

***Classical Literature and the Retroaction of Socialist Ideology—The Sovietization of a Medieval Georgian Epic Poem and Its Mysterious Author***  
**Diego Benning Wang**

*O Georgia—who makest us shed tears, /Thou art the second cradle of the Russian muse. /One who carelessly forgets about Georgia, /Is not likely to be a poet in Russia. –Evgeny Evtushenko*  
*When you read Rustaveli, you would be thinking: could there be many writers who lived 700-odd years ago akin to this precious genius of the Georgian people? –Mikhail Kalinin*

Early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian poet Kontantin Balmont, the first person to fully translate the medieval Georgian epic poetry *vepkhistqaosani* (*The Knight in Panther Skin*) into Russian, said such about the work's author Shota Rustaveli: “*Like Homer to the Hellas, Dante to Italy, Shakespeare to England, Calderón and Cervantes to Spain, Rustaveli is Georgia... A people, if great, will compose a song and carry in their bosom their world-renowned poet. Such crown-bearer of the ages, still unbeknownst to the Russians to this day, was the chosen one of Georgia, Shota Rustaveli, who in the twelfth century endowed his homeland with a banner and an appeal—vepkhistqaosani [...] This is the best poetry of love ever composed in Europe, a rainbow of love, a bridge of fire, which connects the heaven with the earth.*”<sup>1</sup> Long after Balmont's Russian translation of *vepkhistqaosani* was completed, the work still remained unknown to most non-Georgians of the Soviet Union. Yet four decades later, Rustaveli had become a household name far beyond his native Georgia and throughout the Soviet Union. His work *vepkhistqaosani* in various translations and adaptations was read with enthusiasm by children and adults alike in the Communist Bloc and beyond, in languages ranging from Russian to Yiddish to Esperanto, and, of course, in its original Georgian. Despite the fame of *vepkhistqaosani*, little is known about Rustaveli the poet even to this day.

Besides the literary prowess and the philosophical depth of the work itself, the celebration of *vepkhistqaosani* and its biographically obscure author had much to do with the cultural policies of the Soviet government. Moreover, the promotion of Rustaveli was

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<sup>1</sup> Irakli Abashidze, Introduction to *Vityaz' v tigrovoy shkure* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1969)

part and parcel of the Soviet government's efforts to mainstream Georgian literature as a bastion of philosophical ideals, moral ethics, and literary genius for the Oriental peoples inhabiting the multi-ethnic state. In this article, I will look into the Soviet government's promotion of the trans-regional characteristics of Georgia that were achieved through the promulgation and appropriation of *vepkhistqaosani* within Soviet ideological confines. In so doing, I will succinctly analyze the historical significance and literary content of the work, its reproductions by the Soviet government, and the celebration of the life of its author. Building on this, I will illustrate the role of epic poetry in the Soviet nationality policy by looking into some of the cultural and literary characteristics of *vepkhistqaosani* and situate them within the ideological canons of the Soviet regime.

### ***Vepkhistqaosani*: A Brief Plot Summary**

Arabian knight Avtandil has been betrothed to Tinatin, daughter of Arabian king Rostevan. While hunting with Rostevan, Avtandil encounters the Knight in Panther Skin Tariel whose sorrowful expression astonishes the entire Arabian entourage, but whom quickly disappears at their sight. Out of curiosity, Rostevan sends Avtandil to search for Tariel. Avtandil eventually finds Tariel and learns the latter's tragic story. A princely knight of India, Tariel has been deeply in love with Nestan-Darejan, daughter of Indian king Parsadan. Despite Tariel's display of bravery in battles, Nestan-Darejan has been secretly married by Parsadan to a foreign prince. Touched by Tariel's story, Avtandil pledges to postpone his marriage to Tinatin and search for Nestan-Darejan with Tariel. The two knights become sworn brothers, and strike a pledge of fraternity with another knight called Pridon. After a long and adventurous quest, the three knights arrive at the fortress where Nestan-Darejan is confined, where they break through the fortification, slaying some three hundred guards in the process, and succeed in rescuing Nestan-

Darejan. After their act of gallantry, Pridon returns home; Tariel and Nestan-Darejan follow Avtandil to Arabia, where Avtandil receives the pardon from Rostevan and marries Tinatin, and Tariel and Nestan-Darejan also tie the knot. Avtandil and Tariel eventually inherit the thrones in their respective kingdoms, rule their domains benevolently, and live happy conjugal lives.

### **The Author of *vepkhistqaosani***

The real name of the author of *vepkhistqaosani* is not revealed in the work itself, where only his epithet Rustaveli appears in the prologue, indicating that he hailed from a locality named Rustavi. His given name Shota is based largely on oral accounts. The only known portrait of Rustaveli was a fresco in the Cross Monastery (*jvris monasteri*) in Jerusalem, a Georgian-built monastery that was taken over by the Greek Orthodox Church in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Rustaveli's origin is also disputed. Despite rivaling claims, by the 1960s, most Soviet Georgian scholars accepted that Rustaveli's birthplace of Rustavi signified a locale in the southern Georgian region of Meskheta (aka Javakheti, or *Javakhq* in Armenian). There also exists another well-documented locality bearing the name of Rustavi in the region Qartli that appeared in writings by the medieval Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli.<sup>2</sup> The classification of Rustaveli by Georgian scholars as a Meskhetian might bear implications on the Georgians' and Armenians' competing claims of autochthony in the Armenian-majority region of Meskheta, from which a large number of Turkish-speaking Muslims (Meskhetian/Ahiska Turks) were deported by Stalin after the end of WWII. Based on the secular attire donned by Rustaveli in the above-mentioned fresco, many Georgian scholars speculate that Rustaveli held a ministerial position under Queen Tamar, under whose reign Georgia registered a considerable territorial expansion

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<sup>2</sup> Cyril Toumanoff, "Medieval Georgian Historical Literature (VII-XV Centuries)," *Traditio*, 1 (1943): 139-82

and unprecedented socio-economic prosperity. Many have even speculated that Rustaveli had love affairs with Tamar, which is relevant to the image of Nestan-Darejan in the epic. Moreover, Tamar is the only historical figure explicitly mentioned in the poem.

Rustaveli's admiration of the beauty and fidelity of Tamar also coincides with later exaltations of her by later Russian poets and writers, such as Mikhail Lermontov in *The Demon* and Anna Akhmatova in a 1927 poem written in the North Caucasus resort town of Kislovodsk. Several contemporary Georgian poets are mentioned in the epilogue. Nevertheless, many Western scholars speculate that *vepkhistqaosani* was written centuries after Tamar's reign.<sup>3</sup>

### **Language**

*Vepkhistqaosani* was originally written in an archaic Georgian script known as *nuskhuri*, which is unintelligible to readers of the modern Georgian script *mkhedruli*. The reproduction of *vepkhistqaosani* would involve transcription from *nuskhuri* to *mkhedruli*, which would in turn alter the orthography. In addition, *vepkhistqaosani* is replete with medieval archaisms, most of which, though intelligible to modern speakers of Georgian, pose some difficulties for comprehension and translation.

The Georgian language was once the *lingua franca* among hermeneutics of the Eastern Mediterranean; many religious works were first translated from Greek into Georgian and then from Georgian into Arabic or Hebrew, and vice versa. In the middle ages, Persian Sufi poetry had strong influences on contemporary Georgian literature, particularly works of the Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi, from which Rustaveli's theme of the *mijnuroba*—devoted love (of Arabic origin) is derived. Georgia's territorial expansion in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries also intensified the Persian influence on Georgian literature. Numerous

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<sup>3</sup> David Marshall Lang, *The Georgians* (New York: Praeger): 173

Persian poets such as Nizami and Khagani lived in territories under Georgian rule.

*Vepkhistqaosani* comprises approximately 1600 four-lined stanzas, which, in terms of length, is fairly average by the standards of its time. Its lexicon has significantly enriched the modern Georgian language, as the reigns of Tamar and her predecessor Davit Aghmashenebeli (David the Rebuilder) saw a period of standardization of the Georgian language.

*Vepkhistqaosani* is one of the few texts that survived the Mongol pillaging in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The original text of *vepkhistqaosani* that is known to have been in the possession of several Georgian monarchs was lost during the Mongol invasion.<sup>4</sup> The earliest existing manuscripts of the poem dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, roughly half a millennium after it was originally written.<sup>5</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, manuscripts of the poem were used by Georgian brides as dowries—extraordinary for a society with low literacy rates. The poem’s wide dissemination contributed to the abundance of reproduced manuscripts as well as the availability and credibility of the text. Several different editions of *vepkhistqaosani* published in Georgian in Tiflis in the late-19th century noticeably differed in length. In the mid-1930s, Soviet Georgian linguist and ethnographer Akaki Shanidze reconstructed the text of *vepkhistqaosani* using modern Georgian. Most later publications of the Georgian text were based on Shanidze’s edition with minor modifications.

### Themes

Soviet Orientalist Iosif Orbeli remarked: “*Rustaveli’s poem is absolutely free from the spirit of pedagogy, but many hundreds of its verses are profoundly edifying.*”<sup>6</sup> There is indeed an extensive spectrum of themes that occur in the epic. Besides its astounding

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012): 153

<sup>5</sup> Natia Revishvili, “Rustaveli (Rustveli), Shota—Velikiy gruzinskiy poet-gumanist”

<sup>6</sup> Venera Urushadze, preface to book of aphorisms of Rustaveli in English with parallel text in Georgian (Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1966)

thematic diversity, a large number of verses and passages of the epic contain pedagogical messages and aphoristic values.

One of the overarching themes of the epic is, of course, love. In *vepkhistqaosani*, love is affectionate as is fraternal. Truly remarkable for its time, the author of *vepkhistqaosani* does not assign any gender or hierarchical attributes to the expression of love, but rather portrays two conjugal relationships based primarily on mutual affection. Soviet Georgian historian and philologist Pavle Ingorokva argues that Rustaveli's theme of love harks back to the Hellenic influence on Georgian literature thanks to the promotion of Greek philosophy by the medieval Georgian theological academies of Gelati and Ikalto.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the epic is not entirely free from values that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Marxist-Leninist might frown upon, such as gender biases and feudal hierarchy.

Intertwined with the theme of love is the theme of camaraderie and friendship, which in the epic takes the shape of sworn brotherhood (or *comitatus*). In some parts of Georgia, this practice is known as *dzmobili* and has been well documented by ethnographers. Another recurring theme is the exaltation of physical beauty often characterized by the rampant use of hyperbole. Besides, the male protagonists' chivalric gallantry is profusely exalted and often rendered via strategic thinking and exuberant descriptions of violence. Furthermore, the poem contains a multitude of geographic and ethnographic ambivalences. Also unsettling to the Marxist reader are the seemingly Orientalist depictions of deception, servitude, and slavery.

Nevertheless, the epic truly stands out in its complexity of plot twists, intensity of the unfolding of events, and multitude of characters that are integrated into complex and intertwined power relations. The poet excels in his focus on the physical, intellectual, and

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<sup>7</sup> Introduction to Wardrop's translation of *vepkhistqaosani* (Moscow: Kooperativnoe Izdatel'stvo tovarishchestva inostrannykh rabochikh v SSSR, 1938)

emotional strength of the two male protagonists, the love and commitment of the two female protagonists, and their loyalty to both their monarchs and their sworn fraternal bonds. Thanks to these characteristics, *vepkhistqaosani* seems to rise above its historical backgrounds of the feudal age of Georgia, heralding a form of humanism that would prevail in Renaissance Europe several centuries later.

Through reading essays on *vepkhistqaosani* published in the 1960s-1980s, one could not help but notice the diverging evaluations of the poem by Georgian and Russian scholars. Georgian scholars such as Irakli Abashidze and Sargis Tsaishvili tended to focus on the “knightly” backgrounds of the work’s main male protagonists, taking into account the overarching feudal context. In comparison, Russian commentators such as Nikolai Zabolotsky<sup>8</sup> and Pavel Antokolsky<sup>9</sup> were more critical in dealing with such controversial subjects in the epic as misogyny and slavery.

As many of these commentators have noted, *vepkhistqaosani* is abundant in philosophical statements and aphoristic passages. Besides the numerous books of citations and aphorisms of Rustaveli published in Soviet Georgia and beyond, quotes of Rustaveli often appeared in writings of Soviet Georgians, fictional and otherwise. For instance, one particular verse of the epic is widely known in Russia even up to this day—“*Who seeks not a friend is his own foe!*” The selection of aphorisms, nonetheless, is likely to induce selective interpretations of the multifaceted topical components of the poem. By selectively glorifying the humanist aspects of *vepkhistqaosani*, the Soviet press was in fact often reiterating ideals of classical Marxism, implying that in the pre-capitalist medieval Orient, such affluent and cultured knight-errands like the male protagonists of the epic were free to participate in the production of the conditions for their own lives

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<sup>8</sup> Nikolay Zabolotsky, introduction to his own translation of *Vityaz' v tigrovoy shkure* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1966)

<sup>9</sup> Pavel Antokol'sky, “Persten' dragotsenny”, *Ogonyok* (May 1961)

centered on voluntarily sworn fraternal bonds and genuine mutual affections. Soviet Georgian literary scholar Nodar Natadze wrote in the mid-1960s:

*“Whatever the historic evaluation of the poem, the reader’s fantasy gets piqued by its richness in emotional nuances, brilliant ideality of [its] humanely attractive protagonists, their masculinity and positive attitude towards life, [and the] enviable splendor of the happiness they have captured in their battles.”*<sup>10</sup>

In other words, many selected aphorisms of Rustaveli’s poem, when interpreted from the Marxist-Leninist worldview, were analogous to numerous other aspects of the *korenizatsiya* policy (indigenization) that characterized the Soviet government’s doctrines regarding the preservation and promotion of ethno-national elements, best summarized by Stalin:

*“When developing the culture that is national in form, Socialist in content, the peoples of the USSR take everything positive and valuable from the culture of the past, in literature, music, in national songs, melodies, in the style of national architecture. They critically adopt the culture of the past, accepting the best, most forward, most revolutionary, democratic, and socialist elements and traditions in the cultural heritage.”*<sup>11</sup>

As Stalin’s quote suggests, the positive and valuable elements of cultural productions from the past are usually singled out for promotion under the official ideology regardless of the negative and backward, anti-Socialist, elements that are intentionally occulted. *Vepkhistqaosani* is, likewise, not free from ambiguities. The poet claims in the prologue that the epic is not his original work, but rather his adaptation of an ancient Persian legend into Georgian and into verses. Prominent scholars, including the distinguished Georgian-born linguist Nicholas Marr, have rebuked the veracity of this statement, due to

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<sup>10</sup> Nodar Natadze, “‘Vityaz’ v tigrovoy shkure’ kak natsional’noe dostoyanie gruzinskogo naroda,” in Tsaishvili, Natadze, eds., *Shota Rustaveli i ego poema* (Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1966)

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Marksizm i natsional’no-koloniya’nyy vopros*, 1934. The article is largely based on an earlier article by Stalin published in 1913. However, the expression “National in form, Socialist in content,” coined in the late-1920s, does not appear in the original version.

the fact that the unconventionality of its plot twists was unparalleled in contemporary Persian literature.<sup>12</sup>

*Vepkhistqaosani* describes mostly Muslim territories inhabited by Arabs, Indians, and Altaic tribesmen. Even prior to the writing of the epic, the predominantly Orthodox Christian Georgians had experienced devastating warfare against Muslim Arabs, not to mention the Mongol invasion and lengthy Ottoman and Persian rule that would take place after the epic's composition. The ethno-geographic settings of the epic are clearly at odds with the traditional Orthodox Christian affiliation that formed the pillar of the Georgian identity under later Muslim rule.

Although religious allusions permeate the entire epic, they tend not to contradict either Christianity or Islam, but rather echo contemporaneous themes and semiotics in Persian Sufi literature. Rather than the providence, the poem places a stronger emphasis on the humanist dimension of philosophical discourses. Such syncretic humanism can be exemplified in the verse “*If God protect thee, it cuts alike well whether thou strike with a log or a sword.*” As Donald Rayfield reckons, the poem “is an extravagant and apparently pagan tale;” although “the poet avoids direct praise of Christianity—Christ, the Trinity, the Virgin are never mentioned,” the poem contains passages that “echo biblical turns of phrase” as well as Christian ideals.<sup>13</sup>

### **The National Epic and the Soviet Nationality Policy**

Under the policy of *korenizatsiya*, the Soviet government emphasized the importance of national languages and literatures in culture and education in minority areas. Stalin wrote: “*The most basic and most important [element] in the national form of culture is the national language; it is also characterized by peculiarities of the national art—of*

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Marr, *Khakani, Nizami, Rustaveli* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1935)

<sup>13</sup> Donald Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History*, New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 77

*literature, music, architecture, etc.*,”<sup>14</sup> which, stemming from a Marxist-Leninist worldview, spoke to the paramount importance of the national language and the national literature in the Soviet government’s enactment of cultural policies in its ethnolinguistically demarcated territorial constituencies.

The promotion of national literatures was often centered on prominent literary figures that commanded reverence among the public. The personification of national literary achievements was Eurocentric in essence. It was under this approach that the importance of epic poetry for the national identity was often stressed and elevated in the official promotion of national literatures.

The importance of epic poetry had to do with the numerous socio-historical elements conveyed therein, namely, (1) historical components, particularly in the case of historical epics, which would often coincide with actual historical events; (2) exaltation of heroism and chivalry that could shape the collective national psyche and emphasis on collective traits of characteristics that could jointly forge the national identity; (3) identification of allies and enemies, which often bears crucial implications on national sovereignty; in the Soviet context, this would often assume a class-oriented outlook; (4) conceptualization of national sovereignty based on descriptions of geography and the delineation of boundaries of the ancestral homeland, which is especially relevant to the Marxist-Leninist notion of the nation, of which territory is a quintessential component; (5) literary components that could potentially become a depository of references.

Boris Groys best sums up the policy of selective promotion of cultural legacy from the past by suggesting that “the art of the past was not living history that could serve as a guide to the present, but a storehouse of inert things from among which anything that

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<sup>14</sup> Stalin, *Marksizm i natsional'no-kolonial'nyy vopros*

seemed appealing or useful could be removed at will.”<sup>15</sup> Groys further argues:

*“As for professional writers, anyone who has learned history of art or literature from Soviet textbooks will recall that [...] authors became utterly indistinguishable in accounts that were not real, historical history, but a kind of hagiography that was intended to foster a deindividualized hieratic image. This hagiographic description made no distinction between Goethe and Sholokhov and Omar Khayyám—they all loved the people, were persecuted by scheming reactionary forces, labored for the radiant future, created truly realistic art, and so on.”*<sup>16</sup>

In the Soviet Georgian context, translator Venera Urushadze wrote in the introduction to her 1948 English-language *Anthology of Georgian Poetry*:

*“Striving to master the [...] revolutionary actuality and to effect the renovation of poetic form which it demands [sic], Georgian Soviet poetry, [...] consistently evolves and improves the best artistic traditions of age-long classical Georgian literature. [...] The poets of Georgia are deeply interested in the rich treasury of national poetic folklore. Both the works of the poets of the elder generation and those of the galaxy of poets that have come to the fore during the current decade bespeak the great attraction that the sources of the poetry of the people, its motifs and forms, have for them.”*

Such ideologically oriented, generically eclectic agenda of the promotion of Socialist national literature that was developed in the mid-1930s not only shaped the later output of literary works, but also affected the policies on the promotion of pre-modern/pre-Soviet literary works. One genre that came under the spotlight was the national epic.

### **The National Epic in the Soviet Georgian context**

Prior to its annexation by the Russian Empire in the early-19<sup>th</sup> century, Georgia had experienced lengthy periods of foreign rules, most often by imperial powers professing alien faiths—the Arabs, Mongols, Persians, Ottomans, etc. Partially owing to its extensive historical connections with surrounding non-European empires, Georgia was designated by the Soviet government as a cultural hub for peoples of the Soviet Orient.

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<sup>15</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, 2011, London: Verso, p. 41

<sup>16</sup> Groys, p. 48

Even as late as the early-1980s, the General Secretary of the Soviet Georgia and later Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze famously led a Georgian delegation on a broadly publicized visit to India, during which Georgia's historical Indo-Persian connections were celebrated.

The route of adventures in *vepkhistqaosani* extends eastwards and coincides with the Silk Road, traversing Arabia, Persia, India, China, and ports by the Indian Ocean. The subject of eastward travels was not uncommon in medieval Georgian literature.

Chakhrukhadze's epic poem *tamariani*, written in the same period as *vepkhistqaosani*, includes accounts of travels to India, China, and Central Asia. Chakhrukhadze himself traveled as far as China to the east and the Maghreb to the west, and was well versed in Arabic and Persian. Medieval Georgia travel writer Rapael Janibegashvili wrote travelogues about his trip to India. Among the handful of preserved works of medieval Georgian literature, *vepkhistqaosani* best reflects the literary achievements of the Georgian language in that period, which made it ideal for the promotion of cultural connections among peoples of the Orient centered on the Georgian experience.

On the flip side, nonetheless, *vepkhistqaosani* makes no explicit mention of westward contact with Europeans.<sup>17</sup> The marginal importance assigned to the European civilization in the epic sat uncomfortably with the Soviet policy of Europeanization of Georgia inherited from Tsarist times.

In the pre-Soviet Georgian literature, there was a scarcity of poetic works possessing the typical tropes of epic poetry and simultaneously having the appropriate amount of mystification of a glorious past of Georgia. This notwithstanding, the origin myths of Rustaveli, including the locality of his birthplace, his biographical details, and rival

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<sup>17</sup> Some scholars argue that the fictional kingdom of Gulansharo in the epic actually refers to the Kingdom of Venice, which was then the world's prominent sea power, the references thereto are scarce, brief, and vague.

claims by neighboring Armenians all tended to undermine the Rustaveli's legitimacy as Georgia's national writer.

The modern form of the Georgian language was standardized fairly recently under Tsarist rule, and the spearheading figures of Georgia's linguistic modernization were all Occidentalized in outlook. This left Georgia a relatively limited range of potential alternatives of national epic, among which was the aforementioned *tamariani* by Chakhrukhadze; the Georgian adaptation of a Persian love story *visramiani*, supposedly written by Sargis Tmogveli also during the reign of Tamara (mentioned in the epilogue of *vepkhistqaosani*); the Georgian adaptation of Persian poet Ferdowsi's epic *Shah-name* (*Tale of Kings*) titled *rostomiani*; another 12<sup>th</sup>-century Persian-influenced love novel in prose *Amiran-Darejaniani* attributed to Mose Khoneli (also mentioned in the epilogue of *vepkhistqaosani*); ancient folkloric epic *amirani*, considered by many as the prototype of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus; the 17<sup>th</sup>-century love novella collection *rusudaniani*; medieval Georgian folk tale *eteriani*, which was adapted into an opera then into a Soviet movie; as well as modern novels featuring ethnographic themes from Georgia's isolated northern mountain regions by late-19<sup>th</sup>-century writers Vazha Pshavela and Aleqsandre Qazbegi—the latter's novel *The Patricide* (*mamis mkvleli*) partly inspired Stalin to take up his pseudonym Koba. Even the Greek mythological stories of Medea's dispatch of the Argonauts to Colchis (modern-day Black Sea coast of Georgia and the North Caucasus) in search of the Golden Fleece were often employed by the Soviet government to symbolize the immensity of Georgia's historical heritage.

### ***Vepkhistqaosani* in the Stalinist Period**

As soon as the Russian Empire acquired its first territorial gains in Eastern Georgia in the late-18<sup>th</sup> century, Tiflis (Tbilisi since 1936, modern capital of Georgia), a semi-

Europeanized Persian city with an Armenian majority, became the administrative center of the entire Caucasus Viceroyalty, which by 1917 extended from the fringes of Eastern Anatolia to the steppes by the Volga Delta. Like their Tsarist predecessors, the Bolsheviks continued to govern Transcaucasia through Tiflis (capital of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic between 1921 and 1936). The Soviet leader Stalin himself was from Georgian backgrounds.

In the late-1920s and early-1930s, under Stalin's auspices, a linguistic revolution was undertaken by Georgian-born linguist Nicholas Marr, who had written prolifically on *vepkhistqaosani* even before the establishment of the Soviet regime. Marr saw his prestige skyrocket as he started proselytizing his Japhetic theory (aka *Marrism*) centered on his audacious postulation of a universal proto-language that purportedly existed under the so-called Primitive Communism. This theory, which is based on comparative discourses on Caucasian languages and Semitic languages, not only directly harked back to theories of classical Marxism, but also concurred with the contemporary Marxist-Leninist ethnological theory of confluence (*sliyanie*), which formed the centerpiece in the theoretical basis of the Soviet regime's implementation of the *korenizatsiya* policy. The same period of 1928-1931 saw the unfolding of Stalin's "Cultural Revolution," during which a series of draconian cultural and educational campaigns were carried out by the Soviet government to promote literacy and ideological conformity. Under the Stalinist hierarchy of nationalities, the Georgians were deemed by the Soviet government to be a culturally developed nation, vis-à-vis Georgia's "less culturally developed" neighbors such as the Azeris and peoples of the North Caucasus, who were yet to have standardized written languages or national literatures. Subsequently, the Georgians were assigned the role of pioneering the cultural and ideological modernization in the Caucasus. In the

meantime, Georgian language and culture were being imposed on several ethnic groups inhabiting autonomous territorial entities within Georgia and in the North Caucasus. Most notably, in the mid-1930s, new alphabets based on the Georgian script were created for the Ossetian and Abkhaz languages; numerous geographical names in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were Georgianized in the same period. Moreover, term “renaissance” (*vozhrozhdenie/renessans*) occurred frequently both in the lexicon of the Soviet central government’s propaganda regarding the policy of Socialist Realism and in proclamations made by key cultural and educational figures in the member republics of Transcaucasia. One has to bear in mind that the phenomena labeled as national renaissance in Soviet times fundamentally differed from tsarist-era cultural and educational movements such as the Jewish Enlightenment (*haskalah*) and the Armenian Awakening (*Zartong*). All these pre-Soviet movements emerged from the intelligentsias of the ethno-confessional groups they affected; whereas the Soviet-era cultural and educational campaigns were under the tutelage of the Soviet government and its ideology. As Katerina Clark suggests, the reproduction and, more importantly, appropriation of the past were part and parcel of the Stalinist cultural policy.<sup>18</sup> As Erick Scott argues, the humanist components of *vepkhistqaosani* endowed the Soviet Georgian high culture with a pre-modern legacy unparalleled in other Soviet member republics.<sup>19</sup> These ideational elements turned *vepkhistqaosani* into a bastion of idealized Georgian traditions of romanticism.

During the Stalinist period and its aftermath, the Soviet government’s reproduction of *vepkhistqaosani* took a myriad of forms, including state-commissioned translations, illustrations, monumentalization, and organization of commemorative events.

### **Translation and Illustration**

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<sup>18</sup> Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011): 42-77

<sup>19</sup> Erick Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2016): 202

In the concluding paragraph of his 1966 introduction to his own Russian-language translation of *vepkhistqaosani*, Nikolai Zabolotskiy writes:

*“Rustaveli does not need our exaltations, since time and people have made his book immortal. Nor does he need apologies for cases in which the moral peculiarities of his characters diverge from our own perceptions. But Rustaveli needs explication and interpretation. It has to be assured that the Russian reader that is unfamiliar with the peculiarities of Georgian history and culture apprehends Rustaveli’s poem as thoroughly as possible.”*<sup>20</sup>

The original meter of *vepkhistqaosani*, called *Shairi* (or *Shayari*, “verse” in Arabic), is characterized by four-lined stanzas of sixteen-syllabled verses, which makes the translation of the epic into European languages a daunting task. The first complete translation of *vepkhistqaosani* into a European language appeared in an English-language edition by an Englishwoman named Marjory Scott Wardrop published posthumously in London in 1912. Wardrop’s brother Sir Oliver Wardrop served as the United Kingdom’s First Commissioner of Transcaucasia between 1919 and 1921. Nicholas Marr characterized this translation by its semantic loyalty and stylistic divergence.

Although excerpts of the poem were translated into Russian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first complete Russian translation was by Balmont based on Wardrop’s English translation. In a brief note to his translation, Balmont spent a substantial amount of time in Georgia and consulted numerous Georgian intellectuals while undertaking the self-assigned enterprise of translation. Moreover, taking into account the rhyme employed by Rustaveli in the original, Balmont also intended to render his translation using a similar rhyming scheme adapted to the phonetic peculiarities of the Russian language.

Prior to the latter half of the 1930s, which saw the publication of three complete Russian translations of *vepkhistqaosani*, Balmont’s translation had been the only

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<sup>20</sup> Nikolai Zabolotskiy, “Mudrost’ Rustaveli”, *Vityaz’ v tigrovoy shkure* (Moscow: Sovetskiy pisatel’, 1966): 13

complete text of the poem available in Russian. A participant in the Russian symbolist movement, Balmont was driven into emigration shortly after the Bolsheviks seized power, and was marginalized in the Russian literary scene due to the rise of post-symbolist genres of Russian poetry both in emigration and within the Soviet state. Shortly before the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rustaveli in 1937, several editions of Balmont's translation were published in the Soviet Union, but with many notable modifications. Under a regime hostile to émigrés and frowning upon Avant-Garde literature, Balmont's translation was scarcely reproduced after the sudden output of new translations completed in the late-1930s. Many later editions of Balmont's translation published in the Soviet Union would not even mention the name of the translator.

The state-sponsored translation of *vepkhistqaosani* began in the mid-1930s—a crucial period that saw the replacement of futurism and other Avant-Garde literary genres by the state-promoted Socialist Realism. This period also coincided with the apex of Stalin's purges. The conformity to state-approved guidelines no doubt placed significant obstacles for the state-commissioned translators of *vepkhistqaosani*. Nevertheless, the endorsement of Stalin himself for the translation of *vepkhistqaosani* cannot be underestimated. Stalin's daughter Svetlana Alliluyeva wrote in her memoirs that she “never saw [Stalin] reading any poetry—nothing beyond the Georgian *Knight in the Tiger's Skin* by Rustaveli, the translations of which he considered himself master enough to judge.”<sup>21</sup> Stalin gave a copy of a 1937 Russian translation to Svetlana as a gift for the latter's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday; and copies of numerous editions of *vepkhistqaosani* can still be found at Stalin's personal library. Many scholars and translators of *vepkhistqaosani*, such as Ingorokva, Nutsubidze, and Zabolotsky, had all been imprisoned prior to embarking on their projects on the poem,

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<sup>21</sup> Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Only One Year*, trans. Paul Chavchavadze (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969): 389-90

often on grounds of their non-conformity with the Soviet state's imposition of the Socialist Realist genre.<sup>22</sup>

Under state patronage, the translation of literary works from Soviet minority languages into Russian was undertaken not only by professional philologists with strong command of the original languages, but also by poet-translators, who were typically native speakers of Russian with no pre-existing knowledge of the languages from which they translated. Prominent Soviet poets such as Valery Bryusov, Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Arkady Tarkovsky translated Georgian poems into Russian with the help of Georgian-speaking linear translators. The practice of linear translation was so commonplace that Avar-speaking Daghestani poet Rasul Gamzatov wrote a satirical poem deriding the poet-translator's lack of knowledge of the original languages in which the poems had been written:

*"You, perhaps, were lucky in one thing: /For the author your work is witty and constrained. /But you were unlucky in something else: /We—the Avars know the Avar language!" (To a Certain Russian-Language Translator)*

Compared to professional philologists, poet-translators usually exercised more translational freedom and were less restrained in making choices of between preservation and omission. The use of linear translators in the translation of *vepkhistqaosani* into Russian occurred as early as the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. Out of the four complete Russian translations published in the Soviet period, two were carried out by ethnic Georgians, the other two by Russian/Ukrainian poet-translators with the help of linear translation. The earliest of these translations was the one by Soviet Georgian poet and screenwriter Giorgi Tsigareli, first published in 1937. In quick succession came a 1938 posthumously

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Pratt's biography of Zabolotsky delves into great lengths in talking about Zabolotsky's efforts in coping up with the transition from futurism to Socialist Realism and the repressions Zabolotsky suffered as consequences. Sarah Pratt, *Nikolai Zabolotsky: Enigma and Cultural Paradigm* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000): Chapters 3-6

published translation by Ukrainian poet-translator Panteleymon Petrenko, who lived in Tiflis while translating *vepkhistqaosani* but never mastered Georgian, and died before finishing the last 155 stanzas (completed by Valeri Chichinadze). In the same year, Georgian publicist Giorgi Ioseliani published a prose adaptation of the poem for school-age readers in Russian. In the mid-1930s, Georgian philologist, director of Georgia's State Academy of Sciences of Shalva Nutsubidze was commissioned by Stalin to translate the poem, on which he spent at least five years. Stalin, a connoisseur of *vepkhistqaosani* since his childhood in Georgia, himself partook in this translation by translating one stanza. Simon Sebag Montefiore's biography of Stalin offers an account on Nutsubidze's only meeting with Stalin, which took place in Oct 1940:

*“When [Nutsubidze was] shown into [Stalin's] office, Stalin was smiling at [him], [...] and then he started to rave about the ‘magnificent translation of Rustaveli.’ Sitting [Nutsubidze] down, Stalin handed the astounded professor a leather-bound draft of the translation, adding, ‘I’ve translated one couplet. Let’s see how you like it.’ Stalin recited it. ‘If you really do like it, I give it to you as a present. Use it in your translation, but don’t mention my name. I take great pleasure in being your editor.’”<sup>23</sup>*

One of the first editions of this translation was printed in 1941 with lavishly embroidered hardcovers. Stalin even gave a copy of this translation to Beria's son Sergo on the latter's wedding with Maxim Gorky's granddaughter and close friend of Stalin's daughter Svetlana, Martha (Marfa) Pershkova.<sup>24</sup>

The most widely circulated translation was the one by Russian poet-translator Nikolai Zabolotsky, who, like Petrenko, did not speak Georgian. Apart from his pronounced dedication to the translation and promotion of Georgian poetry, Zabolotsky was also an outstanding poet, whom Darra Goldstein praises as “one of the greatest figures of [the twentieth] century” that was “both the last link in the Russian Futurist tradition and the

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<sup>23</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: Phoenix, 2004): 329

<sup>24</sup> Montefiore, 521n

first significant poet to come of age in the Soviet period.”<sup>25</sup> Having first published an adaptation of the poem for children in the late-1940s, Zabolotsky published his complete translation one decade later, which by the early-1980s had been reprinted in at least eight different editions.

By comparing these translations, one can notice a general trend of increasing fluidity and rhyme, but at the expense of increasing divergence from the original. Even the fluctuation of the aggregate amount of stanzas is telling of the scale of modifications by the translators. The most widely circulated Georgian edition of *vepkhistqaosani* consists of 1646 stanzas. By comparison, Wardrop’s English translation has 1576 stanzas, Petrenko’s 1587, Nutsubidze’s 1671, and Zabolotsky’s 1789.

Endowed with more creative freedom than the enterprise of translation, multiple series of illustrations to the epic were produced between the 1930s and the 1960s. The works of these illustrators—most of whom were ethnic Georgians—are indicative of the contemporary official art policies under different Soviet leaderships and degrees of tolerance of divergence from the official guidelines of Socialist Realism. There exist several pre-Soviet series of illustrations, such as the ones by the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Mamuka Tavakarashvili in the style of Persian illuminated manuscripts and more recent ones by Michály Zichy. In Soviet times, the most renowned state-commissioned illustrator of *vepkhistqaosani* was arguably Lado Gudiashvili, who was a disciple of the founder of Georgian simplistic painting Niko Pirosmi (Nikoloz Pirosmashvili) and achieved fame in the Russian émigré community in Paris prior to his repatriation to Soviet Georgia in 1925. Another famous state-commissioned artist was Irakli Toidze, best known for his war propaganda posters. The most reproduced illustrations were from the series by Sergo

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<sup>25</sup> Darra Goldstein, *Nikolai Zabolotsky: Play for Mortal Stakes* (Cambridge University Press, 1993): 1

Qobuladze, who accentuated human muscles and facial expressions. Other series were produced by Apolon Kutateladze, Lado Grigolia, Tamara Abakelia, Levan Tsutskiridze, Ucha Japaridze, Natela Iankoshvili, Rusudan Petviashvili, Dementy Shmarinov. None of them strictly conformed to either traditions of the Georgian painting or principles of Socialist Realism.

### **Memorialization and Celebration**

Soviet Russian writer Andrei Bitov who traveled to Georgia in the 1970s wrote:

*“There is special credibility in the name of the poet whom you have not read. [When] the ear hears the sound that corresponds with someone’s name a hundred times, there would be no name in it. But it is worthwhile to pronounce it to a person who knows what it means, who knows on the grounds of his own love, and you will hear and believe. The word ‘Rustaveli’ soars from the lips of the Georgian person precisely in such credible manner.”<sup>26</sup>*

The fame of Rustaveli among the Soviet public and the increasingly strong connections of Soviet Georgia to her mystified national poet had much to do with the memorialization and celebration by Soviet authorities that were nothing short of extravagant.

The dates of birth and death of Rustaveli have never been precisely determined. Rustaveli’s 750<sup>th</sup> and 800<sup>th</sup> anniversaries were grandiosely celebrated in the Soviet Union respectively in 1937 and 1966, with an interval of 29 instead of 50 years. The 1937 celebration was essentially an effort by the then leader of Soviet Georgia Lavrenti Beria to demonstrate his patronage to art and literature. Beria even petitioned Stalin in May 1937 for the organization of the anniversary and the creation of a special plenum dedicated to the studies of Rustaveli within the Writers’ Union of the USSR. Prominent party apparatchiks such as Voroshilov and Mikoyan attended ceremonies held in 1937.

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<sup>26</sup> Andrey Bitov, *Gruzinskiy al'bom* (Tbilisi: Merani, 1985)

In 1937, also the centennial of Pushkin's death, the government of Soviet Georgia established an institute of *Rustavelology* at Georgia's Academy of Sciences that was to be staffed by some of Georgia's most accomplished literary scholars to day. Some prominent figures of the culture and politics of Georgia were *Rustavelologists* at certain points of their careers, such as the first president of post-Soviet Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Beria himself wrote in an article in the newspaper *Pravda* on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution on Nov 7, 1937:

*“Only under the conditions [created by] the Soviet authorities [...] did the celebration of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Georgian national poet Shota Rustaveli become possible. Only under the conditions of the indestructible Stalinist friendship did the frequent cultural exchange among peoples of the USSR become possible, when the greatest monuments of the culture[s] of separate peoples became the possession of the entire Soviet nation, [where people] in different republics, border regions, and provinces of the Soviet Union prepare for the celebration of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the immortal Rustaveli with an equal amount of love.”*

The best indicators of the magnitude of Rustaveli's popularity in the Soviet Union lay in the records of the Soviet publishing industry. Between 1935 and 1969, 23 different editions of the complete Russian-language text of *vepkhistqaosani* were published within the Soviet Union; between 1926 and 1966, the complete Georgian text of *vepkhistqaosani* was published in 27 different editions in Soviet Georgia.<sup>27</sup>

In 1921, the State Drama Theater of Tiflis was renamed after Rustaveli. In 1937, a peak of the Caucasus was named Rustaveli. The Soviet authorities produced a short movie, a ballet, and a musical recital based on passages from *vepkhistqaosani*. Excerpts of the poem were printed in numerous widely circulated Soviet publications. Images of *vepkhistqaosani* and Rustaveli appeared on covers of Soviet magazines as well as books on Georgia published in Soviet member republics and the Eastern Bloc. Readings of

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<sup>27</sup> Babayan, 12-3, 134-5

*vepkhistqaosani* appeared in the curricula in schools all across the Soviet Union. A 1984 scholastic edition of *vepkhistqaosani* registered a print run of over a million copies. In the 1980s, abridged audio books of *vepkhistqaosani* were released in Moscow. An East German-manufactured Soviet cruise ship unveiled in 1968 was named the *Shota Rustaveli* and sailed the Black Sea between Odessa and the littoral of Georgia and the North Caucasus. The cruise's boarding pass prominently featured a portrait of Rustaveli, and a pamphlet distributed to the cruise's multinational passengers contained the following passage in Russian and English:

*“Though no information about the life and work of Rustaveli has come down to us [...], the poem itself is convincing proof that its author was a noble humanist who acclaimed Man [sic], love, friendship and fortitude. Today, centuries after Rustaveli created his poem, the name ‘Shota Rustaveli’ on the bows of one of the finest Soviet passenger liners calls to mind the heroes of [vepkhistqaosani]. Many of the decorative details of the ship’s interior derive from motifs of the poem, particularly the superb chased bas-reliefs executed by the best Georgian masters of this art.”*

The Soviet government also issued five series of postal stamps honoring or featuring Rustaveli. Pins, memorabilia, matchbox labels, envelopes, lacquer boxes, and consumer goods like tin cigarette boxes featuring Rustaveli and the theme of his epic were produced and circulated in the Soviet Union. Although Soviet authorities frowned upon consumerism, Soviet artisans produced a multitude of brass- and bronze-decorated covers for hard copies of *vepkhistqaosani*, many embellished with enamels.<sup>28</sup>

One of the most widespread and most enduring commemorative efforts in honor of Rustaveli under the Soviet government was the renaming of streets. From the late-1950s to 1960s, streets bearing Rustaveli's name appeared in over 70 cities and towns in at least

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<sup>28</sup> In Georgia, there did indeed exist a pre-Soviet tradition of presenting gold-plated, jewel-clad copies of *vepkhistqaosani* as gifts or dowries, but many of the extravagant covers produced in the 1980s were used for Russian and English translations of the poem and by craftspeople from non-Georgian backgrounds. Some of the best-known decorative covers were produced by Daghestani-born, Tbilisi-based ethnic Avar craftswoman Manaba Magomedova. Examples can be found in her numerous monographs.

ten Soviet member republics. In 1956, in Abkhazia, where ethnic tensions had been brewing between the titular Abkhaz and the Georgians, two major seaside promenades were named after Rustaveli by local authorities, and a bust of the poet was installed in front of a local Georgian theatre. These moves were seen by members of the local titular ethnic group as imposition of Georgian chauvinism.<sup>29</sup>

In 1959, a literary and archaeological expedition led by Irakli Abashidze conducted research at the Cross Monastery of Jerusalem where Rustaveli's only actual portrait was located. Following his return to Soviet Georgia, Abashidze wrote a travelogue titled *The Palestine Diary (palestinis dghiuri)*, consisting of 60 pages of unnoted text and 21 pages of blurry full-page photographs. A few years later, Abashidze wrote a long lyrical poem on the same trip titled *Palestine, Palestine*.

### **Exporting *vepkhistqaosani***

*Vepkhistqaosani* had been published, either in part or in whole, in major Western European languages as early as the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. However, most German and French translations were incomplete and published within the boundaries of the Russian/Soviet state. It was only in Soviet times that *vepkhistqaosani* started to circulate on a large scale in the West, and later in countries of the Communist Bloc and the Third World. The Soviet state's efforts in translating, reproducing, and actively exporting the poem were crucial for its international outreach. The Soviet publishing industry started exporting *vepkhistqaosani* as early as the late-1930s. In the late-1920s, in order to raise money for its industrialization campaigns, the Soviet government started exporting books to the West. Book-trading agencies were established to facilitate the export of Soviet

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<sup>29</sup> The bust of Rustaveli was destroyed shortly after the fall of Sukhumi to Abkhaz secessionists in 1993 during the Georgian-Abkhaz War. Streets once named after Rustaveli have been renamed to honor the Abkhaz culture.

publications. In 1938, an oversize hardback gift edition of Wardrop's English translation was published in Moscow and New York.

Shortly before 1966, for the occasion of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Soviet Georgian authorities commissioned translations of the poem into numerous Soviet and foreign languages. New English, French, and German translations of the poem were published in 1966. One remarkable translation from this period was a Hebrew one by Boris Gaponov. A native of Crimea, Gaponov grew up in the Georgian city of Kutaisi, home to a large community of Judeo-Georgians, and learned Biblical Hebrew from his rabbi father. Gaponov's translation was published in Tel-Aviv in 1969, the year that saw the severing of diplomatic ties between the Soviet Union and Israel following the Six-Day War.

The export of *vepkhistqaosani* to foreign countries, especially to countries of the Communist Bloc, was often imbued with ideological implications that had as much to do with the promulgation of Georgian literature as with the export of Soviet ideals, which can be summed up in the preface to a 1953 Chinese translation of *vepkhistqaosani*:

*“Vepkhistqaosani is a treasurable legacy of the people of Georgia, which, under the Soviet power, has come to be accepted and appreciated by the proletarian masses. The new culture ought to absorb outstanding elements of preexisting, old culture; yet such preexisting culture is not [to be] limited to one nation [or] one country. The zenith of the construction of our motherland's culture will come about along the zenith of economic construction. Time is ripe for us to reorganize our own cultural heritage and introduce other nations' and countries' progress in [reorganizing their] cultural heritage.”*<sup>30</sup>

### **The Apex of Soviet “Rustavelophilia”: The 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

The year of 1966 saw the culmination of the celebration of Rustaveli in the Soviet Union thanks to the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rustaveli's birth. Within the year of 1966, 1036

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<sup>30</sup> Li Jiye, addendum to preface to his translation titled *Hupi Wushi* (Beijing, China: Zuoqia Chubanshe, 1954)

scholarly and literary works on Rustaveli and *vepkhistqaosani* were published in Russian in the Soviet Union, as opposed to 660 in 1937.<sup>31</sup>

For the occasion of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Abashidze wrote a collection of lyrical poems titled *Following the Footsteps of Rustaveli (rustavelis nakvelevze)*, in which Abashidze imaginarily follows Rustaveli from ancient Babylon to medieval Persia to the bank of the Ganges and encounters the numerous cultures in the lands he traverses. Compared to Abashidze's earlier poem *Palestine, Palestine* that is saturated with ecclesiasticisms, *Following the Footsteps* profusely capitalizes on the secular, and even anti-religious components of the imagined personality of Rustaveli. Writer Nikolai Tikhonov, who chaired the Writers' Union of the USSR under Stalin, summarized in his copiously laudatory preface to *Following the Footsteps* that Abashidze's Rustaveli is an "apostate, seeker of high truths devoted to humanly love and passion, entering into a dispute for his independence and spiritual freedom," and that Rustaveli's devotion to freedom "puts him against the power of the church—a hypocritical and deceptive power." This imaginary anti-church attribute to Rustaveli by Abashidze would certainly lend greater legitimacy to the celebration of Rustaveli under the watchful eyes of the Communist authorities. Tikhonov in the above-quoted passage also associates the celebrated humanism of Rustaveli's poetry with the contemporary Soviet Georgian literature spearheaded by writers like Abashidze, claiming that "[Abashidze's] cycle of verses about Rustaveli is a great achievement of the entire Soviet poetry." An oratorio based on poems from this collection helped its composer Otar Taktakishvili win the USSR State Prize in 1967, the first year after its establishment.

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<sup>31</sup> Babayan, 27-136

In 1966, the Tbilisi subway was unveiled in spite of Tbilisi's failure to meet the tacitly enforced demographic prerequisite of having at least one million inhabitants for the construction of an underground mass transit system. One Tbilisi subway station near the city's main street Rustaveli Prospect was named *Rustaveli* and embellished by a towering statue of the poet as well as *vepkhistqaosani*-themed decorative motifs in the interior of the station. A monument of Rustaveli was erected in Moscow where celebrations also took place. In Armenia, lengthy sessions of the republican Academy of Sciences were convened in Oct 1966 to celebrate the anniversary of Rustaveli and the ties between the Georgian and Armenian peoples.

The Soviet beatification of the visual image of Rustaveli was also conspicuous. A 1982 book published in Tbilisi included 100 portraits of Rustaveli, out of which over 90 were produced by Soviet-era painters.<sup>32</sup> By comparing and contrasting these images, one can easily notice that the Soviet-era images of Rustaveli, including portraits as well as statues, consistently feature a robust figure with scant and dark facial hair and a charismatic gaze, despite the fact that the only actual portrait of Rustaveli in Jerusalem is a lifeless medieval fresco of a white-bearded elderly man in long garbs.

At the zenith of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, the government of the Georgian SSR designated the month of October as memorial month of Rustaveli, which was concluded on November 1 by Brezhnev's first of only three visits to Georgia, where he gave a triumphant speech in Tbilisi after conferring the Order of Lenin—the highest collective distinction of the Soviet Union—to the leadership of the Georgian SSR. In the speech, Brezhnev declared:

*“Georgia is a country with an ancient culture. This is once again testified by the celebration of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the great poet and thinker Shota Rustaveli. Rustaveli is Georgian, but he belongs*

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<sup>32</sup> Boris Kandelaki, *shota rustavelis asi portreti* (Tbilisi: Khelovneba, 1982)

*not only to Georgia. He belongs to all the peoples of our multi-national homeland. This was pronounced emotionally and warmly at the celebratory assembly at the Bolshoi Theater [...] This was testified once again by the unveiling in Moscow of a monument of the author of [vepkhistqaosani]. Together with Georgia, our entire country [and] the entire progressive humankind are celebrating the glorious jubilee of the poet.”<sup>33</sup>*

The grandeur of Rustaveli’s 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary would humble later commemorations of more politically important events in Soviet Georgia, including the 50<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the creation of the Georgian SSR respectively in 1971 and 1981, the bicentennial of the 1783 signing of Georgievsk Treaty that precluded Russia’s annexation of Georgia, and soccer team Tbilisi Dynamo’s 1981 European title.

### **The Political Dimension of the Celebration of Literary Achievements**

The timing of the celebration of Rustaveli’s 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1966 was by no means accidental. Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s cult of personality in the Secret Speech in Feb 1956 triggered unprecedented mass protests in Tbilisi two weeks later that were forcibly clamped down by the Soviet government. The celebration of Georgia’s culture and history through the personification of Rustaveli could potentially help to appease the Georgian national sensitivities. Khrushchev’s replacement of the Georgian-born Stalin as Soviet leader, liquidation of the Georgian-born Beria, and destruction of Stalin’s personality cult deprived the average Soviet Georgian of not only two strong leaders but also a point of national pride. The Union-wide celebration of the Georgian culture and literature under the mythologized metonym of Rustaveli may be construed as an effort to de-Stalinize the culture of Georgia. Moreover, after Stalin’s death, the Soviet government considerably relaxed its cultural policy. Edward Allworth characterizes the post-Stalinist period as one during which cultural elites in Soviet member republics were able to

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<sup>33</sup> Besik Lipia, “Leonid Il’ich schital gruzin narodom s otkryтым serdtsem,” *Sputnik-Georgia* (Oct 19, 2016)

“tacitly regroup” and make inroads in “exploring the frontiers of permissible inquiry.”<sup>34</sup>

In fact, the Soviet state’s celebration of literary achievements dated back almost as early as the establishment of the regime itself. Events such as the centennial of Pushkin’s death in 1937 left huge imprints on the memories of Soviet citizens. The 1949 celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pushkin’s birth enlisted the participation of Paul Robeson, and was exported to Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe. Epics of Soviet member republics were also celebrated in similar manners, but few on a scale comparable to *vepkhistqaosani*. In Soviet Azerbaijan, the Farsi-language poet Nizami who spent most of his life in the city of Kirovabad became Azerbaijan’s national poet despite the fact that few modern Azeris knew Farsi. Shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, preparations were underway for a grandiose celebration of the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nizami’s birth, only to be dashed by the Soviet collapse. Similar roles were assigned to Ferdowsi in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan’s Alisher Navoi, and Estonia’s Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald. In Armenia, the legend of David of Samsun (*Sasuntsi Davit*) became enshrined as the national epic. Other national epics include Ossetia’s saga of Batraz the Nart, Karelia’s *Kalevala*, Kalmykia’s *Dzhangar*, and Kyrgyzstan’s orally preserved *Manas*.

Another one of the most widely disseminated national epics of Soviet Peoples was *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign* (*Slovo o polku Igoreve*). In the late-1980s, the epic’s 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary was extravagantly celebrated in the Ukrainian city of Chernigov (Chernihiv) near the border with Byelorussia, and was intended by the local authorities to promote the fraternal bonds of the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. The theme of Eastern Slavic fraternity had been avidly and successfully exploited by the Kremlin and member republic authorities since the mid-1950s, which served to offset Russian nationalism and

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<sup>34</sup> Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1990): 249

the “first among equals” status assigned to the Russian people in the Soviet “family of peoples” by different Soviet leaderships in succeeding periods.

### **Conclusion**

Unintentionally echoing Balmont, Ingorokva wrote in 1938:

*“The great Russian people remember with love the name of [Rustaveli] together with the name of Pushkin, just as the great Ukrainian people remember the name of Rust[a]veli together with that of Taras Shevchenko. The Byelorussians and Uzbeks, the [Tajiks] and [Turkmens], the Kazakhs and [Kyrgyz], just as Georgia’s closest [neighbors], the peoples of the Caucasus—[Azeris], Armenians and the highlanders of the Caucasus—lovingly recall the name of Rust[a]veli together with those of their own national poets.”*<sup>35</sup>

*Vepkhistqaosani*’s literary genius, its geographic and ethnographic settings, and pioneering humanist components altogether contributed to the Soviet government’s inclination to designate the work as Georgia’s national epic. This reflected the intention to promote the literary and cultural multiplicities of Soviet Georgia, attained through translation, illustration, commemoration, and most importantly, the appropriation of the work using ideologically permissible tropes of epic poetry to cater to the Soviet reading public. Doubtlessly, Rustaveli could not have been immortalized without the Georgian public’s genuine fondness for *vepkhistqaosani*. The fierce 1978 protests in Tbilisi against the Soviet Georgian government’s proposed language law are indicative of the volatile role of cultural and linguistic sovereignty in the relations between the Russo-centric Soviet core and the increasingly nationalistic Georgian periphery. As Bitov suggests, Georgia perhaps was never fully integrated into the Russo-centric Soviet state. However, it was the Sovietization of historical Georgian writers like Rustaveli that consolidated the meta-political bonds between Georgia and the Russian core of the Soviet empire.

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<sup>35</sup> Ingorokva, Moscow, 1938