

Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia

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Think of what you are about to read more as a dialogue between two scholars of Georgia than a conventional review of a colleague's book. Those few of us outside of Georgia who chose to study the Georgian language and delve into the three millennia history of that beautiful and beleaguered country have usually shaped our narratives in the template of national history – the story of a distinct people who managed to maintain a continuous existence despite invasions, occupations, exile, and the fall of their polities. Writing in a mode that only became imperative in the nationalist 19th century provides a coherence and continuity that belies the eclectic, disjointed, and cosmopolitan actualities of the Caucasian *longue durée*. Yet since sources often are generated by states, and archival materials are usually organized by governments, the imprimatur of nation effaces the more complex variations of how people in the past understood themselves and others.

Donald Rayfield, Professor Emeritus of Russian and Georgian at Queen Mary, University of London, has undertaken just such a national story, even while his book's title – *Edge of Empires* – affirms Georgia's liminal position between great multiethnic states. His subtitle suggests that he is presenting one possible account and that others will offer different readings. When I first went to Georgia nearly half a century ago, Donald Rayfield was somewhat of a legend, a stellar student with fluent Georgian and a deep knowledge of its literature. Yet despite the proximity in our scholarly interests, over many decades we never met. He had left Georgia before I arrived, and though he apparently came to a lecture I delivered in London, he left with making himself known to me. When I published *The Making of the Georgian Nation* in 1988, Rayfield gave the book a relatively critical review in which he even took issue with the title. How could this book, which centered on the 19th and 20th centuries, be about the making of a nation whose origins reached back into prehistoric times? I finally met Professor Rayfield a year ago when we shared glasses of wine after the

successful dissertation defense of one of his protégés. Later I bought his extraordinary two-volume dictionary of Georgian, which his wife delivered to me in a plastic bag in Victoria Station.

After the usual linguistic and archaeological introduction, Georgia's history is conventionally said to begin with its first king, Parnavaz, who may or may not have existed, but who is enshrined in chronicles both Georgian and Armenian. Georgia's mixed heritage is attested to by Parnavaz's name and his mother, both Persian. The king married a North Caucasian (Chechen or Ingush) and gave his daughter in marriage to an Ossetian. The Georgian king Mirian III converted to Christianity circa 317, and a century later the first Georgian alphabet was devised. Georgians had their own identity, religion, and language but were deeply embroiled in the shifting alliances, allegiances, and imperial rivalries that roiled through Caucasia and Anatolia. King Vakhtang Gorgasali, founder of Georgia's eventual capital, Tbilisi, was also the son of a Persian mother and the husband first of a Persian wife and later a Byzantine royal. His country's affinity with Iran marked Georgian culture until the 19th century. Colchis (Lazica), Western Georgia, remained more firmly in the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine sphere of cultural and political influence until the coming of the Ottomans. The fateful decision of Catholicos Kvirion II in the seventh century to accept the dyophysite Christology of Byzantium ended the centuries-old closeness with the monophysite Armenians and secured Georgia as an eastern outpost of Orthodox Christianity.

The Arab invasions in that same period were an even more radical rupture in the history of Caucasia. Three Christian peoples – Georgians, Armenians, and Caucasian Albanians – would henceforth live with the threat, as well as the promise of tolerance, from Islam. Throughout the following centuries Georgia was more like a mini-empire, with a diverse population, and hierarchical inequitable relations of power among its peoples, than an ethnically and religiously homogeneous nation-state. Its history paralleled those of its neighbors (Armenia, Persia, Turkey, and Russia) at least until late Soviet times. Rather than ethnicity, it was religion and language that determined who might pass for Georgian. Rayfield is fond of the definition of Georgia offered by the ninth century author Giorgi Merchule: 'We can consider as Greater Georgia wherever Mass and prayers are said in Georgian' (p. 62). But as in Armenia, so in Georgia, many of the towns were inhabited by Muslim merchants and workers. A traveller in the late tenth century observed that Tbilisi was 'wholly Muslim' (p. 72).

Georgia (*sakartvelo*) was first united only in the early 11th century under Bagrat III, king of the Abkhaz. But soon the kingdoms of Caucasia, particularly the Armenian, faced a new and mortal danger – the invasions of the Seljuk Turks. Georgia's monarchs made strategic agreements with the invaders, heralding a period of expansion and prosperity under the two most eminent rulers of the medieval period, David *aghmashenebeli* (the Builder) (1089–1125) and Tamar (1178–1213). David gave up his Armenian queen for a Qipchak to promote his kingdom's security interests, while Tamar's consort, David Soslan, was an Ossetian. Their empires, with their cosmopolitan capital at Tbilisi, were devastated in the early 13th century by the Mongols, and Georgia's fortunes ebbed and flowed in the ensuing half millennium until by early modern times its monarchs repeatedly petitioned Russian tsars for protection against the predations of the Persians and the Ottomans.

Rayfield's opus is very informative, in the sense that it is chock full of information – reigns, dynasties, foreign incursions, efforts at unification, and multiple failures to hold fragile states together. Like an earlier specialist, Cyril Toumanoff, he is obsessed with how various princes were related to one another, who was legitimate and who a pretender or usurper. His focus is on politics, the role of elites, rather than on society and social relations more broadly. He largely leaves out culture and literature, perhaps justifiably since he has treated Georgian writing extensively in his earlier history of Georgian literature. When the rulers of Georgia cease to be native royals, Rayfield follows the adventures and misadventures, amorous and military, of the various Russian governors and viceroys. In such a history from the top down, with much of the down left out, Georgia recedes from view as palace intrigues and personalities take center stage. The emancipation of the serfs is given short shrift. The dominance of Armenians in Tbilisi and other towns is mentioned in passing. Thanks to a Georgian study, he provides interesting details on anti-Semitism, which was largely a local Russian rather than a Georgian problem.

For all its suggestive material Rayfield's construction of the Georgian past fails to give much analysis of why events or processes occurred. The story is Georgian-centric and Georgian-philic, a national narrative focused on the steady march forward of the Georgians themselves. Georgians' implicit nationalism is taken for granted rather than investigated. The rule of Russians is largely seen as a negative imperial imposition, though Rayfield concedes at several points that the authorities 'did some good' or 'Not all government measures were reactionary' (pp. 304, 310). Almost completely missing are the complex relations of Georgians with the other peoples of Georgia, particularly their social rivals, the Armenians, which in my understanding was a primary ingredient in the generation of Georgian nationalism and even the particular Menshevik brand of Marxism that became hegemonic in the national liberation movement.

Still, what Rayfield gives us is usually reliable and clearly presented. The single doubtful episode comes with the appearance of Stalin, whom he claims framed an innocent watchseller, Arsena Jorjiashvili, for the assassination of General Fedor Griaznov in 1906, which in fact Stalin organized. Rayfield's source is a post-Soviet article, but close reading of the evidence from earlier memoirs indicts Jorjiashvili, who carried out the killing even as Stalin's group of terrorists was preparing to murder the hated officer (p. 315). There is also no evidence connecting Stalin with the murder a year later of the nationalist poet and political figure Iliia Chavchavadze (now Saint Iliia), which Rayfield pins on the Bolshevik leader.

The chapter on the revolution and Georgian independence (1917–21) is bizarre in two ways. Rather than using recent research and writing on the period, Rayfield depends almost exclusively on memoirs, for example, of the German general Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein. The years in which masses of people moved onto the stage of history are told as the maneuvering of key leaders, a throwback to older modes of diplomatic and military history. The word 'soviet' is studiously avoided in favor of 'council,' and the role of the Mensheviks is grossly underestimated.

Things go downhill both for Georgia and the book when we reach the 'Soviet annexation.' After 1921 the history of Georgia as told here was one of unremitting repression, executions, and resistance. Sanguinary as the Communists could be, they managed to create a degree of loyalty as formerly subaltern people moved up the social ladder and peasant Georgia was transformed into a modern urban and industrial society. Literacy, mass education, better health care, and public support of literature and national culture were also products of the Soviet state. Yet here Soviet power is depicted basically as a terror regime built on unspeakable brutality. How raw power translated into a grudging legitimacy needs to be explained. Rather than conceptualizations or interpretations, we are given reportage and indictment. It should be noted that Rayfield has uncovered fascinating material on Georgian émigré activity against the USSR and Soviet counterespionage targeting Georgians, though one might question the balance between the treatment of the emigration and internal affairs. Rayfield's Soviet chapters are clearly post-Soviet history, a post-revisionist chronicle that reflects the current anti-Soviet, even anti-Russian, mood of present-day Georgians. What the Soviets called their *dostizheniia* (achievements) have fallen into a deep memory hole and left on the surface are the ruins of a cruel failed experiment in human engineering.

Rayfield regains his footing in the last chapter, which covers the years of restored independence. Although he was once a friend of the troubled dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who became Georgia's freely elected president in 1991, Rayfield is balanced and judicious in sorting through the contentious politics and suicidal civil and ethnic wars that divided and ultimately led to the disintegration of Georgia. While there is no love lost with the former communist, and second president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, the author acknowledges that this survivor of numerous assassination attempts was able to disarm the reckless paramilitaries and reestablish a modicum of state authority. Rayfield is equally critical of Mikheil Saakashvili, the flamboyant young lawyer who overthrew Shevardnadze in the "Rose Revolution" of November 2003. Unlike some pro-Georgian Western writers, Rayfield does not claim that Russia rather than Georgia initiated the disastrous Russo-Georgian war of August 2008. In this dubious adventure Saakashvili was the provocative David to Russia's slow-footed Goliath. Rayfield's narrative ends on the eve of Saakashvili's electoral defeat by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili in 2012.

This book will fascinate anyone interested in the turbulent, tangled past of the Georgians. What it lacks in analysis and overriding interpretation it makes up with recovered tales of willful characters who in their zeal usually brought disaster to their country. When I attempted five decades ago to bring some coherence, if not unbroken continuity, to Georgia's history, I emphasized the theme of cultural and social construction of national identity and argued that only in modern times did politics, culture, territory, and popular sovereignty come together in a discourse of nationhood. Whatever Georgia was in its thousands of years – tribal society, dynastic realm, ethnoreligious community – it became a nation only in the 19th century with the rise of its secular intelligentsia and even more forcefully in the 20th century in the years of Soviet rule. A second argument in *The Making of the Georgian Nation* was that the histories of small peoples like Georgians and Armenians cannot be told in isolation from the histories of the empires with which and within which they existed. Empires both thwarted and enabled the making of nations. That complex story may be underplayed in Rayfield, yet he gives us sufficient detail to illuminate the paradoxical interplay between the imperial and the national. Georgians were made and remade over time, both by their own efforts and the restraints imposed and possibilities provided by those that dominated them.

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