.
[130] For more details of the expedition see: Rototaev, *Pobezhdennaia Ushba*, 100-111; *Krasnyi sport*, 7 March 1944.

a “severe penalty” be given to the chairman of the Georgian Committee and moved to make sure that all committees and other organizations of physical culture understood that they did not have the right to approve difficult ascents without a special commission from the VSA. In short, the VSA used Japaridze’s failed 1943 expedition as a means to assert their exclusive right to control all alpinist activities. If the 1938 Beletskii incident left unanswered questions about the rights of local institutions to approve ascents, the rebuke of Japaridze after the 1943 Ushba-Shkhelda expedition offered a definitive answer – approval for the most difficult climbs could only be given by the VSA itself. In the aftermath of the 1943 expedition, the VSA forbade Japaridze from leading alpinist work and agreed to remove his title of Honored Master of Sport, which would essentially end the alpinist career of one of the Soviet Union’s leading alpinists.[131]

The VSA initially did not ask Japaridze for his account of events and never informed him that they were depriving him of his title of Honored Master of Sport. When he discovered this news secondhand from another Georgian alpinist in Moscow, Japaridze sent a scathing letter to Pavel Rototaev, the head of the VSA, arguing that it was unfair to judge him in absentia and that the VSA’s information was founded “on fairy tales, on rumors, on some kind of dubious reports.” Japaridze further condemned the VSA for its lack of leadership during the war, noting that while the Georgian Alpine Club was preparing reservists for the defense of the Caucasus, the VSA was completely absent, having sent only two small pieces of unsubstantial correspondence to the AlpClub over the last three years. He likewise accused the VSA of hypocrisy, noting that in previous years leading alpinists had conducted important expeditions that ended in serious injury and even death, but instead of being reprimanded they were praised and even given titles. Japaridze conceded that the death of Raizer and the amputation of Telemak Japaridze’s leg was tragic, but the frostbite did not stem from organizational failures and could have been better

[131] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 28g l. 84-85b.

addressed with "more modern medical care" in Svaneti, a claim that suggested the failure of Soviet modernity in the periphery. Instead of being criticized, he argued that the expedition should be recognized by the VSA as an important achievement in the development of Soviet alpinism – something that many leading Soviet climbers had already done. Japaridze concluded his letter by directly challenging the ability of the VSA to end his alpinist career: "I do alpinism not because of a title and began to practice it when no kind of title yet existed in alpinism except 'alpinist.' I was an alpinist long before the organization of the All Union Section and will be until the end of my life – no one will be able to take that away from me."[132] Here, Japaridze was directly challenging not just the institutional authority of the VSA, but its moral authority to lead Soviet alpinism.

The VSA eventually rescinded their decision to remove Japaridze's title, but Georgian alpinists gained an unfavorable reputation for conducting risky summits late in the season, attracting additional unwanted scrutiny from the VSA. When Japaridze and the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture and Sport raised the possibility of another attempt at an Ushba-Shkhelda traverse in June 1945, the VSA initially refused to permit it and reasserted that the Georgian Committee did not have the right to approve the expedition. The VSA requested that Japaridze come to Moscow and submit additional materials because of his "violations" from 1943. The traverse was eventually approved by the VSA, but all of these requests pushed the attempt well into the fall when the weather was much more dangerous. [133]

Now sanctioned to conduct the traverse, Japaridze reorganized the expedition based on lessons learned in 1943. Instead of six climbers, the 1945 expedition would include a "storming group" of only three climbers, Nikolai Mukhin, Keleshbi Oniani, and Alexander Japaridze, but

---

[132] Letter from Al. Japaridze to Rototaev, August 8, 1944. Personal archive of Ivane Japaridze, Tbilisi, Georgia.
[133] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 28 l. 28-29.

would be aided by an auxiliary group for the first part of the climb. Japaridze also arranged extensive rescue operations and created a detailed plan to abandon the traverse in the case of bad weather. A rescue group made up of Evgenii Abalakov, Nikolai Gusak, Beknu Khergiani, and Goji Zurebiani – all holders of the title of Master or Honored Master of Sport in Alpinism – was formed in case the climbers needed direct aid from below.

Japaridze, Mukhin, and Oniani began the first ascent on Ushba on September 25th, signaling twice a day that they remained in good condition. Despite these precautions, the weather soon worsened and by October 3rd the climbers were no longer visible or in touch with the supporting groups on the ground. By October 6th, the climbers had exceeded the control time set for the first section of the traverse and a rescue was arranged. But the weather continued to impede the rescue efforts. Only on October 12th, when the weather partially cleared, were the three climbers spotted, attempting to descend from the northern peak of Ushba. The trio of climbers had waited out the storm on the peak itself, spending several days without food reserves. Despite every attempt, the rescue group – made up of some of the best climbers in the Soviet Union – could only watch helplessly as the weather further deteriorated. Airplanes that had been specially arranged for this very possibility likewise failed to find any trace of the endangered climbers, despite making multiple risky passes near the peak. With every passing day, the chances of survival lessened exponentially. For two weeks the weather made it impossible for the rescue group to make any progress, and it took until the end of October until they were able to find traces of the stranded climbers. Soon it was obvious that the climbers had not survived the ordeal – Japaridze, Mukhin, and Oniani had perished weeks prior, likely attempting a descent on October 12th. An expedition in 1946 found definitive evidence that the climbers had died in an avalanche, but it would take twelve years before bodies of the fallen

climbers were recovered despite extensive search efforts the following year. Alexander Japaridze, the indomitable leader of Georgian climbing, was dead, killed by his beloved Ushba.[134]

The Meaning of Loss at the Intersection of Empire

Japaridze's death was a huge loss for the Georgian mountaineering community and one that inflamed tensions between the Alpine Club and VSA even further. Georgian alpinists placed the blame for Japaridze's death squarely on the VSA, arguing that without the unnecessary "red tape" delaying the expedition until the fall, Japaridze's group might not have perished.[135] Although the conflict over the 1943 Ushba expedition was ostensibly about safety, the VSA's actions in 1945 illustrated that the real issue was one of control. The VSA had used the injury of Telemak Japaridze and death of Raizer in 1943 to challenge the independence of the Georgian AlpClub, and threatened to strip its chairman of his qualifications to continue leading alpinist activities, despite the fact that there were multiple other instances where Soviet climbers had undertaken risky climbs without punishment. When Georgian alpinists were forced to cede approval for the Ushba-Shkhelda traverse to the VSA, the AlpClub was needlessly delayed. The lesson was a bitter one: either insist on the right to approve summits at the regional level and be threatened with punishment, or accept the authority of the VSA to regulate the AlpClub's activities.

Since the punishment of Beletskii's group in 1938, the VSA had used safety protocols as a way to gain greater control over the sport. In general, this tighter regulation helped to decrease the number of alpinist deaths and injuries. But at least in this case, the VSA had clearly delayed a

---

[134] Rototaev, *Pobezhdennaia Ushba*,111-119.
[135] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 40 l. 46.

well-planned traverse late into the season simply to assert its right to regulate alpinist activities at the highest level. The insistence on checking the AlpClub's safety precautions paradoxically ensured that the traverse was taken under much more dangerous conditions, and Georgian climbers were not wrong to blame the delay for the deadly outcome. The censure of Japaridze in 1943 and his ultimate death in 1945 illustrated that, despite the immense reorganization of alpinist work since 1936, the creation of the VSA had done little to change the relationship between the Georgian climbing community and authorities in Moscow that had existed since the foundation of the OPTE. In the following years, relations between Georgian AlpClub and VSA would devolve into outright conflict and open hostility, the result not just of Japaridze's death in 1945 but also over a decade and a half of frustrations with the central institutions of the sport. By 1945, it was clear that Soviet alpinism was largely a sport for Russians and that the central institutions of the sport had little patience for local initiatives or desire to promote alpinists from the periphery.

Mountaineers may have been only one tiny segment of Soviet society, but I would argue that the institutional and interpersonal conflicts that developed between the Georgian AlpClub and the VSA are illustrative of larger tensions in an empire ostensibly built on equality between nationalities. The frustrations and grievances of Georgian alpinists as they attempted to develop a national climbing community speak to the ways that the Soviet Union failed to ensure that equality. By 1945, Georgian climbers had accomplished two of the stated goals of Soviet alpinism where the trade unions had largely failed, the creation of climbing communities in mountainous regions and the promotion of women climbers. In a sport that was increasingly represented by the Soviet intelligentsia, Georgian climbing had more "peasant" alpinists than any other organization. Meanwhile, no other alpinist society could cite the integral participation of

women or such a long history of their involvement in climbing activities. Georgian climbers had helped achieve some of Soviet alpinism's greatest successes, but they were rarely supported by the sport's central institutions like the OPTE, TEU, or VSA, which often interfered in their activities, failed to provide proper material support, and regularly exhibited chauvinistic attitudes about the Caucasus. Ultimately, the development of mountaineering in Georgia was a success not because of Soviet policies or institutions, but in spite of them. Histories of Soviet nationalities policy have often emphasized the constructive nature of Soviet rule; that is, the many ways that the Soviet federalism succeeded in promoting national identities and national spaces. But in the case of alpinism, Soviet authorities proved remarkably hostile to the project of Georgian climbing. On paper the Soviet Union may have been committed to a politics of anti-imperialism, but on mountain trails and alpine paths these ambitions were never fully realized.

CHAPTER 5: A QUESTION OF RESPECT: GEORGIAN MOUNTAINEERING AFTER THE WAR

Introduction

The deaths of Alexander Japaridze, Nikolai Mukhin, and Keleshbi Oniani on the slopes of Ushba in 1945 caused the fraught relationship between Georgian climbers and the All Union Section of Alpinism (VSA) to grow even worse after the war. Georgian alpinists had a well-established list of grievances with the governing bodies of the sport going back to the early 1930s, but the tragic results of the 1945 Ushba-Shkhelda expedition dramatically escalated the intensity of this conflict. Part of the reason for this was personal. At the time, Alexander Japaridze had been the head of the Georgian Alpine Club and one of the leading figures of the Georgian climbing movement for at least a decade. Japaridze's indomitable climbing style, meanwhile, meant that he had already survived a number of dangerous climbs, narrowly escaping death in both the Caucasus and Central Asia. In perhaps the most famous example, Japaridze was forced to crawl back on his hands and knees after losing feeling in his limbs while attempting to climb the 7100-meter Korzhenevskoi Peak in the Pamirs in 1936, resulting in severe frostbite and an extended stay in a Central Asian hospital.[1] Japaridze's uncanny ability to survive risky situations made his death even more shocking and arguably marked the first major loss for Georgian climbers since Shota Mikeladze in 1932.[2]

This chapter examines the aftermath of Japaridze's death and the ways that conflict between the Georgian Alpine Club and the VSA evolved after the war before an eventual rapprochement between the two groups in the early-mid 1950s. The VSA used the deadly 1945

[1] *NSNM* no. 4 (1937): 4-6.
[2] There were two other deaths before Alexander Japaridze's accident – one in 1939 and another in 1942, but these two deaths did not have the same impact on the AlpClub.

expedition and another incident in 1946 to dramatically curtail the rights of Georgian climbers, allowing the AlpClub to climb only the easiest peaks in the Caucasus without approval from Moscow. Until the early 1950s, Georgian climbers retained a largely unfair reputation for insubordination and reckless climbing and the AlpClub was repeatedly criticized for failing to develop worker alpinists and for a lack of financial discipline. Despite these attacks, the Georgian AlpClub remained dedicated to utilizing alpinism in the service of the nation and continued many of the same practices that had defined Georgian climbing since 1923. Conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi only ameliorated in the early 1950s due to the changing goals of Soviet alpinism and a new social contract that deemphasized the centrality of workers to the Soviet project as a whole. By the mid-1950s, Soviet alpinism began to focus on high-altitude ascents on peaks over 6000 meters, a reflection of global mountaineering practices, which necessitated a shift towards climbing in Central Asia and abroad. Georgian alpinists were active participants in the fight to climb the world's highest peaks, but this demanded a reorientation of the goals of Georgian climbing and a closer and more productive relationship with the VSA. By 1955, the VSA was no longer focused exclusively on the primacy of worker alpinists and began to see the Georgian AlpClub as a positive model for the development of alpinism in Central Asia. All of these factors meant that the relationship between the AlpClub and the VSA substantially changed in the early post-Stalin period and involved coordination and cooperation where there was once conflict. As I argue, these changes suggest that even in a period of renewed Russian nationalism, the relationship between Russians and non-Russians was more complicated and contingent in ways that transcended these larger political developments.

The Aftermath of Japaridze's Death: The Imposition of Control

For the Georgian climbing community, the deadly results of the failed 1945 expedition demonstrated the ultimate dangers of centralized control and Moscow's interference in their independence. Alexandra Japaridze in particular argued that the death of her brother was not due to a lack of climbing ability or a poorly planned expedition, but because of the VSA's own "protracted red tape" (iz-za dolgoi volokity) in delaying approval for the climb, which pushed the expedition late into the climbing season. Alexandra Japaridze's indictment of the VSA was well known among Soviet climbers, and was cited as late as 1954 by a leading Russian alpinist to illustrate the dangers of delaying alpine expeditions for bureaucratic reasons. Alexandra Japaridze was not wrong in her assessment, and archival evidence suggests that the delay in 1945 was punishment for Alexander Japaridze's decision to climb Ushba without the approval of the VSA in 1943. Questions about approval of both the 1943 and 1945 expeditions fit into a larger pattern of attacks on the unique independence of Georgian climbing organizations by the central sporting authorities since the early 1930s, and Georgian climbers understood Japaridze's death as an unnecessary consequence of this conflict. It is not surprising that immediately after Japaridze's death, Georgian climbers named the AlpClub in his honor, a decision that could also be seen as a repudiation of the VSA.[3] The 1945 expedition has remained important to Georgian sport history, and in the post-Soviet period has been seen as another example of the "imperial immorality" of Soviet policy in the sphere of mountaineering.[4]

For the VSA, however, the two Ushba expeditions illustrated the dangers of an independent and assertive alpine organization and the failures of Georgian climbers specifically

---

[3] See I. Aslanishvili, O. Gigineishvili, D. Purtseladze, *mtamsvleloba saqartveloshi 1923-1950* (Tbilisi, 1954), 99; = Japaridze, *mq'invarts'veridan,* 75-76.
[4] See Ivane Japaridze, "imperiuli uzneobis magalitebi" in *lelo,* 20-22 November 2001 and *lelo,* 23-26 November 2001.

to take safety precautions seriously. Eva Maurer has argued that Japaridze's untimely death likely prevented an "open power struggle" between the climber and central authorities due to the increasingly hostile relations between Georgian alpinists and Moscow.[5] Part of this hostility involved renewed attacks on the independence of the Georgian AlpClub by the central authorities. In February 1945, V. Snegov, the head of the All Union Committee of Physical Culture, sent a letter to the heads of the Georgian Communist Party and Council of People's Commissars requesting that the Georgian Alpine Club be transferred to the trade unions. Snegov praised Georgian mountaineers for their climbing achievements but argued that since funding for alpinist activities was allocated through trade union organizations, it was necessary to transfer the Georgian club to a trade union since it did not currently have enough funding to reach its full potential. The seemingly positive letter was in reality a veiled attempt to undermine the institutional independence of the Alpine Club by appealing to some of the highest political figures in the Georgian republic. The archive is silent about the response of Georgian authorities, but the attempt ultimately failed and the Georgian Alpine Club retained its status as an independent organization. The fact that the Georgian climbers were able to maintain their independence at a period of intense conflict with central authorities suggests that they had strong support for their activities on the republican level and that even as the sport changed they were able to cultivate important relationships with powerful Georgian politicians similar to their experience in the 1920s and 1930s.[6]

The central authorities may not have been able to force the AlpClub into a more subservient institutional framework through the trade unions, but VSA did have the power to limit the rights of what mountains Georgian alpinists could climb. In 1946, the Georgian

---

[5] See Maurer, *Wege zum Pik Stalin,* 304-305.
[6] GARF f. 7576 op. 1 d. 508 l. 58.

climbing community suffered another loss when the alpinist Davit Babak'ishvili was struck in the head by an errant rock fall while resting in his tent during an attempt on the southern peak of Ushba. The incident was purely accidental – as the leader of the expedition noted, the camp was placed in a safe location protected from direct rock falls. A rock could only reach the camp through a ricochet, an unlikely event that was impossible to protect against. It seems Babakishvili was extremely unlucky as well. The deadly rock, weighing no more than two kilograms, struck him on the crown of the head but left his tent-mate unharmed.[7] The incident would likely not have led to an official reprimand, except that the Georgian group was not where they were supposed to be. The climbers had been given permission to conduct training expeditions on several peaks before making a record attempt on the neighboring Shkhara peak, but were not able to complete the ascents by the planned deadline. Facing a quickly closing climbing schedule, the group decided to replace the planned ascent on Shkhara with a traverse of Ushba, two climbs that were similar in difficulty but offered markedly different challenges. It is not entirely clear who approved the change in objectives – whether the expedition leader, the AlpClub, or the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture – but the climbers did not receive permission from the VSA.

Both Babakishvili's death and the circumstances surrounding it were seen by the VSA as more proof that Georgian climbers were insubordinate, irresponsible, and unable to execute basic safety measures. The archival evidence is fragmented, but it seems clear that the VSA used Georgian accidents in 1945 and 1946 to justify new restrictions on the Georgian Alpine Club. In 1947, the VSA forced the AlpClub to apply for permission to climb mountains at the third level

[7] Another account suggests that rock was much larger and dragged Babakishvili out of the tent thirty meters down the mountain. For the two different accounts, see GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 73d ll. 32-33, 41, 44-45. Either account, however, suggests that Babakishvili was extraordinarily unlucky and that there was not much that could have been done to prevent his death.

of difficulty and above, a draconian measure that put sharp constraints on the further development of the Georgian climbing community (experienced mountaineers generally climbed at the fourth level of difficulty and above).[8] The new restrictions deeply angered Georgian climbers, who saw no reason why they should need permission to climb mountains in their own republic, especially if the alpinists had already qualified to climb at that level of difficulty. But the restrictions succeeded where the VSA, and even the OPTE, had previously failed – namely, limiting the independence of Georgian climbers and forcing them to accept the primary authority of Moscow to dictate the rules of Soviet alpinism.

The 1947 Anniversary Traverse

In 1947, the All Union Committee of Physical Culture and Sport organized an extensive traverse crossing the Caucasian range from Elbrus to Kazbegi. The traverse was meant to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the October Revolution, and involved hundreds of climbers from leading DSOs, local committees of physical culture, the Red Army, and other climbing organizations. The Committee of Physical Culture and Sport likewise cooperated with the VSA and the trade unions in planning the event, which marked the first large scale collaboration between the various institutional bodies of Soviet alpinism and illustrated how the sport was quickly evolving in the post-war period. In principle, the anniversary activities should have allowed for a temporary reprieve in hostilities between Georgian climbers and the central authorities, since the traverse was articulated as a celebratory event that included significant participation from the Georgian AlpClub. And yet, by the time the traverse was completed the

[8] It is not clear exactly when these restrictions were put in place, but at least as early as 1947. See, GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 40 l. 46; GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 ll. 58-59. As Eva Maurer notes, the question of route approval was often a contentious issue for other local and national alpinist sections, who were frustrated with the need to obtain approval from Moscow to climb at the highest level. See Maurer, *Wege zum Pik Stalin,* 305.

relationship between Georgian climbers and Moscow deteriorated even further, the continued result of radically different interpretations for the failure of the 1945 Ushba expedition.

The anniversary traverse was an ambitious undertaking involving attempted ascents on over one hundred peaks broken into thirty sections.[9] The Georgian Alpine Club, together with the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture, was tasked with two of these sections, including one of the most difficult sections in the entire traverse, section seventeen. The other objective given to Georgian alpinists, section eighteen, was a much easier route that, at least on paper, posed few real challenges to experienced climbers. Georgian alpinists were initially not even assigned the more difficult section seventeen, which entailed a traverse of several prominent peaks on the border of Svaneti and Kabardino-Balkaria rated at a 5b category of difficulty. However, after the central organizers failed to secure a group to complete the section, they offered it to the Georgian AlpClub after the anniversary traverse had begun, likely in late July. This short delay would prove critical to understanding the frustrations of Georgian climbers, who were criticized by the central authorities after the traverse was completed for their inability to complete the climbs before the anniversary events closed in September.

Together with the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture, the AlpClub created a plan to complete the more difficult section first before turning their attention to the less challenging section, which was only rated at a 2b level of difficulty. The AlpClub meanwhile assigned some of its best climbers to tackle the more difficult section. Led by the experienced Ivan Marr, the initial group mainly consisted of leading Svan climbers, including Bekno Khergiani, Chichiko Chartolani, Maksim Gvarliani, Bessarion Khergiani, and Almatskir Kvitsiani – alpinists who had been foundational to the successes of Georgian climbing for the last fifteen years. The group assigned to the easier section eighteen was made up of several less experienced climbers, but was

[9] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 91 ll. 1-7, 91-92.

led by the talented Goji Zurebiani, now holding the title of Master of Sport.[10] The AlpClub's plan utilized the second group serving as a potential rescue team for the harder section, supporting Marr's group before turning to their own objective. This was all a relatively standard plan according to the norms of Soviet climbing and was an efficient use of the two groups. But an unusually long string of poor weather throughout the Caucasus in August pushed the climbs back into September. Marr's group began section seventeen on September 15th, eventually completing it nearly ten days later on the 24th. But when the weather conditions again deteriorated in late September, Marr canceled the planned attempt on the eighteenth section as a "precaution."[11] It is clear that here, the AlpClub was attempting to address the criticisms that it had received since 1943, particularly that its climbers had a dangerous habit of attempting ascents unreasonably late in the season. Instead of forcing a summit on the objectives of section eighteen – objectives that would clearly be attainable in good weather – Georgian climbers decided to abandon the section both to avoid any unnecessary risk and to illustrate that they took safety measures seriously.

Georgian alpinists had a legitimate reason for their decision to abandon the attempt on section eighteen and they were far from the only team unable to complete all of their climbs. Despite this, the organizers of the anniversary traverse singled out the AlpClub and the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture for several organizational failures that led to the incomplete section. The traverse organizers argued that the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture had critically delayed the formation of groups for the planned climbs, imperiling the possibility of completing each section on time. The Georgian AlpClub, meanwhile, was criticized for its decision to utilize the climbers for section eighteen as the rescue group for section seventeen, and

[10] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 91 l. 51.
[11] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 91 ll. 41-42.

the All Union Committee of Physical Culture contended that this choice ensured the easier section would not be completed.[12]

The Georgian Committee of Physical Culture pushed back strongly against these claims, arguing in a letter to the All Union Committee of Physical Culture in Moscow that the group selection and material provisions were in fact given "exceptional attention." As the head of the Georgian committee noted, the main factor in causing the delay was poor weather conditions in the Caucasus during August, not any organizational fault of Georgian organizers. And as the Georgian committee made clear, the AlpClub succeeded in completing one of the three most difficult sections of the entire anniversary traverse, while the other two sections were not completed, despite being assigned to leading Soviet alpinists. Georgian climbers, meanwhile, were dismayed when not a single mention of their impressive accomplishment was included in the All Union Committee of Physical Culture's official report. The All Union Committee was unmoved, however, and refused to change the wording of the decree accusing the Georgians of organizational dysfunction.[13]

For Georgian climbers, the criticisms sustained after the 1947 anniversary traverse illustrated the impossibility of meeting Moscow's demands. Criticized in 1943 and 1945 for organizing difficult expeditions late in the season, the AlpClub canceled a climb in September 1947 as a precaution in light of deteriorating weather conditions. Instead of being praised for their attention to safety protocols, Georgian Climbers were instead sharply criticized for failing to complete one of their assigned sections, despite having completed the other, much more challenging section. The central authorities contended that Georgian climbers had been assigned the easier section eighteen by June 30th, making their failure to attempt this climb before late

[12] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 91 ll. 40-40 ob, 97.
[13] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 91 ll. 41-44 (Georgian letter and official decree); 40-40 ob (letter in response from All Union Committee of Physical Culture).

September an egregious organizational oversight. But the archival record suggests a more complicated story. Georgian climbers were given the responsibility for completing the more difficult section seventeen much later than this, likely in late July although the exact date is not clear. By August 14th, the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture officially confirmed the climbing groups for each section and released funds for the climbs. It is clear from these documents that Georgian alpinists intended to start the climbs much earlier, but were in fact delayed by poor weather conditions. And given the chronically short supply of alpinist equipment and the general lack of resources in the immediate post-war period, it made a good deal of sense to combine the two groups. Here, Georgian climbers were faced with an enormously frustrating paradox – insist on their independence to climb late in the season, and face extensive disciplinary procedures by the VSA when something went wrong. Observe safety protocols and refuse to attempt a potentially dangerous climb that was pushed back to late in the season because of poor weather conditions, and be sharply criticized for organizational failures to complete the climb earlier. Ultimately, the criticisms of the central authorities suggest that their issue with the Georgian climbing community was less a question of safety, and more a problem of understanding how to deal with an assertive and confident group of climbers from the non-Russian periphery who refused to immediately cede to Moscow's authority in all alpinist matters.

502 On Kazbegi: The Continued Importance of 1923

In 1948, Georgian climbers prepared to celebrate another anniversary, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first Georgian ascent on Kazbegi. By this time, Nikoladze's expedition was widely considered to be the first Soviet summit and the beginning of Soviet alpinism – a

development that, as discussed in chapter four, was the result of lobbying by leading Georgian climbers like Sandro Gvalia and Alexander Japaridze to remake what was initially articulated as a national event into an All-Union one. However, despite the previous year's activities in celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the October Revolution, neither the VSA nor the All Union Committee of Physical Culture officially commemorated the anniversary of what was now understood as the beginning of Soviet climbing. Part of the reason for this was certainly the overall lack of funds in the post war period as well as the novelty of All-Union alpine events (the 1947 traverse was the first of its kind). But another reason is that while Nikoladze's expedition was recognized as the beginning of Soviet mountaineering over other summits, its centrality to Soviet climbing was not fully recognized in 1948, a fact that would change by the next major anniversary in 1953. This meant that the twenty-fifth anniversary was largely only celebrated by the Georgian climbing community, which prepared an extensive alpiniada to memorialize the 1923 expeditions. An examination of the alpiniada offers insights into some of the key continuities between the goals of Georgian alpinism during its first years and after the war.

The Georgian Alpine Club together with the Georgian Committee of Physical culture and sport initially made plans for an extensive alpiniada of over one thousand participants, an ambitious undertaking that required significant outside support. Georgian institutions did not have enough equipment to supply such a large event on their own, so they asked the leader of the Transcaucasus Military District to loan them the necessary equipment, including alpine boots, sleeping bags, and even sweaters. The organizers likewise specially requested 1100 special badges (znachki) from an Estonian factory to give to the participants in commemoration of the event.[14] Ultimately, these grandiose plans were scaled down, and only 527 climbers attempted the summit with 502 reaching the icy peak of Kazbegi, still an impressive accomplishment. It

[14] sea p. 1744 a. 1 s. 577 p. 12, 16, 28.

seems likely that the limiting factor was the overall lack of equipment and not enthusiasm for the alpiniada's activities, which were led by veteran Georgian climbers like Sandro Gvalia and Soso Aslanishvili. The original plans, meanwhile, illustrate the intimate relationship between the AlpClub and Georgian Committee of Physical Culture, and some of the ways that the AlpClub's activities continued to have strong support from republican level institutions.

The 1948 alpiniada reflected an already established practice of celebrating the anniversary of the first Georgian climbs in 1923 by leading Georgian climbers. In 1933, Georgian alpinists attempted to organize an expedition to Ushba in celebration of ten years of Georgian climbing, only to have the expedition pushed back into 1934 because of problems procuring funding. In 1943, Alexander Japaridze organized a traverse of Ushba and Shkhelda that likewise was intended to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Georgian climbing. The daring expedition entailed a brilliant winter ascent on Ushba, the first of its kind, but ended in tragedy when one alpinist died of gangrene and another needed to have his foot amputated due to complications from frostbite. By 1948, the VSA had forbidden Georgian alpinists from conducting such dangerous expeditions without explicit permission from Moscow. But Georgian organizers cleverly sidestepped these restrictions by focusing their activities on Kazbegi, which offered routes at a category of difficulty that did not require the permission of the VSA. By 1948, Georgian climbing activities had largely stalled, the result of both restrictions from above and challenges finding funding on the republican level. In 1947, the Georgian climbing community only accomplished four climbs, a sharp drop even from the wartime years. In 1948, climbing activity decreased further to only two summits, one of which was the anniversary alpiniada on Kazbegi. But the massive alpiniada, the largest Georgian climbers had ever organized even if it

did not reach the intended size, signaled that despite the constraints, Georgian alpinists were firm in their commitment to develop an independent community of climbers in the republic.[15]

Accounts of the alpiniada likewise illustrate the centrality of the 1923 expeditions and the continued importance of the first Georgian climbers. Among the many participants in the 1948 alpiniada were several members of Nikoladze and Didebulidze's expeditions, including Alexandra Japaridze, Soso Aslanishvili, Maro Tkavadze, Maro Bezhanishvili, and Ivane Kukavadze – a clear linkage between past and present. And although the vast majority of the climbers in 1948 utilized the newer and safer route across the Gergeti glacier, a more experienced group followed the original path traversing the treacherous Devdoraki glacier, replete with a stop at the "Hawk's nest" where members of the two 1923 expeditions had camped. This name had been coined by Nikoladze in an attempt to replace the original title of the camp, Ermolov's hut, built by the Russian Mountain society and which had fallen into disrepair by 1923. The continued usage of "Hawk's nest" in 1948 suggests the ongoing importance of Nikoladze's project to claim mountainous space in the name of the nation, especially since most Russian alpinists still referred to the camp by its original name at this time. These connections to the past were highlighted by a special correspondent from *Sovetskii sport*, who participated in the alpiniada and wrote an unpublished account of the anniversary events. The correspondent, Nikolai Tarasov, likewise noted several important moments in Georgian alpine history, including Shota Mikeladze's death in 1932, the construction of the Kazbegi meteostation, and even the suggestion made by Soso Aslanishvili that a local Mokhevian was the first to complete an alpine summit in the eighteenth century. Tarasov further highlighted the importance of Iagor Kazalikashvili to the Georgian climbing community, noting that he was "a person of great courage and valor (otvaga)" whose poems had been translated into Russian by the well-known

[15] For lists of climbs see K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze*, 330-337.

author Nikolai Tikhonov.[16] It is unclear why Tarasov's account was left unpublished, but it does suggest that the center was not interested in the anniversary alpiniada or in celebrating Georgian alpinist history more widely.

All of this indicated that in the post-war period, Georgian climbers continued to have a keen sense of their own history and were able to articulate this history to outsiders in a compelling and convincing way. Facing the full disciplinary power of the VSA, the Georgian climbing community turned to strategies that had worked in the past that were not forbidden by the central authorities, this time combining an anniversary climb with a regional alpiniada. As in 1923, the 1948 climb relied on support from local Mokhevians and brought together students from Tbilisi with "rural youth" from Kazbegi and other neighboring villages.[17] The event likewise included significant participation from Georgian women, although it is clear that this involvement was considered much less important than in 1923, suggesting both how Soviet alpinism remained primarily a space for male climbers and how Georgian alpinists specifically failed to fulfill Nikoladze's extensive vision for gender equality as articulated during the first few years of Georgian climbing. But the alpiniada was successful as a mobilizational event. Of the 502 climbers, 450 had never reached the peak before resulting in hundreds of climbers receiving the badge of Alpinist of the USSR at the First Level. The AlpClub also used the event to graduate 35 new instructors of alpinism, and the absence of deaths and injuries began the process of rehabilitating the reputation of Georgian climbers for conducting unsafe climbs.

Perhaps most importantly, the alpiniada demonstrated the enduring power of Georgia's own national figures to inspire a new generation of climbers. The alpiniada corresponded with the one-hundredth anniversary of Alexander Kazbegi's birth, and the participants toured the

[16] sea p. 1744 a. 1 s. 463 p. 1-28. Quote from 21.
[17] sea p. 1744 a. 1 s. 409 p. 1-2.

writer's museum as part of the alpiniada's activities. The alpiniada likewise involved lectures on Georgian alpinist history by Soso Aslanishvili, and included a visit to Iagor Kazalikashvili's grave in honor of the local climber. In all of these ways, the 1948 events demonstrated how the memory of the past summits, climbers, and goals – all of which were deeply national – continued to inform the future of the Georgian climbing community and served as a foundation with which to develop new climbers.[18]

Real and Imagined: The Betlemi Cave

The Georgian Alpine Club likewise continued to develop other climbing practices that were central to the Club's activities before the war, particularly the exploration of caves as important archeological sites for understanding Georgian history. In 1945, Georgian alpinists, returned to the Khvalmi cave complex in western Georgia, where they had conducted research before the war, in an attempt to find more evidence of Georgia's medieval past, including an original copy of Rustaveli's poem "The Knight in the Panther's Skin" that was thought to be located in the caves. Although the expedition uncovered more examples of medieval material culture, including clay dishes, the climbers were not able to find any of the rumored treasures detailed in Vakhushti Bagrationi's *Georgian Chronicles* – a collection of medieval manuscripts compiled in the eighteenth century that the climbers used to guide their investigations. The results were disappointing, and suggested that while the medieval manuscripts correctly identified the cave sites where royal treasures had once been held, their usefulness in actually finding medieval artifacts was in fact limited.[19] These setbacks did not stop the AlpClub from

---

[18] Sea 1744 1 463 29, 36

[19] *PV* (1948): 228-230. For more about a more scientific perspective on Georgian caves see Levan Maruashvili's article in the Soviet scientific journal *Nature*: *Priroda* no. 3 (1949): 55-58. Also, an unnamed article (likely Maruashvili) *Priroda*, no. 7 (1949): 43-44.

creating a special speleological commission after the war, which set out to comprehensively study the many cave complexes in the republic. These efforts failed to make any new major discoveries until 1948, when members of the Kazbegi meteorological station happened to notice what looked to be a door with a chain hanging from it nestled in the cliffs of the mountain. The remnants and location matched the description of the Betlemi (Bethlehem) Cave, an important religious site detailed by Vakhushti Bagrationi in the eighteenth century and made famous by Ilia Chavchavadze's nineteenth poem, "The Hermit," but was long thought to exist only as a legend. Led by Alexandra Japaridze, Georgian alpinists embarked on a daring winter expedition to investigate the site further.[20]

In early January 1948, Alexandra Japaridze and another climber arrived in the village of Kazbegi to investigate the possible existence of the cave, where they met up with Levan Sudzhashvili, a local climber and member of the AlpClub who was the first to notice the chain. This small group was joined by members of the Kazbegi museum before setting off to investigate the mysterious door and chain perched high in the cliffs. Japaridze's account of the expedition, which was published in *Pobezhdennye Vershiny* (*Conquered Peaks*), a newly formed Soviet alpinist yearbook, suggests the degree to which Georgian alpinists struggled to address concerns that they did not take safety measures seriously. Japaridze noted that her group of climbers took extra measures to ensure that nothing would go wrong, and that if an accident did occur help would be readily available, "climbing patiently and carefully" on the icy cliffs. Soon the group found the iron chain and directly above it the wooden door. Behind the door stood the fabled Betlemi cave – a stunning archeological discovery made possible only by the climbing activities of the AlpClub.[21]

---

[20] *PV,* (1948): 230.
[21] For the full account, see *PV*, (1948): 229-239. Quote from 232.

The cave itself was located on a steep cliff over 4000 meters between the Abano and Gergeti glaciers southwest from the Kazbegi peak. Inside, the cave contained a wealth of archeological materials, including a brass bell, a spoon for communion, an altar, and a "khorugv'", a type of religious banner was stitched with crosses. All of these items indicated that the cave had been used for religious purposes, likely as a private chapel or prayer room. The climbers likewise uncovered several other objects, including both wooden and bronze candlesticks, arrowheads, wooden bowls, and several Georgian and Iranian coins, with the oldest dating to the eleventh century. As Japaridze noted, there was evidence that someone had inhabited the cave as late as the first half of the nineteenth century, a discovery that directly corresponded with Ilia Chavchavadze's famous poem "The Hermit" which detailed the legendary cave and the monk that inhabited it. The existence of the cave itself also gave evidence to Vakhushti Bagrationi's contention that Iosif the Mokhevian had visited the site during his summit of Kazbegi in the eighteenth century, since the peasant had brought back a piece of cloth that could only have come from the Betlemi Cave. Here, pre-revolutionary climbing history and nineteenth Georgian literature directly intersected with the physical exploits of Georgian alpinists. Soso Aslanishvili had long claimed that Iosif the Mokhevian was the first mountaineer in world history, a contention that was based on Georgian folklore and legend. But in discovering the cave, which was not even believed to exist, Georgian alpinists gave material evidence to support these assertions, even if they were not able to prove Iosif the Mokhevian's first summit. At the very least, the existence of a centuries-old religious site located in alpine conditions gave credence to Aslanishvili's insistence that Georgians had their own tradition of mountaineering separate from Russian or European climbers. Perhaps more significantly, the discovery of the Betlemi cave illustrated the enduring power of nineteenth century Georgian

literature to inspire alpine expeditions. Since 1923, key Georgian climbers had cited the importance of writers like Vazha Pshavela, Alexander Kazbegi, and especially Ilia Chavchavadze as they embarked on their climbs. In discovering the Betlemi cave, Georgian alpinists were able to collapse the distance between the imaginary geography of Chavchavadze and the physical space they inhabited, only reaffirming the centrality of such writers to Georgian climbers' own conception of mountainous space.[22]

The 1948 expedition was arguably the most significant and difficult archeological find for the Georgian AlpClub since the exploration of the Katskhi Pillar in 1944. The expedition involved substantial support from republican institutions and signaled the close connection between those institutions and the Georgian AlpClub.[23] But Alexandra Japaridze's account also suggests some of the ways that her brother's death in 1945 remained central to the concerns of Georgian alpinists. The expedition itself was dedicated to Simon and Alesha Japaridze, and among the article's photos was an image of Alesha Japaridze scaling a cliff at the Khvalmi caves. Considering the account was published in the newly formed alpinist yearbook read by nearly all Soviet climbers, these inclusions were easily understood by other climbers as a bold statement about the continued independence of the Georgian climbing community. Georgian climbers were likewise regularly criticized that they embarked on expeditions dangerously late in the season, but this did not stop the AlpClub from organizing an expedition in the dead of winter. All of this suggests that far from ceding to the demands of the central authorities, the Georgian

[22] On the cave's contents see, *PV* (1948): 235-238. In her account, Japaridze included several lines of Chavchavadze's poem translated into Russian, as well as an extended quotation from Vakhushti Bagrationi, suggesting how central these sources were to Georgian alpinists' discovery and understanding of the cave.
[23] *PV* (1948): 230.

AlpClub reasserted its independence in small but meaningful ways that were difficult to control.[24]

1950 VSA Meeting: Conflict Escalates

By the end of the decade, the relationship between the VSA and Georgian AlpClub had failed to improve since Japaridze's untimely death in 1945 and arguably grew worse with each passing year. In a May 1948 meeting of the VSA, Sandro Gvalia pointedly argued that Georgian climbers "need only one (type) of help – respect for us."[25] Gvalia's quote illustrated how conflict between Georgian climbers and the VSA was not just about policy, but also related to a real sense that the center did not see them as equal partners in the project of Soviet alpinism. Respect for Georgian climbing accomplishments and abilities, as well as the management and organizational successes of the AlpClub, would become a recurring issue at VSA meetings in the following years. The VSA and leading Soviet climbers meanwhile continued to insist that Georgian alpinists were poorly prepared for their expeditions, engaged in unsafe climbing practices, and lacked financial discipline in their expenditures. Five years after the war, the two sides could not be further apart.

All of these issues erupted into open conflict at a March 1950 meeting of the VSA. Here, Otar Gigineishvili, increasingly the leading voice of Georgian alpinism at high-level meetings, strongly rejected criticism aimed at the AlpClub by top Soviet climbers. Gigineishvili was clearly a skilled orator, who used a combination of humor, sarcasm, and wit to defend the rights of Georgian climbers at VSA meetings. Stenographic reports often noted "laughter in the hall" after one of Gigineishvili's pointed quips, and his pugnacious speaking style ably represented the

---

[24] For Alesha Japaridze's picture see *PV* (1948): 229; for the dedication see *PV* (1948): 239. In this way, both the beginning and end of Alexandra Japaridze's articles were marked with the memory of her brother.
[25] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 33 l. 10b.

interests of the AlpClub in an often hostile environment. In 1950, Gigineishvili gave a relatively straightforward report on the state of alpinism in Georgia at the annual plenary meeting of the VSA, which offered some criticisms of the VSA but was by itself not openly combative. Gigineishvili highlighted the AlpClub's accomplishments from 1949, including several regional alpiniadas that trained hundreds of new alpinists, over three-dozen separate sport ascents taken by different groups of climbers, and a well-visited exhibition at the AlpClub's headquarters as well as weekly reports from climbers.[26] Gigineishvili acknowledged that there were few sport *razriadniki* in Georgia, but blamed this on the lack of support from trade union sections. In 1946, the VSA adopted a new system of classifying an alpinist's rank that more closely reflected the larger Soviet sports structure. Newcomers to the sport would first receive badges in alpinism (znachok Al'pinist SSSR) at the first and second level for their beginning alpine climbs. More sustained training led to the title of third *razriadnik* (here, perhaps better as "third class sportsman"). Eventually an aspiring alpinist would attain a rank of first *razriadnik*, before fulfilling the demands to become a Master of Sport in Alpinism.[27] The norms to achieve each rank were increased often in the first several years after they were implemented, and Gigineishvili was not wrong that it was difficult to develop *razriadniki* outside of the trade unions, which had access to alpine camps where specialized training took place. In his remarks, Gigineishvili also criticized the VSA for failing to inform representatives of the republics about the creation of a new commission as well as the tendency of the VSA to ignore the AlpClub's materials on the classification of peaks. Gigineishvili added that there were also problems with a recently published chronology of Soviet alpinism that misrepresented Georgian ascents, despite extensive documentation at the AlpClub concerning these climbs. When Gigineishvili was given

[26] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 36 ll. 193-196.
[27] P.S. Rototaev, ed., *K Vershinam, Khronika Sovetskogo* al'pinizma (Moscow, 1977), 123.

five additional minutes to discuss the shortcomings of the AlpClub, he noted that the Club's activities were still hampered by the lack of its own alpinist camp, shortages of equipment that were endemic to mountainous republics like Georgia, and continued restrictions on Georgian climbers attempting peaks at the highest level of difficulty.[28]

All of these criticisms suggested that the AlpClub's problems remained institutional, driven by conflicting understandings of the proper relationship between the VSA and republican organizations and differing ideas of who should be an alpinist. The lack of a camp forced Georgians to rely on alpiniada events to train new alpinists, but this meant that alpinism continued to languish in the trade unions and there were few worker alpinists in the republic – a situation for which Gigineishvili was roundly criticized.[29] But stenographic reports from plenary sessions following Gigineishvili's speech indicate how conflict between Georgian alpinists and the VSA was also deeply personal. The very next day, several leading Soviet climbers offered their own assessment of the AlpClub, harshly criticizing Georgian alpinists for what they saw as a long list of repeated failures. As one participant contended, "Gigineishvili gave a cheerful report, but this cheerful report revealed the unhappy matters of alpinism in Georgia this year."[30]

Questions about safety were at the forefront of these criticisms. As one alpinist argued, "Georgian alpinists prepare for ascents poorly, especially on peaks at the highest category (of difficulty)" adding that they had a history of beginning climbs in late August and September when the weather was more dangerous.[31] Another leading Soviet alpinist, Ferdinand Kropf, continued these criticisms, sharply indicting Georgian alpinists for consistently breaking the

[28] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 36 ll. 197-203.
[29] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 36 ll. 204-206.
[30] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 20.
[31] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 ll. 21-22.

rules of Soviet climbing, further noting that they "did not obey general regulations."[32] Part of these critiques stemmed from the AlpClub's 1949 attempt at completing a traverse of Shkhelda and Ushba, the same traverse that Alexander Japaridze had attempted in 1943 and 1945. Like the previous attempts, Georgian climbers were forced to abandon the traverse due to bad weather, although this time without incident. But this did not stop another alpinist named Ivan Limarov from accusing the Georgians of having "laid low" (oni ostizhivalis') when his group was able to complete a similar traverse during the same period, essentially arguing that the Georgian climbers could not handle the difficult climb. Limarov likewise argued that the Georgian group had failed to offer help when he requested it, and the Georgians had offensively expressed doubts about the abilities of Limarov's team when asked for aid. The stakes here were clearly personal.[33] It is difficult to assess the degree to which these personal clashes were built on ethnic or regional hierarchies, but Limarov was clearly engaging common stereotypes about Georgian climbers from after the war.

The Georgian AlpClub was further criticized for its lack of financial discipline. Limarov questioned why the failed Shkhelda-Ushba traverse cost 60,000 rubles, when an expedition to the Pamirs only cost 40,000 rubles.[34] Kropf argued that the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture and sport had given the AlpClub 250,000 rubles in 1949, but Georgia was only able to prepare 348 alpinists with this money, a cost of 716 rubles per alpinist – far higher than Kyrgyzstan's cost of 99 rubles per alpinist.[35] Another alpinist blamed the lack of a camp on the AlpClub itself, arguing that they long had the funds to set up a primitive camp to train aspiring climbers as *razriadniki* should have wanted to, while the preparation of beginning alpinists and instructors

[32] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 24.
[33] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 ll. 36-37.
[34] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 ll. 37-38.
[35] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 24.

could easily be undertaken without a camp.[36] In short, Georgians were wasteful, doing little despite ample funding. Meanwhile, the AlpClub was denounced for failing to develop alpinism among workers at factories and for its lack of leadership in supporting alpinism in the sport societies.[37] As one alpinist argued, Georgian alpinism remained "the province of a narrow circle of intellectuals and students."[38] This last line of critique was itself particularly disingenuous, since Soviet alpinism as a whole was largely dominated by intellectuals and students, and the AlpClub was one of the only organizations to develop alpinism outside of the educated classes.[39] The low number of worker alpinists was in fact a familiar criticism for Georgian climbers, one that had been consistently deployed since the early 1930s when the Geographic Society of Georgia came under attack by the OPTE.[40]

Gigineishvili pushed back sharply against these accusations of wrongdoing. As he noted, there was a contradiction in the charges leveled against the AlpClub. Georgian climbers were accused of breaking the rules, but then criticized for abandoning the Shkhelda-Ushba traverse in bad weather, even though they did this to abide by Soviet regulations about climbing in dangerous conditions. Gigineishvili added that Georgian climbers had "learned a lesson from the incident with Alesha Japaridze," illustrating how Japaridze's untimely death and the circumstances surrounding it still continued to influence the actions of the AlpClub. The lesson learned was ostensibly about the physical dangers of forcing climbs in poor conditions, but it was clear to the meeting's participants that Gigineishvili was also making a point about the institutional risk involved in failing to err on the side of safety, leaving the AlpClub open to

[36] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 40.
[37] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 36 ll. 204-206; f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 20.
[38] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 40.
[39] Maurer, "An Academic Escape to the Periphery?," 159-178.
[40] See chapter two.

further restrictions by the VSA. The "lesson" of 1945 was not about the danger of the mountains, but rather the danger of the central authorities.[41]

Gigineishvili likewise refuted charges of improper financial discipline, arguing that of the 60,000 rubles allocated to the 1949 traverse, 20,000 was spent on equipment which would be used in the future while the unused amount was returned. It is difficult to know which side was presenting a more accurate representation of the AlpClub's expenditures, although accusations of financial impropriety reflected larger stereotypes about Caucasian corruption.[42] As Gigineishvili contended, it was unfair to compare Georgia to Kyrgyzstan because each republic had a unique geography that influenced the costs of conducting alpinist work. Geography was likewise one of the reasons that the AlpClub had trouble developing worker alpinists. As Gigineishvili detailed, mountainous republics like Georgia were not made up of only mountainous space, and the factories were often located far from the climbing regions, making it difficult to recruit and train worker alpinists. The explanation may have seemed patronizing, but it reflected Gigineishvili's critiques of the Russian alpinists who foolishly searched for the beach in Tbilisi as discussed in chapter two. The stenographic reports of VSA meetings give a real sense that, like other tourists, leading Soviet alpinists flattened the Caucasus into a place of mountains and beaches, where the title of "mountainous republic" meant that mountains were always easily accessible. And although Gigineishvili conceded that the AlpClub had done little to help the trade union's DSOs, he noted that such trade union societies often did little to help the republics – an issue Georgian alpinists had been voicing since the late 1930s.[43]

[41] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 56.
[42] On Georgian corruption see: Scott, *Familiar Strangers*, 163-175. Scott writes mainly about the Brezhnev period, but it is clear that such stereotypes existed much earlier.
[43] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 58.

Gigineishvili's rebuttals did not just touch on questions of policy, but also included biting personal attacks on those that had critiqued him. The Georgian climber questioned whether Kropf was a "patriot of alpinism," implying that Kropf was the opposite, a "chauvinist of alpinism" – harsh words, especially considering that Kropf was foreign born. Limarov meanwhile, was condemned for treating older alpinists disrespectfully and for bragging about completing a summit in bad weather. Gigineishvili suggested that Limarov "needs to learn from veteran alpinists, how to carry yourself." When Limarov retorted that he was older than Gigineishvili, the Georgian quipped that this was not obvious from his actions. And in response to accusations that the Georgian group failed to offer help to Limarov in 1949, who had injured his leg and could not continue the climb, Gigineishvili noted that it was Limarov's own comrades who had left him behind, not the Georgians. In his final words, Gigineishvili offered a unique challenge to Russian engagement with the national republics based on the Soviet understanding of national development. As Gigineishvili argued, because the "local native population is more backward" and because "the Russian element was the most cultured element" Russians should offer help to the local populations. But Gigineishvili was not asking for help for Georgians, whom he did not consider to be culturally backward. Instead, developing alpinism among the local populations was "*our* duty in the national republics" (emphasis added), a contention that placed Russians and Georgians as equals on the Soviet hierarchy of nationalities. Underlying all of the personal animosities and institutional incongruities was the fact that, despite nearly two decades of attacks on the independence and quality of Georgian climbing by the central authorities, Georgian representatives continued to insist on their own equality with the best Russian climbers and their ability to lead alpinism not only in Georgia, but also across the Soviet Union. In doing so, they were defying the expectations of the mainly Russian leadership

within the VSA, who, in ways both implicit and explicit, failed to see Georgian climbers as their equals.[44]

The 1950 Traverse

In 1950, Georgian climbers finally completed the Shkhelda-Ushba traverse that had been first attempted by Alexander Japaridze in 1943, and which took his life in 1945. Japaridze had initially attempted the traverse beginning from the Ushba side, but in 1949 the AlpClub decided to attempt the traverse in reverse, only to be denied for a third time by deteriorating weather conditions. In 1950, Georgian climbers were once again met with, in the words of one climber, "exceptionally difficult conditions" that stranded the group for several days at high elevation on the ridge of Shkhelda and the cliffs of Ushba's twin peaks. After twenty-six days of challenging climbing which saw the mountaineers "counting their every step," the Georgian team, led by Ivan Marr, finally made it past the six dangerous peaks of Shkhelda and over Ushba's two deadly crests. It was the first time that the traverse had ever been completed, and represented one of the leading accomplishments in Soviet alpinism in 1950.[45]

The successful traverse signaled the completion of a goal that had been first articulated by Alexander Japaridze and which had plagued the AlpClub for the past seven years. Georgian climbers had often been in conflict with the central authorities since the early 1930s, but the stakes of this conflict escalated dramatically after the first attempt at the traverse in 1943. As detailed in chapter four, the VSA attempted to strip Alexander Japaridze of his title of Master of Sport after the deadly climb and delayed his second attempt in 1945 until late in the season, a decision which Georgian climbers blamed for Japaridze's own death. In 1947 the VSA imposed

[44] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 37 l. 54-60.
[45] *Zaria vostoka*, 27 August 1950.

restrictions on the AlpClub that significantly curtailed the independence of the Georgian alpinist community, restrictions that were clearly related to the 1943 and 1945 expeditions. In 1949, the AlpClub again abandoned an attempt at the traverse due to safety concerns, but was nonetheless criticized at the annual meeting of the VSA for being both too timid in in the face of dangerous weather and for failing to follow safety protocols – paradoxical criticisms that suggested the only way Georgian climbers could prove their abilities to the VSA was to safely execute the traverse. Doing so in 1950 proved central to the beginning of a slow but important change in relations between the AlpClub and the VSA.

The 1950 climb was undoubtedly a remarkable alpinist accomplishment. Goji Zurebiani noted that he had participated in some of the most difficult climbs of Georgian alpinism in the last decade, including the 1940 Beria traverse, the failed 1943 Ushba-Shkhelda traverse attempt that saw one climber die and another seriously injured, and the 1947 anniversary traverse detailed above, but despite this the difficulty of the 1950 traverse was so great that it was simply "not comparable" with these other climbs.[46] At one point, the group faced such strong winds that they were forced to dig a two-meter deep hole in the ice for protection. Prior to their attempt on Ushba, the group had gone five days without eating before being replenished by their support team.[47] The expedition was given extensive coverage in *Zaria vostoka*, the main Russian language newspaper in Georgia published in Tbilisi, including multiple accounts of the expedition, photos of the participants, and direct excerpts from the group's own diary.[48] Although a local newspaper, the audience of *Zaria vostoka* was not necessarily Georgian, and the newspaper catered to non-Georgian speakers in the republic. By covering the expedition so

[46] *Zaria vostoka*, 2 September 1950.
[47] *Zaria vostoka*, 3 September 1950.
[48] *Zaria vostoka*, 27 August 1950; *Zaria vostoka,* 2 September 1950; *Zaria vostoka,* 3 September 1950; *Zaria* vostoka, 10 September 1950.

extensively, the articles illustrated how the expedition resonated outside of a purely national audience. These accounts make clear that one of the key factors in the expedition's success was the close friendship among the participants, who had been climbing together as a team for the last five years. [49] And although the traverse was led by the indomitable veteran, Ivan Marr, the other four participants were all from Svaneti, including Beknu Khergiani, Goji Zurebiani, Chichiko Chartolani, and Maksim Gvarliani.[50] By 1950, these four climbers were some of best Georgian alpinists who all held titles of Master of Sport and would soon be awarded the title of Honored Master of Sport in Alpinism as a result of the successful 1950 expedition – the highest possible title a Soviet alpinist could attain.[51] The awards exemplified the successful development of a local alpinist community in Svaneti over the past twenty years, one of the central projects of Georgian climbing since at least 1930 and one that resulted in considerable conflict with the OPTE and the VSA. Goji Zurebiani in particular represented a direct connection to the first days of Georgian climbing in Svaneti, having participated in the search for Pimen Dvali and Simon Japaridze's bodies in 1929, as well as Alexander Japaridze's first attempt on Tetnuldi in 1930. By 1950, these Svan climbers were not just hunters or regional guides, but leading Soviet alpinists who were widely respected by the entire Soviet climbing community for their impressive abilities.

The 1950 traverse also illustrated the degree to which Georgian climbers were integral members of Soviet alpinism who had developed important friendships with other prominent Soviet climbers. In 1950, Vidalia Abalakov and Nikolai Gusak – two of the Soviet Union's most

---

[49] See K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze,* 336-337. His group, together with Alexandra Japaridze and Gabriel Khergiani had retraced the steps of Alesha Japaridze in 1946. In 1947, the same group of climbers, save for Alexandra Japaridze and Maksim Gvarliani, completed the difficult anniversary traverse in 1947.

[50] The supporting group was likewise largely from Svaneti, and was led by Bessarion Khergiani. See *Zaria vostoka*, 1 September 1950.

[51] See *PV* (1951): 15.

decorated climbers – were conducting their own traverse over Ushba, only to be forced to abandon the climb due to poor weather and a quickly approaching control deadline. The two groups nearly met on the slopes of Ushba when Abalakov's team signaled to Marr with a flare, but the Georgians were too exhausted to complete the additional two to three hours of climbing it would have taken to meet them. By the time Marr's group was well rested, Abalakov's group was gone. The Georgian group was upset that the were not able to meet their "alpinist friends" but were encouraged when they recovered personal notes left by Gusak and Abalakov at the camp. Gusak congratulated the Georgian group on completing the traverse of Shkhelda, and offered his regards to "comrade Marr and the glorious eagles Goji, Beknu, Chichiko and Maksim – my old friends." Beknu and Gabriel Khergiani had participated in Gusak's 1943 expedition to Elbrus to remove the Nazi flag placed there by German climbers as part of operation Edelweiss, and it is clear that the Russian climber was close with other Svan alpinists as the result of his work in the region during the war. Gusak also requested that the Georgians give "heartfelt regards to all the alpinists of Tbilisi and especially Alexandra Japaridze." Abalakov's letter meanwhile offered equally warm congratulations for the "great victory" on Shkhelda. But the notes were not the only encouragement that Abalakov's team had left. In large red letters made using twenty cans of valued "kisel'" – a type of fruit jelly the alpinists carried as food reserves – Abalakov and Gusak spelled out "Greetings to the conquerors" in the ice, an exceedingly thoughtful gesture that, as the Georgians themselves noted, helped to reinvigorate the exhausted climbers for the final section of the traverse.[52] Although it is difficult to trace the exact relationships between various groups of alpinists, it is important to note that while Georgian climbers may have had stark personal disagreements with leading Soviet alpinists like Ferdinand Kropf as detailed above, this did not stop them from developing equally strong friendships with

[52] *Zaria vostoka*, 3 September 1950.

other climbers like Abalakov and Gusak. The networks of Soviet climbing were complicated and, especially in the post-war period, transcended national, regional, or even local identities.

Changing Attitudes and the Beginning of Reconciliation

The 1950 Shkhelda-Ushba traverse was awarded the prize of first place out of all Soviet traverses taken in that year by a jury of leading Soviet climbers. The award was only the second year that such prizes were given out, and reflected larger changes in the content and goals of Soviet climbing. As Eva Maurer has argued, "mountaineering after 1945 underwent a process of self-'sportization' (*sportizatsia*), and Soviet mountaineers went to great lengths to make their own pastime resemble other competitive sports."[53] One aspect of this was the introduction of the three classes of sportsman (*razriadniki*) noted above, but another major change was to institute new competitions for various categories, like best technical ascent, best traverse, and best high-altitude climb. The yearly prizes were valued social capital in the small Soviet climbing community and were considered a significant climbing achievement that ensured respect for the winning DSO, climbing section, or club, at least in that year. Winning first place in 1950 began the slow process of rehabilitating the reputation of Georgian climbers that had been damaged in the previous decade. But it also marked the beginning of a more positive relationship between the central authorities and Georgian climbers. At the 1951 annual VSA plenum, VSA leaders struck a more conciliatory tone toward the Georgian AlpClub, noting that the Georgian climbers had "taken into account the criticism" that was given in 1949. In addition to the Shkhelda-Ushba traverse and another sport ascent on the dangerous peak Dyx-tau led by Alexandra Japaridze, the VSA praised the increased work in developing new badge holders for the title of Alpinist of the

[53] Eva Maurer, "Cold War, 'Thaw' and "Everlasting Friendship;: Soviet Mountaineers and Mount Everest, 1953-1960," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* Vol. 26, No. 4 (March 2009): 486.

USSR, work that was completed through a number of successful alpiniada events. And although the VSA representative noted that there was still work to be done in developing alpinists ranked as sportsmen (*razriadniki*), he also contended that this work would likely continue to develop given the improvements seen in 1950.[54]

What accounted for this seemingly radical change? To some degree, the more progressive attitudes were a reflection of the impressive successes that Georgian climbers had achieved in 1950. Winning first place in the traverse category meant that it was now much more difficult to attack the abilities of Georgian alpinists or their record on safety, considering that the 1950 traverse entailed climbing safely for over three weeks at the highest level of difficulty, often in extremely dangerous meteorological conditions. The VSA was likewise impressed with the Dusheti regional alpiniada that the AlpClub had organized, which involved 378 aspiring climbers.[55] But in other ways, even if the AlpClub was more successful, its goals remained markedly similar to those in 1949 and arguably much earlier. The Georgian Alpine Club was still focused on conducting regional alpiniadas to develop climbing in the mountainous regions of the republic, while its best climbers concentrated on completing sport ascents on the most difficult peaks in the Caucasus. There was no real change in the development of worker alpinists, and Georgian climbers continued to have only a tenuous relationship with the trade unions. In many ways, the improved relationship had less to do with the direct actions of the AlpClub and was more deeply related to changing values within the VSA. In a shift that had been hinted at during past meetings but was only now fully articulated, the VSA acknowledged the importance of developing climbing among people who lived in mountainous regions. Mass alpinism no longer meant that Soviet alpinism would be centered only on urban workers, but also the rural

[54] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 l. 28.
[55] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 l. 10; K'etskhoveli, ed., *k'avk'asionze,* 344.

population of the mountainous republics – populations that Georgian climbers had been engaging since 1923.[56]

Since the late 1920s, Soviet tourist and alpinist organizations, institutions, and societies had focused solely on the primacy of the worker-alpinist as a cultural ambassador bringing socialist modernity to a backward periphery. There was almost no desire to develop "peasant-alpinists" or alpinist communities in the mountainous regions themselves, and the introduction of a camp system in the late 1930s further cemented this orientation, allowing Soviet alpinists, who were almost all from the industrial centers of European Russia, to climb in the periphery without having to develop relationships with local people. As Eva Maurer has noted, the emphasis on developing worker alpinists was itself circumscribed by limited funding within the OPTE, and the Soviet climbing world was largely one made up of the intelligentsia, students, and white-collar workers, even if the construction of alpine camps by trade union organizations gave some opportunities to workers.[57] And while these trends only accelerated after the war, the inclusion of peasants and collective farmers in the definition of mass alpinism marked a dramatic change from over twenty years of Soviet climbing, even if the commitment to worker alpinists was largely only symbolic during this time.

The reason for these changes had to do with internal developments that were specific to Soviet alpinism as well as the larger social relations of post-war socialism and late-Stalinism. First, by the early 1950s, all of the most difficult peaks in the Caucasus had been climbed by Soviet alpinists, many repeatedly and utilizing different and more technically challenging routes. This forced Soviet climbers to make climbs more difficult, either by combining multiple peaks in traverses like the Shkhelda-Ushba traverse or by climbing in winter conditions. The

---

[56] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 l. 9-10.
[57] Maurer, "An Academic Escape to the Periphery?," 162-164.

"sportization" of Soviet alpinism and annual competitions also pushed climbers to find increasingly challenging peaks and by the mid-1950s the global pursuit of high altitude peaks over 6000 meters in height – signified by the successful 1953 ascent on Everest by Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary – drove Soviet climbers to focus on high-altitude ascents. All of these developments meant that by the end of the decade, the center of Soviet climbing had largely shifted from the Caucasus to Central Asia. In the early 1950s, the VSA was beginning to contemplate the best way to develop alpinism in the Central Asian republics, and was forced – often by Georgian climbers – to consider what it would mean if this development overlooked the local populations. As Otar Gigineishvili provocatively argued in 1951, if the October Revolution guaranteed the rights for Kazakhs to be scientists, then "why on earth should they not be alpinists?"[58] These challenges confronted the reality that Soviet alpinism was dominated by Russians, even in places like Kazakhstan, and encouraged the VSA to take a more sympathetic view towards the development of alpinism among non-Russian people who lived in mountainous regions.

If the newfound support for non-Russian "peasant" or "collective-farmer" alpinists was due to the shifting geography of Soviet climbing, then the de-emphasis on the centrality of worker alpinists was undoubtedly related to the changing social contract of Soviet socialism after the war. As scholars like Elena Zubkova and Donald Filtzer have shown, the immediate post-war period entailed a series of political crises with significant labor unrest that prompted renewed repressions of industrial workers.[59] By the early 1950s, although the material conditions of workers had improved significantly and the authorities relaxed the repressive mechanisms that

---

[58] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 l. 143.

[59] Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge, Eng., 2002); Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*, trans. and ed. by Hugh Ragsdale, (Armonk, 1998).

restricted worker mobility, the relationship between workers and the Soviet ruling elite had fundamentally shifted. After the war Soviet leaders enacted what Vera Dunham has called "The Big Deal" – a form of accommodation with the Soviet middle class that ensured loyalty through the promise of privilege.[60] As Dunham has detailed, this new social contract had its roots in the 1930s, but what was new in the post-war period is that it explicitly rejected workers.[61] And as Eva Maurer has argued, the reduced status of workers combined with the longer working hours, lower relative pay, and fewer vacation days than the middle classes ensured that Soviet alpinism remained the sphere of engineers and academics.[62] By the early 1950s, it was no longer necessary for the institutions of Soviet climbing to so stridently advocate for worker inclusion, an acknowledgement of a reality that had existed even at the height of the proletarian tourist movement.

The Georgian AlpClub was well placed to capitalize on these larger changes in the early 1950s. As the VSA and central institutions began to look for models of how to develop alpinism in the mountainous periphery there was really only one example to emulate – the AlpClub itself.[63] Since 1923, Georgian climbing had been a project of engagement between intellectuals mainly from Tbilisi and the rural population in the regions where they climbed, one that was based on seeing local hunters as equal partners instead of backward peasants. This project was enormously successful and meant that the best Georgian climbers were not just professors like Otar Gigineishvili but also "peasants" like Goji Zurebiani, a collaboration that was unique in the

---

[60] Dunham's own definition of the middle class, itself an ambiguous term, is helpful here: "They are the solid citizens in positions and style of life below the top officials and the cultural elite, yet above the plain clerks and factory workers, of farm laborers and sales girls." Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham, 1990), 5.
[61] Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 15.
[62] See Maurer, "An Academic Escape to the Periphery?," 164-166. These observations mirror post-war developments in tourism where white-collar workers had greater access to rest. See, Koenker, *Club Red,* 146-150.
[63] It is important to note that the focus on the mountainous periphery was itself circumscribed and ultimately never successful, and the middle classes – in particular engineers – went on to dominate the top ranks of Soviet climbing in the 1960s and 1970s. See, Maurer, "An Academic Escape to the Periphery?," 165-166.

Soviet climbing world. While the top Soviet climbers – those that held the title of master or honored master of sport in alpinism – were almost all from the middle classes with an occasional worker representative, the only examples of peasant or *kolkhoznik* (collective farmer) masters by early 1953 were Georgians from Svaneti like Zurebiani.[64] It is important to note here that the designation of an alpinist as peasant or *kolkhoznik* simply meant non-urban, at least in the world of Soviet mountaineering, since it was not clear that many of the Svan climbers even worked at collective farms. The development of worker alpinists might have stalled, but there was simply no investment in so-called peasant alpinists outside of Georgia. Eva Maurer has suggested the reason for this was the low status of peasants as well as their lack of mobility, since many did not even hold internal passports.[65] And while this undoubtedly correct, another part of the reason was national – Soviet alpinism was simply uninterested in developing non-Russian alpinists who actually lived in the mountainous periphery. The camp system only exacerbated this problem, creating absurd situations where Central Asian climbers were sent to the Caucasus to train, requiring significant resources and time.

What this meant was that by the early 1950s, Soviet alpinism was a *Russian* middle class sport. The overwhelming majority of top climbers came from the industrial centers of European Russia and Ukraine – places like Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and Khar'kov, with Moscow by far being the most well represented city. And although there were some "masters" from Central Asian cities like Alma Ata and Tashkent during this period, these alpinists also tended to be ethnic Russians. Indeed, an examination of the lists for Honored Master of Sport from 1948 to 1952, most of which included the holder's nationality, illustrates how unique the position of Georgian climbers was. Of the thirty active titleholders in 1952 – the very elite of Soviet

[64] These lists are compiled in the Soviet alpinist yearbook *Pobezhdennye Vershiny*. See: *PV,* (1948): 421-437; *PV*, (1949): *khronika*; *PV*, (1950): *khronika*; *PV,* (1951): 531-532; *PV*, (1952): 481-482, *PV* (1953): 592-593.
[65] Eva Maurer, "An Academic Escape to the Periphery?," 165.

climbing – there were nineteen Russians, two Ukrainians, one Jew, one Belarusian, and seven Georgians, including four *kolkhozniki* from Svaneti. In a community that was heavily skewed towards Russians from Moscow, Georgians made up nearly one quarter of the highest ranked climbers.[66] In short, the Georgian AlpClub was the only high-ranking community of non-Russian alpinists where the history of climbing was itself intimately tied to the meaning of the nation.

This is not to say that tensions between the VSA and the AlpClub immediately disappeared after 1951. At the 1951 annual plenum, Ivan Marr complained bitterly that, while Georgian climbers had slowly gained the right to climb at higher levels of difficulty without external approval, they still needed to obtain the permission of the VSA for the most difficult climbs. As Marr noted, Georgians did not have the right to climb "on our own mountains," despite the fact that they had excellent sportsmen and even honored master of sport titleholders. The celebrated Shkhelda-Ushba traverse was itself threatened because the VSA had failed to approve the climb, despite the fact that the AlpClub sent a representative to Moscow twice to secure the approval. Ultimately, as Marr detailed, it took the intervention of the Georgian government to receive final permission, an untenable situation that limited the development of alpinism in Georgia.[67] Otar Gigineishvili mirrored Marr's criticism, bluntly asking "whether the union republics have the right to participate in alpinism?" The question was an openly provocative one that struck at the Russian dominated nature of the VSA and Soviet climbing in general. As Gigineishvili continued, "Our union republics do not have the rights, that they should have, they belittle the meaning of the union republics, they do not believe them… people live in

---

[66] See: *PV,* (1948): 421-433; *PV*, (1949): *khronika* ; *PV*, (1950): *khronika*; *PV,* (1951): 531; *PV*, (1952): 481. The initial list in 1948 included all active climbers who held the title from before the war. The percentage of Georgian Honored Master of Sport titleholders certainly decreases in the following years as more Russians earned the title, but the high percentage of Georgians in 1952 illustrates how Georgian climbers were able to successfully navigate Soviet institutions despite attacks on their independence and abilities.
[67] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 l. 58.

the mountains and are not able to go to the mountains until concluding a large correspondence with Moscow."[68] Who exactly the "they" referred to here was not clear, but it was undoubtedly directed at the top leadership of the VSA. Gigineishvili's pointed criticism was a harsh indictment of VSA's relationship with non-Russians over its failure to treat them as equal partners in the project of Soviet mountaineering. The use of "belittle" (prinizhaiut) itself suggests a relationship of inequality based on Russian chauvinism. And as both Marr and Gigineishvili implicitly pointed out, why should VSA representatives in Moscow have the right to approve climbs in republics like Georgia over republican institutions, which were ready to exercise control over mountains they saw as their own. These criticisms raised questions about the nature of Soviet federalism, and the degree to which the VSA's insistence on centralized control conflicted with the anti-imperial promises of the Soviet project as a whole.

Despite the successful 1950 traverse, Georgian climbers continued to have difficulty shaking their reputation for unsafe climbing and failure to obtain permission for their ascents. Gigineishvili highlighted a recent example where several experienced alpinists died in an avalanche in Bakuriani, a well-known area for skiing in southern Georgia (the alpinists, it seems, were not Georgian). But the commission sent to investigate the deaths immediately blamed Tbilisi, assuming that they had approved the alpinists' activities without Moscow's permission. As Gigineishvili pointed out, this "tendency" to immediately blame the local authorities would ultimately slow down the development of alpinism in the union republics.[69] In 1952 a high-ranking VSA member, C.L. Aksel'rod, specifically criticized Georgian climbers in his address for their "cockiness" (ukharstvo) and for having a "frivolous, irresponsible attitude" towards their work. As Aksel'rod explained later, Georgian climbers failed to take safety measures

[68] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 l. 139.
[69] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 l. 139.

seriously, an approach that "lowers the meaning of alpinism"[70] Gigineishvili strongly rebutted these claims, suggesting that such descriptions painted a picture of Georgian climbers not as alpinists but as "jailbirds" (ugolovnikov), prompting laughter from the audience. Instead, Gigineishvili attacked the reliance on rumor, recalling an example where, at a different VSA meeting, another representative erroneously claimed that Georgian alpinists conducted a mass ascent without crampons, an essential piece of alpinist equipment.[71] Ultimately, Aksel'rod withdrew his criticism, and noted that he had received incorrect information.[72] The whole episode illustrated the power of rumor and stereotypes in the relatively small Soviet climbing community and the challenges that Georgians faced in trying to transcend their reputation as alpinists who cared little about safety, a reputation that was clearly and largely unfairly built upon the deadly traverse attempts in 1943 and 1945.

Georgian climbers likewise continued to complain about their lack of an alpine camp. In 1951, Marr noted that although the issue was raised at the VSA in previous years, the AlpClub received no help and was told to look for republican funds to construct a camp. As Gigineishvili pointed out, this issue was also intimately connected to the question of camp vouchers since the republics received few vouchers to distribute themselves. Here Gigineishvili sardonically criticized the central trade union representative for focusing solely on the needs of Moscow and Leningrad, proposing that a solution to this problem was to help develop alpine camps in mountainous republics like Georgia, Armenia, and Uzbekistan.[73] In 1952 the central trade union seemingly attempted to address this problem by transferring the Alpine Camp "Nakra," operated by the central sport society "Nauka" to the Georgian sport society "Nauka." In principle this

[70] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 44 ll. 22, 79.
[71] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 45 ll. 50-51
[72] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 45 123-124
[73] GARF f. 7576 op 14 d. 41 ll. 59-60, 140-141.

should have appeased representatives from the Georgian Alpine Club, but the camp was located in an undesirable and even dangerous place for alpinist activities – as one AlpClub report noted, it was susceptible to avalanches and was "infected with a forest of mushrooms" because of the damp conditions where it was built.[74] The head of the AlpClub, Aleksi Ivanishvili, argued that the transfer was not done to benefit Georgian climbing, but rather to help out the central sport society Nauka, which was "happy to dispose of this camp."[75] Ivanishvili considered the issue of the camp to still be unresolved.

In the following years, Georgian representatives continued to criticize the central trade union for failing to develop alpine camps not just in Georgia, but in other mountainous republics. As Sandro Gvalia detailed in 1953, Dagestan's alpine camp was closed, alpine instructors in Armenia refused to work at the Armenian camp on account of poor conditions, and the Azerbaijani camp was in an equally "deplorable condition." Part of the problem was that, like the Nakra camp in Georgia, the camps were often built in less than ideal locations that guaranteed primitive situations. As Gvalia noted, the Azerbaijani camp did not even have a water supply while other camps did not have firewood for heating, making it difficult to conduct work there.[76] The trade union representative did not dispute Gvalia's criticisms, but argued that when the central trade union offered the mountainous republics spaces in other camps to develop their instructors, these republics failed to use them, sending only one or two instructors when it was possible to send ten. The suggestion was obvious – republican level institutions failed to use the

[74] sea p. 1862 a, 1 s. 324 p. 6-7.
[75] GARF f. 7576 op 14 d. 44 l. 152; Gigineishvili mirrored Ivanishvili's comments. See: GARF f. 7576 op 14 d. 45 ll. 52-53.
[76] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 48 l. 155.

resources already provided, so why should the central authorities provide more to develop a camp.[77]

This defense largely sidestepped the actual problem with the camp system, at least for the Georgian AlpClub. As Gigineishvili detailed in a 1955 meeting of the VSA, it was logical to develop beginning alpinists, specifically those that earned the badge of "Alpinist of the USSR First and Second Level," through alpiniada events since this form of training was much cheaper and more accessible for mountainous republics like Georgia. But, as he continued, it was much more difficult to develop sportsmen (*razriadniki*) without a camp, since alpinists at this level required more specific training. The problem here was that Georgia DSOs received far fewer vouchers for alpine camps than the central sport societies and received little instruction on how to use them, meaning there were no consequences if the vouchers were given to people uninterested in alpinism – a problem that plagued the camp system as a whole. Since the AlpClub had no control over the trade unions, it was helpless to influence this situation, which forced it to develop *razriadniki* in less efficient ways.[78] The system of developing Soviet alpinists through alpine camps operated by trade unions was simply not designed to support the aspirations of climbers in the places where the camps were actually located – a problem that had its roots in the reorganization of alpinism in the late 1930s. It seems that the lack of a camp remained an issue for Georgian climbers throughout the 1950s, although by the end of the decade the Georgian Tourist Excursion Bureau (TEU) and the AlpClub put forward a plan to build a camp in Svaneti, one that was eventually constructed. How this new camp changed the

[77] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 48 ll. 160-161.
[78] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 54 ll. 74-77.

relationship of the AlpClub to the trade unions is unfortunately beyond the scope of this dissertation.[79]

What did change is that the VSA largely dropped their own critiques of the AlpClub over its failure to develop worker alpinists. The larger social changes detailed above meant that workers were no longer central to the project of Soviet climbing, a development that helped to dramatically lessen the stakes of conflict between Georgian alpinists and the VSA. For nearly two decades, the primary criticism of Georgian climbing was its lack of attention to worker alpinists, a criticism that was nearly impossible to address considering the institutional incongruities between the Georgian AlpClub and the trade unions, as well as the trade unions' own bias towards supporting climbers from Moscow and Leningrad. Georgian alpinists may have been frustrated by the camp system, but its limitations were no longer used to attack their focus on developing climbing communities in mountainous regions. Instead, the AlpClub was increasingly praised for its ability to promote well-trained and high-ranking *kolkholz* alpinists, as alpinists from rural mountainous regions were increasingly labeled. As the VSA representative noted in 1951, the 1950 Shkhelda-Ushba traverse was important not just because of its difficulty, but also because the participants were largely made up of "*kolkhoz* Svans" – a fact which, as he added, "confirms the line, that we are taking."[80] Soon the organizational structure of the AlpClub itself, which for so long stood outside the institutional norms of Soviet climbing, was considered as a possible example to develop alpinism not just in the mountainous republics but in Moscow itself.[81] In 1953, alpinism in Kazakhstan was reorganized through a club of alpinists,

---

[79] See sea p. 1862 a. 1 s. 324 p. 1-8; p. 1862 a. 1 s. 398 p. 15-16a, 19; (construction of the Alpine Camp "Ushba"). The archival record is fragmented, but it seems that there were also problems with this camp as well, and it was eventually transferred from the Georgian TEU to the Georgian sport society "gantiadi." See sea p. 1862 s. 1 a. 367 p. 8; sea p. 1862 s. 1 a. 490 p. 1-2.
[80] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 41 ll. 21-22.
[81] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 54 l. 16.

founded under the Kazakh Committee of Physical Culture and Sport – a reorganization that directly mirrored the organizational structure of alpinism in Georgia.[82] Where the organization of Georgian alpinism was once criticized it was now emulated, a radical break from just a few years prior.

Questions about safety also soon faded as the AlpClub continued to win all-union climbing competitions and built an extensive record of accident free climbing. Since Babakishvili's death in 1946, Georgian climbers did not have a single deadly accident until a tragic attempt on Peak Pobeda in Kyrgyzstan in 1962.[83] Meanwhile, after receiving first place for best traverse in 1950, Georgian climbers amassed a series of impressive prizes in all-union climbing competitions. In 1952, two AlpClub expeditions won first place in the traverse category, one of which was led by Beknu Khergiani.[84] In 1954, an expedition in the Pamirs led by Maksim Gvarliani took second place in the category for high-altitude ascents.[85] A year later, Georgian climbers won first and second place in this category, as well as third place in the category for technically challenging ascents. From 1950 until 1960, Georgian climbers won six first place prizes, six second place prizes, and one third place prize securing a reputation as some of the best alpinists in the Soviet Union.[86] The *sportization* of Soviet climbing and the introduction of climbing competitions gave the Georgian AlpClub the opportunity to prove what they had long claimed to be true – that their climbing abilities were equal to the best alpinists from the center.

The goals and independent organizational structure of Georgian alpinism caused intense conflict with the central institutions of Soviet climbing from the early 1930s until at least 1950.

---

[82] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 54 ll. 63-70.
[83] Japaridze, *mq'invarts'veridan,* 249.
[84] see *PV* (1953): 592.
[85] *PV* (1954): 422.
[86] Japaridze, *mq'invarts'veridan,* 238-239.

But as the sport matured in the early 1950s, the result of larger social changes that deemphasized the primacy of workers and internal changes that saw a renewed focus on developing mountaineering in Central Asia, these same goals and this same independent structure began to work in favor of Georgian climbing. Part of this rapprochement can be seen in the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of Soviet alpinism in 1953. Five years earlier, the central authorities had paid little attention to celebrating the twenty-five year anniversary of Soviet alpinism – an anniversary that was central to Georgian climbers since Giorgi Nikoladze's expedition to Kazbegi was seen as the first Soviet climb. But in 1953, the VSA organized an all-union alpiniada to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary – an important event that was predicated on the historical achievements of the first Georgian alpinists.[87] As I explore below, the relationship between the VSA and the Georgian Alpine Club changed even more radically after 1953, as the goals of Soviet sport climbing increasingly shifted to high altitude summits in Central Asia.

High Altitude Climbing

In late May, 1953 a British expedition led by John Hunt saw the first two climbers – Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay – reach the peak of Mount Everest, a stunning achievement that had global significance outside the world of mountaineering. This event would have repercussions within the Soviet climbing community, and push Soviet alpinism in a direction it was already headed – towards high altitude summits in a search of peaks over 8000 meters in height. As Eva Maurer has skillfully detailed, the first Everest summit and the beginning of de-Stalinization created new opportunities for engagement with western alpinists, particularly in Britain, opportunities that, "provided new chances for comparison and self-reflection and thus contributed to the emergence of new discourses of identity and community within Soviet

[87] See GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 94 and 95.

mountaineering."[88] Georgian climbers were at the forefront of these changes, a fact that illustrates how central the Georgian AlpClub had become to Soviet climbing by 1953. As Maurer notes, the AlpClub was itself one of the first to receive news of the Everest summit in October 1953, and Georgian climbers were among a small and select group invited to a lecture given by John Hunt in 1954 in Moscow.[89] Sandro Gvalia even sent a personal letter to the Alpine Club in London to congratulate the successful Everest climbers, since an official message had yet to be sent – another example that highlighted the stubborn independence not just of Gvalia, but of the Georgian climbing community in general.[90]

Prior to the Everest expedition, Georgian alpinists, like other Soviet climbers, were already articulating their desire to conduct high altitude ascents (here, meaning ascents over 6000 meters). At a February 1953 meeting of the VSA, Otar Gigineishvili noted that the Georgian AlpClub had not yet accomplished a high altitude ascent, but that they had already agreed with the Georgian government to fund an expedition to the Pamirs – an expensive and complicated undertaking.[91] This shift in focus marked a fundamental reorientation of the goals of Georgian climbing. For thirty years, Georgian climbers had been concentrated on peaks almost entirely in the Caucasus and their climbing activities were linked to a larger project to conquer mountainous space in the name of the Georgian nation. The development of climbing communities in Svaneti and Kazbegi, as well as other mountainous regions, and the exploration of cave complexes were likewise intimately linked to nation-building efforts on the part of Georgian alpinists. The move to conquer peaks in Soviet Central Asia and abroad did not so much signal the abandonment of this project, but its relative completion. And since the most difficult peaks in the Caucasus were

[88] Maurer, "Cold War," 484.
[89] Maurer, "Cold War," 489.
[90] *Alpine Club*, no. 59 (1953-1954): 366-367. This citation I have taken from Eva Maurer's work. See Eva Maurer, "Cold War," 497 (footnote 31).
[91] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 48 l. 107.

barely over 5000 meters or even under this height, a focus on high-altitude climbing necessitated expeditions outside of the region. For the first time in their thirty-year history, Georgian climbers were focused on peaks far beyond the boundaries Georgia.

This emphasis on high altitude climbing likewise meant a reorientation of the relationship between the VSA and the AlpClub. Expeditions to Central Asia presented unique challenges to climbers unaccustomed to climbing at such high altitudes and required greater organizational support to be successful. As Gigineishvili himself noted, "the organization of high-altitude ascents differs from the organization of simple ascents like we have here the Caucasus," a fact which encouraged the climbers to ask for help from the VSA.[92] For their part, leaders at the VSA were supportive of Georgian efforts to develop experience in high-altitude conditions. In 1954, Georgian climbers conducted their first expedition to the Pamirs where they made a daring ascent on 6500-meter Engels Peak, a first summit. The climb earned the group the first place prize in high altitude ascents in 1954, a remarkable success considering it was their first high altitude expedition. The Georgian team was made up of climbers from Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Svaneti, and Kazbegi, illustrating how Georgian climbing was an enterprise that did not just involve one city or region, but engaged the entire nation. The climbers likewise had a strong sense of the history of Georgian climbing, naming one previously unnamed peak in honor of Giorgi Nikoladze, and another in memory of Simon Japaridze and Pimen Dvali. But, as Gigineishvili noted, their successful expedition was also the result of essential help from Russian climbers. High-ranking members of the VSA offered valuable advice on climbing in the region, and two Russian alpinists experienced in high-altitude ascents joined the Georgian expedition to aid their transition to high-altitude climbing.[93] The AlpClub had needed little organizational help from the

[92] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 48 l. 107; see also GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 49 l. 122.
[93] *PV*, (1954-57): 73, see also Gigineishvili's praise at the VSA, GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 54 l. 79.

VSA when climbing in the Caucasus, but this situation changed as their focus increasingly shifted to Soviet Central Asia.

Georgian climbers still expressed concerns that the development of high-altitude climbing would reproduce the centralizing tendencies inherent to Soviet alpinism, meaning that it would only be possible for alpinists from Moscow to conduct high altitude expeditions.[94] It seems there was some consideration of creating one All-Union team to attack the most difficult peaks in the Soviet fight for an 8000 meter summit. Georgian representatives were deeply opposed to this, arguing that such a team would limit the ability of alpinists from the republics from participating in high-altitude ascents – a reasonable concern considering that alpinists from Moscow held the largest amount of institutional power. But ultimately, the growth of high-altitude alpinism brought the VSA and AlpClub together in ways that had previously driven them apart. The ultimate goal for Soviet alpinists, including Georgian climbers, was an ascent on an 8000-meter peak. Here, there was a problem – the highest summit in the Soviet Union was the nearly 7500 meter Peak Stalin, meaning that Soviet climbers would have to look abroad to fulfill their ambitions. This required cooperation with the highest levels of the Soviet government to receive approval for expeditions that were both physically risky and fraught with potential political danger. And as Gigineishvili noted in a 1955 plenary meeting, high-altitude expeditions were so expensive that, without support for such activities from the VSA, republican institutions would decide to fund other, less expensive sports and let high-altitude alpinism languish. Georgian alpinists did not need a good relationship with the center if they wanted to climb Ushba, Shkhara, Shkhelda, or any other challenging peak in the Caucasus. But if they wanted to complete an 8000-meter summit, they needed the firm support of the VSA. As Georgian alpinists began to look abroad, they were forced to work more closely with the center since all foreign

[94] GARF f. 7576 op. 14 d. 48 l. 107.

travel was organized through Moscow, and it was not possible to receive visas, permissions, or the hard currency necessary for foreign travel without the center's support. This does not mean that conflict between the two groups completely disappeared, but that any tension that did exist was largely not about the meaning of the nation, the ability of Georgians to climb their own mountains, or their rights in developing regional climbing communities. High altitude climbing profoundly altered the goals and aspirations of the Soviet climbing community as a whole, and the role of Georgians within that community.

I have chosen to end the dissertation in 1955, since after this date it is clear that Georgian climbing entered a new phase that requires a much different set of research questions. But this date also serves as important moment in the history of Georgian climbing on its own. In 1955, a Georgian team made a brilliant ascent on Peak Stalin – the highest summit in the Soviet Union. Although the mountain had already been climbed by Soviet alpinists, the Georgian ascent utilized a completely new route from the Garmo glacier that was not known to be possible, winning first place in the competition for best high altitude ascent in the process. But the celebrated summit also offered glimpses into the past history of Georgian climbing. As a team of young Georgian climbers were reaching the peak, Goji Zurebiani – recruited in 1930 because of his surefooted reputation earned as an alpine hunter – was utilizing those same hunting abilities to search for goats near the base camp. Instead, Zurebiani encountered a large bear, which he narrowly managed to kill as it charged at him. The unexpected haul helped to replenish the group's food reserves, and allowed the climbers a rare treat – fresh bear meat. Zurebiani's accidental encounter highlighted the fact that the achievements of Georgian alpinism were built

upon a successful collaboration between rural hunters and the urban intelligentsia – a fact that was as true in 1955 as it was in 1923.[95]

[95] *PV*, (1954-57): 77-80.

CONCLUSION: GEORGIAN ALPINISM AT THE CENTER OF THE SOVIET PROJECT

Georgian alpinism did not end in 1955 and in following years the AlpClub would continue to lead alpinism in the republic, organizing even more difficult expeditions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. And until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgian climbers remained key participants in the central institutions of Soviet alpinism. Today, the AlpClub retains its headquarters at the former Kirov Park in central Tbilisi, although in the post-Soviet period the institutional framework of Georgian climbing has changed significantly. This is to say that this dissertation only examines a fraction of the history of Georgian climbing, and that nature of Soviet alpinism changed significantly in the following decades as Soviet alpinists began to develop new practices utilizing modern climbing equipment and became more integrated into the global climbing community. Georgians were at the forefront of these changes, and a history of climbing after 1955 would certainly highlight questions about the role of socialist internationalism and the often contradictory meanings of Soviet citizenship much more prominently than the first three decades of Georgian alpinism.

But if we focus on the first decade of Georgian climbing after the war, we are left with a number of potentially surprising conclusions. First, in the post-war period the open expression and even celebration of Russian identity was no longer seen as problematic, a fact that had its roots in the late 1930s. As Terry Martin has argued, by the end of the Great Terror, policies aimed at the promotion of non-Russian nationalities were "scaled back, although not abandoned, and implemented silently so as not to offend Russian sensibilities."[1] Questions about Russian superiority were especially sensitive in Georgia. As Erik Scott notes, (s)ome Russians living in

[1] Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire,* 27.

Tbilisi expressed shock that they were not treated with the proper deference – or worse, that they were second class citizens – in a Soviet country they held to be their own. The Soviet literature on the 'friendship of the peoples' cast Russians as Georgia's historical protectors and their leading role received greater official emphasis after victory in the Great Patriotic War."[2] What this suggests it that in the post-war period, Georgian alpinists should have struggled to confront the challenge of a resurgent Russian nationalism that was largely immune to accusations of great-power chauvinism, especially within the Russian dominated leadership of the All-Union Section of Alpinism (VSA).

This does not at all match the experience of Georgian climbers. The post-war period examined in chapter five marked a series of rapprochements with the VSA based in Moscow and, by the early 1950s, the two sides were closer together than at any point in their shared history. Georgian alpinists like Otar Gigineishvili continued to complain about chauvinistic attitudes on the part of Russian tourists and alpinists, as detailed in chapter two, but the center became much more respectful of Georgian accomplishments and receptive to the needs of Georgian climbers. Georgian climbing was fundamentally a national project, but this project arguably received much less support at the height of Soviet nation-building efforts and promotion of non-Russian nationalities in the early – mid 1930s.

This contradiction has two explanations. First, in many ways, class as a social marker retained primacy over nationality even as non-Russians were promoted into the highest levels of republican and all-union governance during this early period. As Diane Koenker has shown in her study of print workers and gender relations in the 1920s, official calls for gender equality met equally powerful expressions of disdain for women's abilities, an insight that is only possible to understand from the vantage of the shop floor. As Koenker argues, the Soviet Union may have

[2] Scott, *Familiar Strangers,* 172.

been committed to women's equality, "(b)ut this was a state that also committed to the privileging of class over gender, and as long as class was defined in masculine terms, as in the workplace, then Soviet women were left with few possibilities for resisting and transforming these attitudes."[3] The shop floor was certainly not analogous to the mountaintop, but I would suggest that there was a similar process working in the sphere of alpinism. Here, I would argue that class was not just seen in through the lens of gender, but also through the lens of nationality. Class was coded as both *masculine* and *Russian*, and this meant that Soviet alpinism remained primarily focused on supporting alpinists who fit these categories, even if such alpinists were not technically workers themselves. This process explains many of the frustrations of Georgian climbers, who were motivated by Soviet promises for national equality but had little recourse to change the dismissive attitudes of their Russian counterparts, a contradiction that is only possible to understand through from the perspective of the alpine expedition. When Soviet alpinism as a whole was freed from the focus on class because of larger social changes in the early 1950s, it opened up new possibilities to accept Georgian climbers as equals, especially those from regions like Svaneti.

Secondly, Soviet nationality policy as a whole, as Terry Martin has pointed out, was itself obsessed with the symbolic markers of nationality. What he fails to highlight though, is that these symbolic markers were heavily based on pre-revolutionary Russian understandings of non-Russian spaces and peoples. As I suggested in the introduction, it is no surprise that Georgian food came to conquer the Soviet table, since pre-revolutionary descriptions of Georgia often highlighted its agricultural abundance and the hospitality of its inhabitants.[4] But mountains were never considered by Russians to be an intrinsic part of the Georgian nation, a fact that meant that

---

[3] Diane P. Koenker. 1995. "Men against Women on the Shop Floor in Early Soviet Russia: Gender and Class in the Socialist Workplace," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 100, No. 5 (December 1995): 1464.
[4] See for instance, Scott, *Familiar Strangers*, 87-121.

Georgian mountaineering was never seen as a priority by the central authorities and succeeded not because of Soviet policies, but in spite of them. The framework of Soviet nationalities policy meant that the center was willing to support the national projects of the non-Russian periphery, as long as those national projects conformed to a pre-existing Russian understanding of that space. By the post-war period, the extensive work and integral participation of Georgian alpinists in the previous decades may not have convinced the Soviet public as a whole that Georgians were a mountainous people, but it did convince the VSA and leading Soviet climbers that Georgians had the right to independently participate in alpinist activities and that the project of Georgian alpinism was a valuable one that deserved considerable support. It may have taken two decades, but Georgian climbers finally convinced the center of their equality. That it took over two decades to do so, suggests some of the very real limits that accompanied Soviet nation-building, even in its most productive period.

These changes prefigured a larger shift in the relationship between Russians and Georgians after 1955. If we glimpse ahead several years, it becomes clear that this relationship becomes more complicated and nuanced, not less so. A central argument of this dissertation has been the power of popular culture and in particular literature to define ideas about the Caucasus, especially Soviet engagement with the works of nineteenth century Russian authors like Pushkin, Lermontov, and others. But if we look at perhaps the most famous re-invention of the "Caucasian tale" in the Soviet Union, the immensely popular 1967 comedic film *Kavkavskaia plennitsa,* often translated as "Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus," these earlier hierarchies of Russian superiority and Caucasian backwardness become much less clear.[5]

[5] *Kavkazskaia plennitsa,* dir. By Leonid Gaidai, Moscow, Mosfil'm 1967. A contemporary scholar notes that *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* was the most popular movie of the year and with 77 million viewers. See: Alexander Prokhorov, "Cinema of Attractions versus Narrative Cinema: Leonid Gaidai's Comedies and El'dar Riazanov' Satires of the 1960s," *Slavic Review* Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn 2003): 455.

Directed by Leonid Gaidai, one of the most famous post-war Soviet directors known particularly for his slapstick comedy, *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* follows the adventures of the hapless Shurik, a blond-haired Russian ethnographer who has arrived in the Caucasus to collect the legends and toasts of the region. Shurik is quickly overwhelmed by Caucasian hospitality and his hosts' proclivity to drink, which lead to a series of humorous and drunken encounters. Soon he becomes attracted to the lovely Nina, a local Caucasian but one who speaks Russian without an accent and embodies Soviet modernity as a student, komsomol member, and alpinist – it seems Nina no longer even lives in the Caucasus and is only there to visit her family. Shurik quickly and unwittingly becomes caught in a scheme to bride-nap Nina for the head of the regional agricultural cooperative, Comrade Saakhov, who hopes to make her his wife and whose own accent and mannerisms mark him as Caucasian. Convinced that this is simply a part of local culture and that Nina herself desires to be bride-napped, Shurik delivers her to Saakhov, only to realize his mistake and attempt to free her later.

In many ways, the film reproduces the orientalism of nineteenth century literature, portraying captivity and kidnapping as a natural Caucasian practices. But on the other hand, the film upends some of these earlier civilizational discourses, presenting a more complicated vision of Soviet modernity that blurs the lines between a cultured center and backward periphery. Shurik is the educated ethnographer from the center, but cannot keep himself sober long enough to complete his work – he is certainly no noble prisoner, even when imprisoned for drunkenness. Saakhov meanwhile is the head of the regional kolkhoz and the representation of Soviet power in the unnamed region, yet readily trades twenty sheep and a refrigerator to his chauffeur for the chauffeur's own niece (Nina). The most "cultured" character in the film rather is Nina, who embodies both categories of Caucasian and Soviet with little tension. In the dramatic penultimate

scene, Saakhov is at home lazily watching ballet on the television, illustrating his status as a cultured Soviet citizen, since ballet was seen at the top of the Soviet hierarchy of culture.[6] As Swan Lake plays in the background, Saakhov is confronted by a now freed Nina, who plays the role of an aggrieved highlander aided by Shurik and another local. The three violently threaten Saakhov for the bride-napping, but Saakhov is quick to demand justice in a Soviet court, begging: "Nina, stop them, we are modern people, this is medieval barbarity!"[7] Nina responds by saying coldly, "mistakes are not admitted, they must be atoned… with blood![8] Here, the civilization narrative is cleverly reversed – in the end the Caucasian is the representative of Soviet modernity, while Nina and Shurik pretend to be medieval highlanders. Whether such medieval barbarity really exists is never answered, highlander justice is only performed. Gaidai is clearly playing with the Soviet anxieties about the incomplete nature of cultural transformation, especially in the Caucasus, but the popularity of the film suggests that by the late 1960s Soviet audiences were able to laugh at the subversion of once common tropes about the Caucasus and Caucasians. In many ways, *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* remains one of the most sophisticated critiques of nineteenth century literary imaginations, and is in fact beloved by Cuacasian audiences even today for its unique ability to upend the logic of Russian superiority.

Another film from 1967, the mountaineering drama *Vertikal'* (Vertical), illustrates more directly how ideas about Svaneti and backwardness had changed since the 1930s.[9] Directed by Stanislav Govoruhkin and Boris Durov, *Vertikal'* follows the exploits of a group of Russian alpinists in Svaneti as they attempt to make a first ascent on the fictional peak Or-Tau, an

---

[6] See Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 3-4.
[7] *Kavkazskaia plennitsa:* 76:52. The translations are generally taken from the English language subtitles, with minor revisions for clarity.
[8] *Kavkazskaia plennitsa*: 77:06.
[9] *Vertikal',* dir. By Stanislav Govorukhin and Boris Durov, Odessa Film Studio, 1967.

ostensibly insurmountable mountain.[10] Although not as popular as *Kavkazskaia plennitsa, Vertikal'* was nonetheless a success with Soviet theatergoers, reaching nearly 33 million people. In the following years the film would attain a cult status in large part due to the songs of the Soviet bard Vladimir Vysotskii, which were a central element of *Vertikal'* (Vysotskii also acted in the film).[11] And in many ways, the film is focused on the courageous exploits of the Russian alpinists, who are all marked as urban and educated, as they try to conquer the mountainous periphery – a standard theme of Soviet alpinism from the 1930s.[12]

In other ways, the film presents a much more nuanced view of Svaneti and the place of Svans in the Soviet Union. Before they begin their attempt on the dangerous peak, the Russian climbers, led by the stoic Lomov, visit a local Svan named Vissarion. Lomov and Vissarion are old friends, and Lomov shows himself to be knowledgeable and respectful of local traditions and culture, which are not presented as backward. A dinner at Vissarion's house plays into narratives of Georgian hospitality and love of drink, a peculiar insistence on lowland abundance in a mountainous setting, but the character of Vissarion is a fully developed one who is an honorable Soviet citizen. At the dinner, the Russian climbers learn of Vissarion's bravery during the war, a reminder of the Svan brigades that proved essential to defending the Caucasus, discussed in chapter four. And when one of the climbers casts a longing glance at a blonde-haired woman who was serving the table – her looks unmistakably different from the rest of the family – Vissarion explains that the woman is his daughter, but that she is in fact Russian. Soon the story

---

[10] For more on Govorukhin and Durov's films and their place in Soviet cinema more broadly, see: Joshua First, "From Spectator to 'Differentiated' Consumer: Film Audience Research in the Era of Developed Socialism (1965-1980)" *Kritika* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 2008): 317-344.

[11] Joshua First notes that, "(w)ith a weak central narrative, Vertikal' relies more on pop-culture representations-such as Vysotskii's image, his music, and mountain-climbing-for its appeal with audiences. The film is not, in fact, goal-oriented, nor does it rely on a spontaneity/consciousness plot." See Joshua First, "From Spectator to 'Differentiated' Consumer," 328-329.

[12] The film also portrays alpinism as a male sphere of action, likewise reproducing some of the more prominent discourses about bravery, masculinity, and climbing that were prevalent in the 1930s.

becomes clear – as the Germany Army was advancing in 1942, Vissarion found the abandoned girl alone and carried her over the pass into Svaneti, keeping her safe by holding her close to his chest. The daughter appears to be fully integrated into the family, speaking the local language fluently, and Vissarion's speech indicates that he sees her as his daughter and not simply a Russian adoptee. These inclusions suggest that, unlike in the 1930 film *Salt for Svanetia*, civilizational exchange now goes both ways and that Svans also offer the gift of life to Russians – that is, the mountainous periphery is not just passively receiving the benefits of the Soviet project, but actively contributing to them. The dinner scene is a small and largely tangential part of the overall story of *Vertikal'*, but it nonetheless breaks radically with past discourses about Svaneti and the need for Russians to offer civilization to backward Svans.

The film also illustrates that Svans, and Georgians more generally, are capable alpinists in their own right. As the Lomov's group discovers, Vissarion's own son Iliko died tragically on Or-Tau, his body never recovered, causing enormous grief for the father. But Iliko is presented as a talented and capable climber, whose failure to summit Or-Tau was not the result of his inferiority but rather the mountain's incredible difficulty, and ultimately bad luck. And the film likewise has other potential references to the history of Georgian climbing. Or-Tau itself could be read as a reference to the twin-peaked Ushba, since one possible translation might be "Double-Mountain" (ori meaning two in Georgian, tau meaning mountain in Balkar). Iliko himself, who the Russian climbers eventually find frozen dead in his tent, seems likely to be a reference to Iliko Gabliani, a Georgian climber from Svaneti who died tragically while participating in an expedition to summit Peak Pobeda in Central Asia in 1961. The 1961 expedition was the first major tragedy for the Georgian AlpClub since 1946, and several highly experienced climbers died while trying to summit the dangerous 7400-meter plus peak. Gabliani

in particular died of frostbite and exposure, like the fictional Iliko, and Gabliani's teammates were unable return with the fallen climber's body during their descent. The details here are particularly vivid. Realizing they would be unable to bring the deceased Gabliani back with them, the Georgian group built a temporary stone grave at 7000 meters with the intention to return the next year to retrieve the fallen climber's body. But the decision tormented them. One Georgian climber left a note in Gabliani's pocket that read "Forgive (us). This year we were not able to lower you, but without fail we will lower you." Another climber suffering from frostbite, noted, "they can cut off (my) fingers, they can cut off (my) hands, but I will come here for Iliko."[13] And like the fictional Iliko, the failure to bring the Gabliani's body back to Svaneti for burial caused enormous pain for his family and the surviving climbers.[14] It is difficult to know without further research if these were deliberate inclusions in the film, but the example of Iliko in *Vertikal'* offered proof that Georgians were not just capable alpinists, but also that mountains were a key part of the Georgian landscape.

Another way to examine at the complexity of post-war changes is to look at the biography of one of the surviving members of the 1961 expedition, Mikhail Khergiani. In the post-war period, Khergiani attained enormous popularity for his fluid climbing, which won him numerous awards at Soviet and international competitions. But Khergiani was also intimately connected to some of the earliest days of climbing in Svaneti. His grandfather was Anton Khergiani, who took part in the search for Pimen Dvali and Simon Japaridze's bodies in 1929 while his father, Bessarion Khergiani, was a well-known alpinist who participated in some of the most important Georgian climbs from the 1930s to 1950s. Mikhail Khergiani was in fact initially not encouraged to participate in alpinism by his father, but secretly followed a mass ascent led by

[13] Iu. Burlakov, *Voskhoditel'* (Moskva 1979), 175.
[14] For an account of the tragic 1961 expedition and its aftermath, see: Burlakov, *Voskhoditel'*, 161-181,

Sandro Gvalia in 1946 in Svaneti until it was too late to turn back, a decision that was reminiscent of Irina Korzun's first ascent described in chapter three. Khergiani hid behind some bushes near the basecamp until dark, and then approached the camp assured that his father, who was participating in the summit, would have to relent. With the support of Gvalia and eventually his father, the fourteen-year-old Khergiani made his first summit.[15] But as one biography written by the Russian alpinist Iurii Burlakov makes clear, training at alpine camps in the North Caucasus and international travel to western Europe helped Khergiani forge friendships and connections that transcended his native Svaneti (Burlakov himself was quite close with Khergiani).[16] In the pre-war period, mountaineering served as a means to connect Svan climbers more closely with the Georgian center in Tbilisi, but in many ways post-war alpinism arguably helped to make those same climbers into better integrated Soviet citizens. For Georgian alpinists like Khergiani, mountaineering was no longer a means of exclusion but rather one of inclusion, a project that had the potential to dramatically upend the directionality of cultural exchange. In traveling abroad for international competitions and exchanges with other foreign alpinists, Khergiani was not just representing Svaneti or Georgia, but the entire Soviet Union.

In 1969, Khergiani traveled to Italy as part of an official Soviet expedition and exchange. Like Simon Japaridze forty years before him, Khergiani was in excellent spirits and climbing confidently. But after a number of successful ascents, tragedy struck in the Dolomites in northern Italy. Khergiani was climbing a challenging wall on Su-Alto, an incredibly difficult peak that had

[15] Burlakov, *Voskhoditel'* 52-58. Burlakov recalled how Sandro Gvalia continued to lead alpiniada events, humorously noting: "Give him the freedom, – people were saying, – he will pull the entire Soviet Union (up) to Tetnul'd." Burlakov, *Voskhoditel',* 53.
[16] Burlakov, *Voskhoditel'.* Burlakov's text contains numerous stories about how alpinism served as a means of integration between Soviet climbers in ways that transcended ethnic, regional, or national identities. For a similar text dedicated to Khergiani see, Aleksandr Kuznets, *Vnizu Svanetiia* (Moskva 1971).

first been climbed in 1951, a major accomplishment at the time.[17] Khergiani was reaching the end of the climb when an unexpected rock fall hit him in the chest and knocked him off the wall. Khergiani's partner, the alpinist Viacheslav Onishchenko, was giving a belay from behind a ledge and was not able to observe what happened (it is not uncommon or unsafe to lose sight of a partner in such situations). Hearing the falling rocks, Onishchenko readied himself for the inevitable pull of the rope – the "catch" that follows a falling climber tied into a rope system. The rope jerked, and then went slack – the falling rocks not only hit Khergiani, they also severed the rope itself.[18] The Georgian climber fell several hundred meters to his death.

Khergiani's tragic accident was a major moment in post-war Soviet alpinism, but it also illustrated how much the sport had changed after the war and how Georgian climbers, especially those from Svaneti, were central to the sport's development and popular perception. Khergiani's untimely passing was commemorated by the Soviet bard Vladimir Vysotskii – the actor and songwriter from *Vertikal'* detailed above – who dedicated the song "To the peak" (K vershine) to Khergiani. Evgenii Evtushenko, a famous Soviet writer and poet, likewise wrote a poem in honor of the fallen Georgian ("Verevka Khergiani" – "The Rope of Khergiani"). Both Vysotskii and Evtushenko were enormously popular from the 1950s to the 1970s, and while they both had contested relationships with Soviet authorities, they nonetheless were key figures in the Soviet cultural elite. Far from seeing Khergiani as a backward peasant hopelessly in need of socialist modernity, some of the key figures in the Soviet intelligentsia were praising the Georgian climber in ways that completely transcended the sphere of alpinism. But even within alpinism, Khergiani's reputation went beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. John Hunt, the leader of the

[17] For more on the first ascent of Su-Alto, see https://www.summitpost.org/georges-livanos-le-grec/774008 (last accessed June 26, 2019).

[18] Burlakov, *Voskhoditel',* 267; For an interview with Khergiani's belayer, see Viacheslav Petrovich Onishchenko, https://www.risk.ru/blog/14107 (last accessed June 26, 2019).

1953 Everest expedition, noted how quickly he became friends with Khergiani while climbing in the Caucasus in 1958. As Hunt explained, when Khergiani was in Britain, "(m)any English alpinists became witnesses of his mastery," and that the loss of Khergiani was felt intimately within the British climbing community. Within the Soviet Union, the alpinist Alexander Borovikov, an Honored Master of Sport titleholder, noted that Khergiani "was the *archetype* of the Soviet person" (emphasis original).[19] These were dramatic reversals from the pre-war period, where Svans were seen as innately uncultured and the development of alpinism in the region was repeatedly attack, not supported.

I am not trying to argue that after 1955 that the imperial tensions between Russians and Georgians detailed in this dissertation simply evaporated. For the entire history of the Soviet Union, Russian chauvinism remained a distinct problem for non-Russians, and there were certainly much larger moments of conflict between Georgian alpinists and the center that I am not able to highlight with this brief overview. Rather, what I am arguing is that the timeline with which we think of Soviet national development is fundamentally wrong, or at least misplaced. The historiography of Soviet national development has regularly focused on the early period of Soviet nation building, the 1920s and 1930s, when ethnographers worked out which peoples were nations and policy-makers decided how to support national languages, cultures, and elites. That is, the 1920s and 1930s are considered in many ways the most *expressive* parts of Soviet nation building. A history of Georgian alpinism suggests in fact the opposite, that this earlier period was far more *repressive* than scholars have acknowledged even as policy-makers articulated their expressive intent. Instead, the post-war period, despite its acceptance that Russians were the first among equals, proved remarkably productive in its support of the national projects of non-Russians and was able to foster far more equal relationships between Russians

[19] Burlakov, *Voskhoditel'*, 8.

and non-Russians than this earlier period that was focused on the construction of nations and nationality. As mature socialism began to deliver on some of the promises of socialist modernity, no matter how incompletely and insufficiently, one of the promises that began to be fulfilled was the promise of national equality. Like other failures of the Soviet project, the inability to completely transcend the imperial hierarchies of the past would ultimately lead to that project's undoing. Scholars have often looked at the success of Soviet nationality policy as one of the key reasons for the rise of nationalism in the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union as a whole, but I would argue that it was also the failure to ensure national equality that helped to fuel this nationalism and eventual collapse.

Finally, a history of Georgian alpinism illustrates the complexity of Soviet empire. It would be easy to conceptualize the experience of Georgian climbers, at least before the early 1950s, as that of the colonial other in an empire intent on repressing the rights of national minorities. Soviet alpinism was unmistakably the world of the Russian intelligentsia and middle class and regularly failed to support the climbing ambitions not just of Georgians, but of other non-Russians as well. And in other ways, Soviet alpinism reflected imperialist tendencies. Alpinists in the center always had better access to equipment that was in constant short supply, and had much more power and influence in the institutions that governed the sport. But this is a gross simplification of a much more complicated story. Georgian climbers never saw themselves as colonial subjects and believed in the Soviet project of socialist modernity. Alpinists like Otar Gigineishvili highlighted the promises of the October Revolution not to contest the Soviet project, but rather to highlight how those promises were left unfulfilled. And the challenges of Georgians like Gigineishvili had real power and were ultimately taken seriously by the VSA, which eventually came to adopt the example of the Georgian AlpClub as it began to focus on the

development of alpinism in Central Asia. The Georgian AlpClub itself was able to survive as an independent institution because of the sponsorship and support of the Georgian Committee of Physical Culture and Sport – that is, because republican level institutions had significant political power and were able to push back against the directives of the center. This was a state committed to sharing political power with non-Russians – a state dedicated to incorporating all of its citizenry, even if that incorporation was accomplished through violence. But its clear hierarchies of power, rule through difference, emphasis on ethnic and national classification, distinct center and multiple peripheries, meant that this was still very much a modern imperial state, even as its leaders articulated an anti-imperial ethos. A history of Georgian alpinism illustrates the tension between Soviet anti-imperialism and the realities of its implementation, and the ways that the Soviet project both motivated and frustrated the national aspirations of non-Russians. Focusing on the limits of Soviet equality, and not just its successes or failures, offers new insights into the meaning of the anti-imperialist Soviet empire.

REFERENCES

Archival Sources
sakartvelos erovnuli arqivi (sea)/Georgian National Archives
Fond 1744: sakartvelos ssr minist'rta sabch'os pizk'ult'urisa da sport'is k'omit'et'i
Fond 1862: t'urizmisa da eksk'ursiebis sakartvelos resp'ublik'uri sabch'o
(Both fonds located in the uakhlesi istoriis tsent'raluri arkivi)

Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF)/State archive of the Russian Federation
Fond 7576: Komitet fizicheskoi kul'tury i sporta SSSR
Fond 9520: Tsentral'nyi sovet po turizmu i ekskuriiam VTsSPS

Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Sankt-Peterburga (TsGA SPb) Central State archive of Saint Petersburg
Fond 4410: Leningradskii oblastnoi sovet vsesoiuznogo obshchestva proletarskogo turizma I ekskursii OPTE

Newspapers
akhali svaneti
Komsomol'skaia Pravda
k'omunist'i
Krasnyi sport
lelo
Literaturnaia gazeta
Molodoi Stalinets
Pravda
Shkola muzhestva
Sovetskii sport
Sovetskii turizm i al'pinizm
t'ribuna
Zaria vostoka

Periodicals
Alpine Journal
Geographical Journal
Na sushe i na more
Pobezhdennye vershiny
Priroda
p'rolet'aruli t'urist'i
sakartvelos geograpiuli sazogadoebis moambe
Turist aktivist
Turist Zakavkaz'ia
Vsemirnyi turist

Published Primary and Secondary Sources

Anisimov, S. *Ot Kazbeka k El'brusu*. Balabanova, 2013.

Arkhangel'skaia, O. and N. Tiriutina, eds. *Puteshestviia po SSSR turistskie marshruty.* Moscow and Leningrad, 1938.

Aslanishvili, I. *Al'pinizm v Gruzii.* Tbilisi, 1935.

———. *Dostizheniia sovetskogo al'pinizma v Gruzii za 1923-1924 g.* Tiflis, 1935.

———. *ekspeditsia svanetshi.* Tpilisi, 1926.

———. "G.N. Nikoladze – zachinatel' sovetskogo al'pinizma." *Pobezhdennye vershiny* (1951): 389-394.

——— "mtasvla-mgzavrosnoba saqartveloshi." *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin* no. 1 (1924): 3-10.

———. *mq'invarts'verze asvla shemodgomit.* Tpilisi, 1928.

——— . "saqartvelos midomoebshi." *tribuna,* August 21, 1923.

———. "ushbis mts'vervalisak'en," *ushba*, no. 1 (October 1934): 1-41.

Aslanishvili, I., O. Gigineishvili, and D. Purtseladze. *mtamsvleloba saqartveloshi 1923-1950.* Tbilisi, 1954.

Aydinyan, Anna. "Griboedov's Project of the Russian Transcaucasian Company and the Ideas of the European Enlightenment." *Pushkin Review* vol. 15 (2012): 101-124.

Bakic-Hayden, Milica and Robert M. Hayden. "Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkans': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics." *Slavic Review* vol. 51, no. 1 (Spring, 1992): 1-15.

Barnouw, Erik. *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film.* Oxford, 1993.

Barrett, Thomas M. "Southern Living (in Captivity): The Caucasus in Russian Popular Culture." *Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 31, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 75-93.

Bayers, Peter. *Imperial Ascent*: *Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire.* Boulder, 2003.

Blauvelt Timothy. "Abkhazia Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era." *Nationalities Papers* vol. 35, no. 2 (May 2007): 203-232.

Bogoliubov, A.N. *Georgii Nikolaevich Nikoladze.* Moskva, 1973.

Bradley, Joseph. *Voluntary Associations in Tsarist Russia, Science: Patriotism, and Civil Society*. Cambridge, Mass., 2009.

Brandenberger, David. "Stalin's populism and the accidental creation of Russian national identity." *Nationalities Papers* vol. 38, no. 5 (September 2010): 723-739.

Burlakov, Iu. *Voskhoditel'.* Moskva 1979.

Chikhladze, Nino. *Gruzinskie zhenshchiny – deiatel'nitsy natsional'noi kul'tury.* Tbilisi, 1987.

Condee, Nancy. "The Anti-imperialist Empire and After: In Dialogue with Gayatri Spivak's 'Are You Postcolonial?'" *PMLA* vol. 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 829-831.

Dabrowski, Patrice M. "'Discovering' the Galician Borderlands: The Case of the Eastern Carpathians." *Slavic Review* vol. 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 380-402.

Dolzhenko, G.P. *Istoriia turizma v dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii i SSSR.* Rostov na Donu, 1988.

———. *Rekreatsionnaia geografiia turizm, ekskursionnoe delo.* Rostov-na-donu, 1989.

Dondua, Dav. "Deiatel'nost' geograficheskogo obshchestva GSSR za vremia s 1924 po 1945 god." *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin* no. 2 (1946): 59-91.

Dunham, Vera S. *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction.* Durham, 1990.

Ellis, Reuben. *Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscapes of Neoimperialism.* Madison, 2001.

Feldman, Leah. *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus.* Ithaca, 2018.

Filtzer, Donald. *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II.* Cambridge, Eng., 2002.

First, Joshua. "From Spectator to 'Differentiated' Consumer: Film Audience Research in the Era of Developed Socialism (1965-1980)." *Kritika* vol. 9, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 317-344.

Fitzpatrick, Sheila. "Cultural Revolution Revisited." *The Russian Review* vol. 58, no. 2 (April 1999): 202-209.

Gorsuch, Anne E. *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin*. Oxford, Eng. 2011.

Gould, Rebecca. "Aleksandre Qazbegi's Mountaineer Prosaics: The Anticolonial Vernacular on Georgian-Chechen Borderlands." *Ab Imperio* no. 1 (2014): 361-390.

———. *Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus.* New Haven, 2016.

Grant, Bruce. *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus.* Ithaca, 2009.

———. "The Good Russian Prisoner: Naturalizing Violence in the Caucasus Mountains." *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 20, no. 1 (Feb, 2005): 39-67.

Hansen, Peter H. "Partners: Guides and Sherpas in the Alps and Himalayas, 1850s-1950s." In *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* edited by Jas Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubies, 210-231. London, 1999.

———. *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment.* Cambridge, Mass., 2013.

Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union.* Ithaca, 2005.

———. "The Soviet Union as a Work-in-Progress: Ethnographers and the Category Nationality in the 1926, 1937, and 1939 Censuses." *Slavic Review* vol. 56, vo. 2 (Summer, 1997): 251-278.

Hope, John. "The Self in the Other: Alexandr Griboedov's Orient," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* vol. 57, no. 1-2 (March, 2015): 108-123.

Isachenko, A. G. ed. *Russkoe geograficheskoe obshchestvo 150 let*. Moskva, 1995.

Iskander, Fazil. *Sandro of Chegem.* Translated by Susan Brownsberger. New York, 1983.

Japaridze*,* Alexander. *rcheuli nats'erebi (Selected Writings)*. Edited by D. Dondua. Tbilisi 1949.

———. *Shturm Ushby.* Moscow, 1940.

———. *Tetnuldi.* Tbilisi, 1948.

Japaridze, Ivane. "imperiuli uzneobis magalitebi." *lelo* November 20-22, 23-26, 2001.

———. *mq'invarts'veridan everest'made.* Tbilisi, 2010.

Javakhishvili, Al. "sakartvelos geograpiuli sazogadoebis daarseba da misi mnishvneloba," *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin* no. 1 (1924): 13-18

Johnson, Jeremy. "Literacy Unveiled: Citizenship, Nationality, Gender and the Campaigns to Eradicate Illiteracy in the Soviet South Caucasus 1922-1936." Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2018.

Jones, Stephen F. *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883-1917.* Cambridge, Mass., 2005.

Kaiser, Claire Pogue. "Lived Nationality: Policy and Practice in Soviet Georgia, 1945-1978." PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2015.

Kazalikashvili, Iagor. *leksebi.* Edited by Mikel Pataridze. Tbilisi, 1933.

Ketskhoveli, N., ed. *k'avk'azionze.* Tbilisi, 1959.

Khalid, Adeeb. "Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective." *Slavic Review* vol. 65, no. 2 (Summer, 2006): 231-251.

———. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR.* Ithaca 2015.

Khergiani, Miron. *Tigr Skal.* Translated by Kamilla Korinteli. Moscow, 1989.

Koenker, Diane P. *Club Red: Vacation Travel and the Soviet Dream.* Ithaca, 2013.

———. "Men against Women on the Shop Floor in Early Soviet Russia: Gender and Class in the Socialist Workplace." *The American Historical Review* vol. 100, no. 5 (December 1995): 1438-1464.

———. "The Proletarian Tourist in the 1930s: Between Mass Excursion and Mass Escape." In *Turizm: the Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism,* edited by Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, 119-140. Ithaca, 2006.

Kuznetsov, Aleksandr. *Vnizu Svanetiia.* Moskva 1971.

Lermontov Mikhail. "The Demon." In *Narrative Poems by Alexander Pushkin and by Mikhail Lermontov*, translated by Charles Johnston. New York: 1983.

Manning, Paul. "Describing Dialect and Defining Civilization in an Early Georgian Nationalist Manifesto: Ilia Ch'avch'avadze's 'Letters of a Traveler.'" *The Russian Review* vol. 63, No. 1 (January 2004): 26-47.

———. *Strangers in a Strange Land: Occidentalist Publics and Orientalist Georgraphies in Nineteenth-Century Georgian Imaginaries.* Boston, 2012.

Martin, Terry. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939.* Ithaca, 2001.

Maurer, Eva "An Academic Escape to the Periphery? The Social and Cultural Milieu of Soviet Mountaineering from the 1920's to 1960's." In *Euphoria and Exhaustion: Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society,* edited by Nikolaus Katzer, Sandra Budy, Alexander Kohring, and Manfred Zeller, 159-178. Frankfurt, 2010.

———. “Cold War, ‘Thaw’ and “Everlasting Friendship: Soviet Mountaineers and Mount Everest, 1953-1960.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* vol. 26, no. 4 (March 2009): 484-500.

———. *Wege zum Pik Stalin: Sowjetische Alpinisten, 1928-1953.* Zurich, 2010.

McReynolds, Louise. *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era.* Ithaca, 2003.

Mikeladze, Davit. “ialbuzi da svaneti” in *kavkazionze,* edited by N. Ketskhoveli, 85-142. Tbilisi, 1959.

Nikoladze, Giorgi. “pirveli kartuli asvla mq’invar-ts’verze” (The first Georgian summit on mq’invar-ts’verze), *The Geographical Society of Georgia Bulletin* no. 1 (1924): 11-56.

———. *pirveli kartuli asvla mq’invarts’verze,* edited by Zaza Abzianidze. Tbilisi, 1983.

———. *The First Georgian Ascent of Mount Kazbek*. Edited by Levan Ghambashidze. Translated by Phillip Price. Tbilisi, 2017.

Nolte, Claire E. *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation.* Basingstoke, 2002.

Northrop, Douglas. *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia.* Ithaca 2004.

Prokhorov, Alexander. “Cinema of Attractions versus Narrative Cinema: Leonid Gaidai's Comedies and El'dar Riazanov' Satires of the 1960s.” *Slavic Review* vol. 62, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 455-472.

Pushkin, Alexander. “A Journey to Arzrum.” In *Tales of Belkin and Other Prose Writings*, edited by Ronald Wilks. New York, 1998.

Qazbegi, Aleksandre. *The Prose of the Mountains: The Tales of the* Caucasus. Translated by Rebecca Gould. Budapest, 2015.

Ram, Harsha. “Between 1917 and 1947: Postcoloniality and Russia-Eurasia,” *PMLA* vol. 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 831-833.

———. *The Imperial Sublime: a Russian Poetics of Empire.* Madison, 2006.

Ram, Harsha and Zaza Shatirishvili. “Romantic Topography and the Dilemma of Empire: The Caucasus in the Dialogue of Georgian and Russian Poetry.” *The Russian Review* vol. 63, no. 1 (January 2004): 1-25.

Rayfield, Donald. *The Literature of Georgia: A History.* London, 2010.

Rokotian, E. “Voskhozhdeniia sovetskikh al’pinistov na kavkaze.” In *K vershinam sovetskoi zemli*, edited by D.M. Zatulovskii, 105- 133. Moskva, 1949.

Roth-Ey, Kristin. *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War.* Ithaca, 2011.

Rototaev, P.S., ed. *K Vershinam, Khronika Sovetskogo al’pinizma*. Moscow, 1977.

———. *Pobezhdennaia Ushba.* Moscow 1948.

Sahadeo, Jeff. *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865-1923.* Bloomington, 2007.

Scott, Erik R. *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire.* Oxford, Eng., 2016.

Semenovskii, V., ed. *Na putiakh k vershinam: pamiati proletarskikh al’pinistov Pimena Dvali i Simona Dzhaparidze.* Moskva, 1930.

Shaduri, Vano, ed. *Russkie Pisateli o Gruzii*. Tbilisi, 1948.

Slezkine. Yuri. “I tend to do my own things and expect you to do yours,” interview by Natalia Laas. *Historians* (online journal), June 12, 2014, http://historians.in.ua/index.php/intervyu/1180-yuri-slezkine-i-tend-to-do-my-ownthings-and-expect-you-to-do-yours.

———. “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism.” *Slavic Review* vol. 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 414-452.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram and Vitaly Chernetsky, “Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space.” *PMLA* vol. 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 828-836.

Steinberg, Mark D. and Valeria Sobol. *Interpreting Emotions in Russia and Eastern Europe.* DeKalb, 2011.

Suny, Ronald Grigor “Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations.” *The Journal of Modern History* vol. 73, no. 4 (December 2001): 862-896.

———. *The Making of the Georgian Nation.* Bloomington, 1994.

———. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union.* Stanford, 1993.

Tuite, Kevin. *An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry.* London, 1994.

———. *Svan.* Munchen, 1997.

Urry, John. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies.* London, 1991.

Wachtel, Michael. *A Commentary to Pushkin's Lyric Poetry, 1826–1836.* Madison, 2011.

Whittington, Anna. "Forging Soviet Citizens: Ideology, Identity, and Stability in the Soviet Union, 1930-1991." Ph.D diss., University of Michigan, 2018.

Woll, Josephine. *The Cranes are Flying.* London, 2003.

Zatulovskii, D.M., ed. *K vershinam sovetskoi zemli* (Moskva, 1949).

Zubkova, Elena. *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*. Translated and edited by Hugh Ragsdale. Armonk, 1998.

APPENDIX A: ABBREVIATIONS

DSO – Dobrovol'nye sportivnye obshchestva/Voluntary Sport Societies

GSG – sakartvelos geografiuli sazogadoeba/Geographical Society of Georgia

RGO – Russkoe geograficheskoe obshchestvo/Russian Geographical Society

OPT – Obshchestvo proletarskogo turizma/The Society for Proletarian Tourism

OPTE – Obshchestvo proletarskogo turizma i ekskursii/The Society for Proletarian Tourism and Excursions

TEU – Turistsko-ekskursionnoe Upravlenie/Tourist-Excursion Bureau

UKM – Upravlenie Kavkazskimi marshrutami/Bureau of Caucasian Itineraries

VSA – Vsesoiuznaia sektsiia al'pinizma/All-Union Section of Alpinism

VTsSPS – Vsesoiuznyi tsentralnyi sovet professionalnykh soiuzov/All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions

APPENDIX B: NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Working with texts in both Russian and Georgian presents unique challenges for consistent and accurate transliteration. In general, I have attempted to make the text as readable as possible while preserving the accuracy of the original sources. When available, I generally used common English versions of words, names, or places over precise transliterations (for instance, Adjara instead of ach’ara, Japaridze instead of the Russified Dzhaparidze, etc.). One particular exception here was my use of *Mount Kazbegi* over *Mount Kazbek*. *Kazbegi* is used far more often in Georgia than the Russianized *Kazbek* or the more traditionally Georgian *mq’invarts’veri*, and as such is arguably the most neutral term to discuss the way the mountain functioned in the Russian and Georgian literary imaginations. For Russian transliteration, I followed the Library of Congress system without the use of diacritics (that is x – kh, ш – sh, etc.). For Georgian, I used the 2002 national system of transliteration (here კ - k’, ქ - k, ყ - q’, თ - t, ტ - t’, ც - ts, წ - ts’, etc.). Georgian does not use capitalization and I did not follow standard English capitalization in the citations for Georgian language sources. However, I generally capitalized Georgian names and places in the body of the text itself to avoid confusion.