Valuing the past, empowering the present: representations and narrations of the Great Purges at the Soviet Occupation Hall in the Simon Janashia Museum of Tbilisi

წარსულის დაფასება და აწმყოს გაძლიერება: დიდი ტერორის ასახვა სიმონ ჯანაშიას სახელობის ეროვნული მუზეუმის საბჭოთა ოკუპაციის საგამოფენო დარბაზში

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რეზიუმე

სტატია განიხილავს თუ როგორ არის წარმოდგენილი დიდი ტერორი და საბჭოთა რეპრესიები ერთად სიმონ ჯანაშიას სახელობის ეროვნული მუზეუმის საბჭოთა ოკუპაციის საგამოფენო დარბაზის ერთ სივრცეში. საბჭოთა ოკუპაციის მუზეუმი ერთადერთი სახელმწიფო ინსტიტუციაა, რომლის მუდმივი გამოფენაც მოიცავს ინფორმაციას როგორც დიდი ტერორის, ასევე საბჭოთა რეპრესიების შესახებ. აღნიშნული გამოფენა თავიდან კონკრეტული პოლიტიკური მიზნის მისაღწევად შეიქმნა. მისი მიზანი ერთი მხრივ, პროდასავლური და ანტირუსული ორიენტაციის მქონე ჯგუფების წარმომადგენლობის პრეზენტირება იყო, ხოლო მეორე მხრივ კი ის უჩვენებს ოფიციალურ ნარატივს, თუ როგორ უნდა ახსოვდეს ქართულ საზოგადოებას საბჭოთა წარსული – პოზიტიურად თუ ნეგატიურად. სტატია ხაზს უსვამს „ხალხურ თქმულებას“ საქართველოს გასაჭირის შესახებ – თუ როგორ იტანჯებოდა ის მუდმივი შემოსევებით, თუმცა ყოველთვის უძლებდა მას. მიუხედავად სახელისა – „საბჭოთა ოკუპაციის მუზეუმი“, იქ ასევე წარმოდგენილია რუსული აგრესიის შედეგები საქართველოს ორ რეგიონზე. საგამოფენო სივრცეში რუსული და საბჭოთა ოკუპაციების ერთ ჭრილში განხილვამ წარმოქმნა აზრთა სხვადასხვაობა საბჭოთა კავშირის გააზრების პროცესში როგორი იყო ის, ცუდი თუ კარგი. ეს სტატია შეეცდება ცალკე გამოყოს საბჭოთა ოკუპაცია და დიდი ტერორის წლები და ასევე, გიდების და ვიზიტორების წარმოდგენები წარსულის შესახებ. სტატიაში ვეცდები წარმოვადგინო გიდების წარმოსახვები ეროვნული ისტორიის შესახებ და როგორია მათი დამოკიდებულება საგამოფენო საგნების მიმართ. სტატიის ეთნოგრაფიული თვალსაზრისი წარმოაჩენს საგამოფენო სივრცის არაბუნებრიობას, თუ როგორ არის მისი მეხსიერება გადაჯაჭვული ბოლო დროის პოლიტიკური და კულტურული მეხსიერების ცვლილებებთან.

Introduction

This article reflects upon some aspects of my ethnographic research for my PhD dissertation at the Soviet Occupation Hall[1] in Simon Janashia Museum, known as Georgian National Museum since 2004, in Tbilisi. The research was carried out over a period of 12 months (September 2018-September 2019), and the methods deployed were participant observation with guides at the museum while they were having a tour in the exhibition as well as in the exhibition hall itself, listening to external guides and talking to different visitors about their impressions and points of view. This article is the outcome of a workshop I attended in September 2019 in Abastumani, sponsored by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, where I presented my research at the Soviet Occupation Hall and reflected over the representation of the Great Purges within the museum.

My main concern here is to ethnographically explore the ways in which the Soviet repressions occurred during the years of the so-called „Great Purges" (1936-1938) are represented and narrated in the exhibition hall and to look at how the exhibition is used in the present to make sense of such a difficult past. The growing anthropological literature on museums and exhibitions has been challenging the „old museology" studies in terms of considering the museums and the objects exposed as contextualised in and not as „apart" from the political, economic and social changes occurring within the society (see Vergo 1989, 3). Museums are sites of knowledge, representations and contestations over the ways of displaying politics, history, science and identities according to the changing contexts: a continuous dialogue and negotiation amongst different attempts of representing the „truth" by institutions and social actors (cf. MacDonald 2010; Dahl and Stade 2000). It is already established that history is socially constructed (Bogumil and Wawrzyniak 2015, 3) and its production and transmission takes multiple and unexpected shapes. I hereby find compelling to explore one of these forms, namely how the memory of the Great Purges is transmitted, represented and turned into public history within the Soviet Occupation Hall.

An important aspect within the museum studies regards also the importance of the museums' visitors and how they perceive the exhibitions (see Hooper-Greenhill 2007) as an active, variegated public that responds to the different truth claims (Gotfredsen 2013, 74). This connects to the studies on collective memory that explore the interrelations between memory and identity, and how they are deeply embedded into politics, history and social relationships (Gillis 1994, 5). Within this web of entanglements, these authors also question how memory is being used and valued in a time of crisis of the identity and how it can be turned into a means of power (cf. Kansteiner 2002; Nora 1989). Hence, given these premises and considering memory and history as intrinsic systems of knowledge and power (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003), the Soviet Occupation Hall at the Simon Janashia Museum in Tbilisi is an interesting site of memory to explore. Thus, in this article, I draw on the literature of memory studies whereby the process of memory making is always political. I consider museums themselves as a political act: they are sites wherein certain truths are conveyed aligning to the nation-state agenda and where these truths are contested and transformed by people in the process of re-enact and make sense of history (Preziosi 2006, 50).

In this article, I first give a brief description of the exhibition and how it was created and for what purposes. I then move to describe one wall I have isolated within the exhibition as it is the one that has the most amount of documents and material regarding the Great Purges. I analyse the use of three languages (English, Georgian and Russian) in excluding and including specific categories of visitors

1 In this article, I address the Museum of Soviet Occupation as the „Soviet Occupation Hall" as an emic way to express what the museum's staff I talked to think of it. Namely, they have always told me that it must not be considered as a museum within the museum, rather an exhibition *part* of the museum.

in accessing the past displayed within the exhibition. Departing from this, I present three examples of tours I attended in English, and Georgian and show how the guides re-enact national history by reproducing the narration at the exhibition and then I analyse how the museum's staff informally relates to and makes sense of it. Eventually, I present a small ethnographic vignette about a visitor of the museum who wanted to add an information regarding the deportation of the Meskhetians occurred in 1944. All these ethnographic vignettes show how the Soviet Occupation Hall is not a neutral exhibition, rather a lively site that made sense of within the interrelation between its visitors, the artefacts and the museum's staff alongside the political and social changes occurring in the society.

The Soviet Occupation Hall: a brief history

The exhibition was created in 2006 under the official order of President Saakashvili and it opened on May 26, the anniversary of Georgian independence. Datunashvili (2018) well investigates the everyday practices whereby nationhood is displayed within the museum. She explores the attempts made by Saakashvili political elite in nationalising the heritage by creating the Georgian National Museum in 2004, and the „Museum of Soviet Occupation" in 2006. The Soviet Occupation Hall was curated and installed by people completely external to the museum with no background in history: two parliamentarians, one architect and a photographer. They gathered material and documents at the former KGB archive, which was exceptionally collaborative for the task, and looked for some objects (prison cell doors, wagon, a „perpetrator's desk") that would integrate with the above documents. In the 3-months period during which the exhibition was being installed, the organisers never asked for advices nor point of views to the museum's staff, who silently felt very humiliated and disagreed with the curators' views of history (cf. Datunashvili 2018, 62). Nowadays, since the curators have passed away, the exclusion of museum's staff involvement in the process of creating the Soviet Occupation Hall is most clearly evident in the way it is addressed by the museum's personnel: a „upatrono" (literally: „patronless") hall. This „patronlessness" causes also failed attempts by different people to change it. Namely, in one year at the museum, I have heard many complaints regarding the exhibition, I saw different temporary exhibitions exposed within the Soviet Occupation Hall, I spoke with several people external to the museum that wanted to add some information regarding the victims of the Soviet repressions (i.e. inclusion of minorities). All these activities, discourses, and attempts of changing the exhibition have been in vain since no one seems to be actively involved in taking care of the exhibition.

The opening of the Soviet Occupation Hall in 2006 reflected a specific political agenda whereby it was needed to replace the political values of the former governments and start new strategies for approaching the European Union and the USA by officially dissociating from Russia. The official rupture with the former institutions and structures was at the stake of Saakashvili's governmental policies, including replacing Soviet symbols[2] with new ones, glorifying a distant past and strengthening the new Georgian national identity along the paradigm of Russia as the historical enemy and aggressor of Georgia[3] (Toria 2014). The 2008 Russian-Georgian war only aggravated this narrative, whereby nowadays not only historians and politicians, but also teachers in school and intellectuals make direct parallelisms between the Bolshevik occupation in 1921 of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia

2 For literature on the implications of post-Soviet transformation in terms of re-writing history and reinventing the socialist past for national purposes see: Chari&Verdery 2009; Bridger&Pine 1998; Verdery 1999, 1996, 1991.

3 See also: Batiashvili 2017; Khalvashi&Batiashvili 2009; Manning 2009; Mühlfried 2007; Jones 1994.

(1918-1921) and the 2008 Russian occupation of the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Thus, conflating the Soviet and Russian occupation in one grand-national narrative empowers the nationalist discourse that depicts Russia as a secular enemy of Georgia. In this grand state narrative, there are no references to the role that the Georgian Soviet state played in the process of building socialism, nor to the fact that two of the most despotic perpetrators of the Soviet Union were Georgians, i.e. Joseph Stalin and Lavrenty Beria, the latter being in charge of the secret police in Tbilisi in the years 1921-1938. On the contrary: it depicts a rather passive attitude whereby Georgia has always suffered under the Soviet regime. Furthermore, these policies led the country to misrecognition of minorities who shared the same violent past.

A description of the exhibition

When you enter the Soviet Occupation Hall, which comprises one small entrance hall and the main exhibition hall, you find yourself in a multi-sensory experience whereby your eyesight, hearing and touch[4] are at play with different mnemonic objects, knowledge and temporalities. Coming from the light and white corridors of the museum, entering the Soviet Occupation Hall makes a quite disruptive contrast. In a poor-lighted space, black and red are the first colours that catch your eyesight, followed by the sounds of people screaming and bombardments. One step more, and your attention is caught on the left by the copy of a wagon with holes in a red spotlight, representing the blood of „the participants of the anti-Bolsheviks uprising of August 30, 1924"[5] shot by the *chekists*[6]. At its feet, an enormous picture of cadets shot by Russian soldiers. On the wall, parallel to the wagon, an „incomplete list of public figures and citizens shot in the period of the Soviet occupation". On the right from the entrance, pictures of Georgian noblemen killed after the Bolshevik occupation with their families. Below, the *chokha* (Georgian traditional costume) belonging to Cholokashvili Qaquca,[7] the leader of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia. Above, on the wall, a video of the 2008 war is responsible of the sound of bombardments and screams that you hear from any angles of the exhibition.

There is already a solid and heterogeneous body of literature that analyses how exhibitions are a combination of various multi-media technologies and that the use of specific lights, objects, patterns, sounds and videos aim at telling a specific and well-known story within the society (Bozoğlu 2020, 45). The first hall of the Soviet Occupation exhibition does not in fact add anything new to Georgian society's knowledge of those facts. The juxtaposition of artefacts, videos, and pictures that refer to different historical events (some of those happened very distant from each other, like the 1924 repression of anti-Bolshevik uprisings and the 2008 Russian occupation video) is designed to capture people's attention in order to provoke specific emotions that sustain the narrative the exhibition entails. Hence, this first small hall immediately drags the visitors in a negative representation of the Soviet period and prepares them emotionally to the main exhibition in the second room. Moreover,

4 Even if it is forbidden to touch the objects exposed, many visitors would touch some objects that emotionally had the most impact on them: the imitation of a wagon where people were shot by the *chekists*, a desk of a *chekist*, the prison cell doors.

5 These are the words on the artefact labels. From now on, all the sentences in brackets without a direct quote refer to the museum's artefacts labels.

6 The term „chekist" stands for the agents of the Soviet state security organisations and is coined from the acronym „Cheka" (Extraordinary Commission, in Russian: *Chrsezvychainaya Komissiya*).

7 According to the museum's staff the *chokha* did not belong to Cholokashvili (Datunashvili 2018: 66). In fact, when the guides would make the tour within the exhibition, they never pointed at the *chokha*.

the material exposed as such forces the visitors to associate the suffering endured by Georgians during the 2008 war with the suffering of the Sovietisation of the country, thereby evading the questions on the role of Georgians in creating the Soviet Union and partaking in the repressions.

The main exhibition is chronologically framed by 7 red billboards on which the following dates are written in bold white. On the first wall form the left, the year 1921. Under this billboard, different materials and videos regarding the First Democratic Republic of Georgia are displayed. After a few meters, the time period 1921-1924 appears, with materials regarding Georgian generals and clergymen killed in those years. On the second central wall we find the years 1921-1937 and it displays several materials regarding the Great Purges. This central wall will be pivotal in this article and it will be discussed in details in the following paragraphs. Finally, on the third wall, we find all squeezed the following years: 1921-1941, 1921-1953, 1921-1960, 1921-1991. Here, in such a few spaces, it is given a particular importance to the birth of the Georgian national movement and the events of April 9, 1989 when Soviet tanks entered the centre of Tbilisi and crushed the peaceful manifestation that was occurring in front of the Parliament.

The exhibition starts and ends with two maps: the first is the map of „Georgian Democratic Republic recognised by the League of Nations" and the last is a map of Georgia with the two regions occupied by Russia coloured in crimson red, above the writing „The occupation still continues…".

Parallel to the first and the third walls, six prison cell doors are displayed, interchanged by dark pillars that support the ceiling. In the middle of the last two pillars, a reproduction of a *chekist* table. This disposition creates an open room that often hosts temporal exhibitions. On the floor of this central room, there are two red big writings, one in Georgian and one in English: „1937-1938. Shoot them as mad dogs". We are not told about the person who said these words, nor even the museum's staff seems to have a clear idea about it, since sometimes people attribute it to Stalin and other times to Beria. This main exhibition hall has a second floor, where documents regarding the First Democratic Republic of Georgia are exposed.

Thus, throughout the whole exhibition, we see how powerful the message of the occupation is by stressing the year when the Soviet occupation started (1921) every time a new historical period is added to the wall. The anthropologist Gotfredsen (2013) in her research within the Stalin Museum in Gori writes about the „Repression Room" added to the museum in 2009. She notes interestingly how the images of the Stalinist purges in the 1930s are at dialogue with those of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war in a „temporal and representative collapse through which photos of the material and human destruction caused by the Russian invasion and bombardment of 2008 is thought capable of acting as a support for a critique of the Stalinist terror. And, perhaps, vice versa: how the purges of the 1930s are thought to have explanatory power in relation to the suffering caused by the Russian invasion of Gori in 2008" (Gotfredsen 2013, 70). Similarly, in the Soviet Occupation Hall, the emotional charge of images, documents, and sentences displayed in the exhibition strengthens the pain that Georgia is still witnessing since the 2008 war.

The stress on Georgian suffering under the Soviet regime is assembled with the Saakashvili propagandistic agenda without opening a space for critically engage with the Soviet past, the figure of Stalin, and the repressions. Moreover, even if the billboards with the years give the visitors a chronology to follow, the material exposed beneath them is anachronistic, confusing, general, and sometimes, wrong. Documents of people killed during the Stalinist repressions are exposed together with information of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia, letters from the 1920s with pictures of people killed in the 1930s, bandits and criminals shot during the regime are pulled together with political prisoners, the number of the victims is incorrect, and the list could be very long. This led to certain voids and gaps within the society that people fill oscillating „between creativity and constraint, anxiety and possibility" (Martinez 2017, 110). There are several articles

that look at the exhibition from different angles as a site where nationalism, Georgianness, post-Rose Revolution truths, Russian-Georgian relations and Georgian victimisation are displayed (cf. Storm 2019; Datunashvili 2018; Batiashvili 2017; Martinez 2017; Toria 2014; Gotfredsen 2013; Mühlfried 2007). However, my interest here is to focus on the repressions occurred during the Great Purges and how this focus might shed light on different interpretations of the exhibition as well as of the narrative it entails. In what follows, I present some ethnographic vignettes that show, first, how the exhibition itself creates voids in the narration that the visitors and the guides fill with their own interpretation. Second, I move to analyse how the tours are laid out and eventually I show some informal attempts of changing such narration.

Choosing languages as a political act of social inclusion and exclusion

In order to be consistent and for the sake of clarity, I have decided to isolate the central wall of the exhibition as it is the main space that displays most of the material regarding the Great Purges. In what follows, I will describe the artefacts and how the choice of languages that label the different materials acts as a means of inclusion and exclusion to certain knowledge of *specific* audiences.

The central wall of the exhibition has a huge Gulag map that immediately catches the attention of the visitors, a simulation of barbed wires with lights covering the whole map to give the impression of imprisonment. The map visually divides the wall in two sections. On the left, we find a panel with the year 1921-1937. Below this billboard, different black and white pictures are in a black framework. We are not told who these people are, it is only clear that they are all pictures of people arrested, and, presumably, killed between 1921-1937. Below this framework, the portraits of 5 important Georgian artists who were shot in 1937-38: Dimitri Shevardnadze, Sandro Akhmeteli, Petre Otskheli, Titsian Tabidze, Evgeni Mikeladze. There is a short description on the side of the portraits in Georgian and English language, their professions and the year when they were shot. This first juxtaposition gives a great contrast regarding what the curators of the exhibition want the visitors to evaluate the most. Namely, by telling the names of the intellectuals who were crushed by the system we are given the idea that the Soviet system aimed at the destruction of the „very finest people of the society who could have brought pride to Georgia", as one of my informants said to me during a tour at the exhibition.

Above the Evgeni Mikeladze's picture, close to the unnamed people in the black framework, there is a billboard with Stalin. No description below as apparently there is no need to explain who Stalin was. Stalin is looking in front of him, his right arm protracted pointing to something in front of him, presumably the future, his left arm on a 5-year plan document of 1946-1950. Behind him, a smiling crowd of people and tractors symbolising the collectivisation. On the Stalin billboard, a sentence in Russian with no translation in Georgian or English: „The reality of our program – it's live people, it's us with you, our determination to work, our readiness to work anew, our resoluteness to fulfil the plan"[8]. Again, below these frameworks and billboards, a display case with pictures of actors, ministers and officers of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), everything described in Georgian and English. Next to these pictures, knives, guns, medals and identity cards belonging to former Chekists and KGB members with a brief description in English and Georgian language.

We move from this first section to a vertical panel with the copies of some letters that the English-Georgian description below tells us to be an appeal of the representatives of Khevsureti, a mountainous region of eastern Georgia, to the American government in 1936. They ask for the help of

8 Translation by the author.

the American government to fight back the Bolsheviks and their imposition of kolkhozes, high taxes and atheism. They write they need help in a moment of suffering, where they do not have weapons other than swords and daggers. Moving to the right, two big pictures one below the other.

On the first picture above, there are three men „troika" whose names are only in Georgian: the number one from the left is Klim Voroshilov[9], the number two in the centre is Lavrenty Beria, and the third one on the right is Anastas Mikoyan[10]. Below, there is a black and white picture framed in a purple framework. Two children, one smiling and one looking serious, other men and women half smiling, a Stalin billboard held by one of the children. Under the picture a sentence written only in Georgian: „The November Parade in Tbilisi. Year 1937".

This first section points out well how Russian, English, and Georgian languages are deployed to show and hide some information depending on the visitors' language knowledge. To the international English-speaking community, it is shown in English and Georgian the intellectuals killed by the Soviet regime and the letters asking for help to fight back the Bolsheviks. To the Georgian speaking community, it is added a new information, only in Georgian, about the „troika" and the parade with Stalin billboard. To the Russian speaking community: nothing but Stalin's slogan with the 5-year plan, a first signal of Russian being the language of the enemy/perpetrator.

Proceeding, on the right, we find a big map of the Gulag camps within the Soviet Union; all the words are in Georgian and Russian language, and the map is taken from the Society Memorial based in Moscow. The second section of this wall is also particularly interesting. On the top, a black billboard with Russian words in bold red: „Life got better, life got happier –Joseph Stalin". Beneath, the picture of General Giorgi Mazniashvili (shot in 1937) with his children and the evidence of his execution signed by the executioner, Zakhar Shashurkin. This information is given only in Georgian language, whereas the execution documents are in Russian. Next to these documents, a copy of a mandate of execution of young people, mostly Georgians, by order of Zakhar Shashurkin. There is no description, only the document in Russian language.

Below this list, a picture of a girl with her father on a wagon in 1928, they both died during the deportation. This information is written only in Georgian. Underneath, some pages of several newspapers in Georgian language. One in particular had the portrait of Sergo Orjonikidze „The red militsieli": the article in Georgian dated 1st February 1937 and stated the death of Sergo Orjonikidze. Interestingly, after several information written only in Georgian, there is then a big black vertical panel with the following sentences in English and Georgian: „from 1921 to 1941 72000 persons were shot, and 200000 were deported. At that time the population of Georgia was 4 million. The repressions in 1937 saw the execution of the most prominent representatives of the nationally determined Georgian scientific, scholarly and creative intelligentsia".

Proceeding along the wall, two documents are shown: two copies of execution reports and order of death sentence. The language in which they are written is Russian, whereas the description is in English and Georgian. On the right side, another picture, black and white, in a purple framework. 13 people are represented, each having a number with a name. We are told only in Georgian about who these people were: chiefs of the proletariat at the meeting of the First Congress. Above these materials, two posters with Soviet-style life are exhibited, one about the collectivization and one about the Olympiads. We reach the end of the wall, the corner is the reproduction of a death chamber with a description in English and Georgian: „during decades, people sentenced to death were shot here". In

9 Klim Voroshilov (full name Kliment Yegremovich Boroshilov) was a Soviet military officer and People's Commissar for Defence during the Great Purges, being responsible for the arrest and executions of thousands of people.

10 Anastas Mikoyan was an Armenian Soviet politician who was also actively involved in the repressions during the Great Purges.

the small cell, which is built with two steel doors, there are pictures of shoes, blood, and bodies that were found in these prisons. The wall ends with this chamber.

The use of the languages in this section is also very interesting. We have in English and Georgian a few adding information to the first section: the number of people shot and deported in those years, the targeted people (Georgian *intelligentsia*), and the copy of a death chamber. In Georgian language we have General Mazniashvili who fought against the Bolshevik occupation in 1921 and his acts of execution, the newspapers telling the death of Ordjonikidze, and the picture with the chiefs of the proletariat. Eventually, in Russian language, we have documents about death sentences and acts of execution and posters about the Olympiads and the collectivization. Hence, we clearly see that the choices of the language to describe the materials play at different levels a type of exclusion and sharing of certain facts of this past that clearly divides also the typology of visitors and what they *need* to understand from it. Depending on their own language skills, the visitors are allowed to access certain information regarding the repressions whereby the materials with the language they do not understand act as an emotional support to the meaning they are attributing to the selected documents. Moreover, the use of the three languages works as a trigger of exclusion/inclusion of knowledge of a difficult and painful past that in some cases becomes stranger to those who have shared it, and familiar to those who have not. Additionally, the choice of using English and Georgian as the languages of the *present,* whereas Russian language is only associated with documents regarding the perpetrators, the propaganda, and the execution lists, empowers the narrative of Russia as the enemy of Georgia. By doing so, it also strengthens the national narrative of Georgian suffering under Russian rule that we perceive throughout the whole Soviet Occupation Hall.

Museum's staff and visitors: re-enacting national history

After a few months that I was in the museum, I realised that the majority of the staff did not like the Soviet Occupation Hall for different purposes. Some of them find the exhibition wrong because it does not represent how the Soviet everyday life really was. Other guides say that the exhibition is poor, the temporality is wrong, there are many mistakes that they need to either explain or avoid. Others even say that it is wrong to use the word of „Soviet occupation" because also Georgia, after the annexation in 1921, conformed to the Soviet system and lived within it. They (some of the guides) were not perceiving themselves as „occupied" until Georgian historians in the late 1980s started to re-evaluate the years of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia and how it brutally ended when the Bolsheviks troops entered the country and established a Bolshevik rule.

However, even if informally I was told about the drawbacks of the exhibition, when it came to carrying out a tour the narrative was quite different. The guides try to keep the narrative as much objective as possible, considering all the material exposed as History. Nevertheless, even if there is an official text regarding the exhibition, the guides are most likely to use their own experience and knowledge in the narration of the Soviet occupation. A tour might last between 40 minutes up to 1 hour, with some exceptions. Even though it is called „Soviet Occupation", the majority of the tours I have listened to start with the assertion that Georgia was occupied three times, and this helps the guide to integrate the references to the 2008 war with the materials of the „Soviet occupation". The first part of the tour is then focussed on the Georgievsk Treaty (1783), Georgia asking for help to the Russian Empire in order to fight back the Ottomans and Persians, and then betrayed by the Russians, and finally the First Democratic Republic of

Georgia) and its disruption. Normally, the guides linger a lot on the first wall of the exhibition, valuing the years of independence from the Russian empire, and the loss of independence after the Bolshevik occupation in 1921. Hence, the first wall usually takes the first half of the tour. Interestingly, when it comes to dealing with the Great Purges (chronologically, the second wall of the exhibition), the discussion becomes quite evasive.

A tour in English language

I listened to several tours in English with people coming from different countries of Europe, and USA, as well from Australia. The stress is always on the loss of the best literates, intellectuals of Georgian society, killed by the insanity of the system. They show the images of Shevardnadze, Tabidze, Akhmeteli, Otskheli, Mikeladze and tell how they were tortured and shot by „them". The definition of this „them" is also interesting and shows a little bit of confusion on how to categorise this „them": sometimes the guides would say communists, Bolsheviks, Soviets, other times Russians. Often, when approaching the poster of Stalin, the guide would say „this is Stalin, you know all what he did", without really explaining who he was, what he did, delegating it to the common sense of the visitors in order to draw the line and fill it with his/her own meaning about who Stalin really was. It was interesting how often, with some guides, I was told that Stalin was not the only one who was ruling, there were also many others (not Georgians), and people should stop blaming Stalin for everything.

From the picture with Stalin, the guide would then jump directly to the Gulag map, showing all the area of Central Asia and Siberia and telling how millions of people were deported and killed in the concentration camps. Visitors normally nodded, I never listened to a tour where the visitor made a question to the guide regarding these repressions. Then, the guide would show the black billboard with all the number of victims killed in Georgia during the Great Purges.

Afterwards, the guide would show the death chamber. There is no reference to Beria, Ordzhonikidze nor the picture where Georgians are with Stalin's portraits at a manifestation in Tbilisi. If there was some additional time, the guide would translate the slogan „life got better, life got happier" in English and say a few words about the propaganda. Then, the tour would continue on the third wall and the guide would say a few words about the German minorities living in Georgia, showing the pictures of the Germans shot in 1937. Finally, the episodes of 9th April, 1989. The tours always finish with the map of the Georgian occupied territories after the 2008 war, and the guide usually explains how nowadays Russia is still moving the borders, by stressing on the concept that the occupation of Georgia is still an ongoing process. The tours I listened to in Russian language for non-Russian people were very similar to the English ones. However, when the narration would cover the Great Purges, the guides were using words like „as you know", „as you also experienced", „as it happened in your country as well" to stress on the shared painful past and history of suffering under Russian rule.

A tour in Georgian language

I was surprised when I listened to several tours in Georgian language. I thought that there would be a difference, that the history told to foreigners would be slightly less detailed than the one told to Georgians. I was wrong. One day, a Georgian family asked for a tour in the museum and I followed the guide to the occupation hall. The guide started the narration by saying that Georgia has been occupied three times. We stayed almost 25 minutes only on the part regarding the First Democratic Republic of Georgia, and when we reached the wall about the repressions, the guide briefly said how

thousands of people were deported and then pointed at the picture of Beria and Ordzhonikidze, implicitly blaming them for the repressions, without adding anything in particular. During the tour, the woman of the group asked a question that surprised me very much: „But Beria in the end…was he good or bad?" The guide evasively replied that he was a figure loved and hated at the same time by many, and then moved on by pointing to the 9th April event on the third wall.

Another interesting tour I listened to in Georgian was with a group of school children. They were taking a lot of pictures of the wagon, and were interested in the map of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia. The guide explained in detail all the materials regarding the First Democratic Republic and the 1921 „Russian occupation", the repressions of the clergymen occurred in the 1920s, and the suppression of the Georgian intelligentsia. Then, the guide moved to the central wall and showed the pictures of Titsian Tabidze, Dimitri Shevardnadze, Sandro Akhmeteli, Petre Otskheli and Evgeni Mikeladze. He asked the children if they knew who these people were, and everyone replied, also saying what their profession was. The guide said that many Georgian intellectuals were killed in those years, but did not explain why or what for. Then, moving on to the Stalin billboard and, with a tone of the voice a bit embarrassed, the guide said „and this is Soso dzia!". „Soso dzia" is a nickname that Georgians had for Stalin and it could be translated as „Uncle Joseph". The only reaction amongst the children was that they took selfies with Stalin' s portrait. Afterwards, very quickly, the group moved to the death chamber, and the guide explained how people were imprisoned, tortured and killed during the Soviet regime. From the death chamber, narration went straight away to the manifestation of April 9 and the repressions occurred by the Soviet militsiya. The tour ended with showing the map of the territories occupied nowadays by Russia.

These two tours were particularly compelling since they display what facts are valued by the guides and what information they think Georgian visitors should focus on. In these tours, the stress on the loss of independence in 1921, the loss of clergymen, Georgian intelligentsia while narrating the repressions and, broader, the Soviet Occupation, is used to empower the narrative of the *ongoing* Georgian suffering under Russian imperialism. This representation of the repressions and, in particular, the analogy with the loss of independence in 1921, add an emotional charge to the discourse of suffering experienced in 2008 and the protracted frozen conflicts, a wound that links collectively all the generations in Georgia.

Russian visitors

I was not able to listen to the tours in Russian language for Russian people because, unfortunately, the guides did not want me to listen to their tours. However, what I have been told by the different guides was that over the years the attitude of Russian people has changed a lot. Before, the majority of them used to get angry for the ways the Soviet past was represented, saying that there was no occupation, that Stalin was Georgian and it was not possible to define the 70 year of Georgian Soviet history just as „Soviet occupation". One guide even told me that once she had a big fight and told the Russian tourists that, if they don't like how Georgians tell this history, they should make a Georgian Occupation Museum in Russia with their own version[11]. However, the guides told me that now Russians seem to have accepted the situation, and many times they apologise for the suffering Russia caused to Georgia. It felt as if the guides had been trying so hard to make Russians apologise for the past „200 years-occupation" that, somehow with a satisfied smile, they

11 This comment probably follows up what Saakashvili said to Putin in June 2006. In fact, Putin complained of the Soviet Occupation Museum of Tbilisi by saying that many Soviet leaders were Georgians. In turn, Saakashvili sarcastically suggested that he could create a Museum of Georgian Occupation in Moscow.

told me that they managed to finally made them say sorry. Informally, other guides and museum's staff often told me that to soften the narrative of the „Soviet occupation", they usually say that these repressions of course occurred not only in Georgia, but everywhere within the Soviet Union, and that Russia suffered a lot as well. „Once you clarify this with Russians, they calm down" they told me a couple of times. Nevertheless, when there were no tours, and I would stay in the exhibition hall and talk with the various visitors about their impressions, it happened to meet with Russian people who were very disappointed.

I remember one Russian lady, she was standing right in front of the 2008 Russian bombardments video, looking at the images of the war, then she would turn around in the hall with a confused face, her eyes getting smaller every time she was looking at some parts of the exhibition. I approached her, presenting myself and asked about her impressions of the exhibition. She looked at me, and immediately told me that she did not like the exhibition at all. She does not understand neither English nor Georgian, therefore she cannot read all the billboards and the descriptions. She realised that the only Russian sentences are those on the copies of the original documents from the shooting lists, or Stalin quotes. Then, she burst in tears. She told me that all her family was repressed by Stalin in the 1930s, that this is a painful past also for Russia, how dare the Georgian state to blame it all on Russia? She then pointed at the smiling Stalin billboard, and say angrily „There is not even written what he did, who he was; there are only his propagandistic quotes of the period! How is it even possible?" The exclusion she felt within the exhibition, whereby the language of nowadays Georgian enemy is associated only to the lists of shot people, perpetrators' quotes, and KGB documents, merged with her lack of understanding the exhibition of a past that she personally knows very well, but that suddenly became stranger, alien to her. „This is a painful past that we all share and have experienced as Soviet citizens, why would they represent us as the enemy that caused all of this?" she then said. I remember having reported this dialogue to some guides in the museum, and they all agreed with this lady, they even told me that there should be two separate museums: one about the Great Purges, and one about Georgian-Russian relations.

The minorities issue

It is already clear so far that the exhibition as well as the guided tours do not really focus on the minorities who endured deportations and suffered during the Great Purges nor afterwards. In the exhibition hall, on the third wall, there is only one small billboard with some pictures of Germans who were shot in 1937. There is no room for other minority groups who were deported or repressed in those years. After talking with many visitors, especially coming from Europe, USA, and Australia, I realised that the message they got from the exhibition was that Georgians suffered a lot and that Stalin was no good with his own people. Many of the tourists liked the interactions between pictures, prison cell doors, videos, that show this dark period of „Georgian history", as they would say. No one, in the tours I followed nor the visitors I talked to, ever asked whether there were other minorities groups in Georgia, or what happened to them.

Once, a guide in the museum told me that it is not the goal of the exhibition to talk about minorities. Namely, given also the few spaces of the exhibition (600 m2), the important thing is to show how bad this period was, how the Church, the intellectual elites suffered and were killed by the Soviets. In this case, for the guide, the objects exposed are functional and enough to give an idea of the Soviet/Russian occupation, there is no need to add further material to prove that.

One day, while I was in the museum, Mr Aslan arrived. He came to the museum to talk with

someone from the administration office because he wanted to ask to put a sort of plaque that recognises the deportation of thousands of Meskhetians in 1944, November 14. Moreover, he took the picture of a billboard on the third wall of the main exhibition: „Total number of victims of the Soviet Occupation in Georgia: shot approximately 80000, deported 400000 (majority of the deported people were retried and shot), WORLD WAR II approximately 400000 dead, TOTAL 880000". Mr Aslan showed me the picture, telling me very angry: „Who are all these people? Why wouldn't they put information about the Meskhetians who were deported?! Do you know how many Meskhetians fought and died in WWII? Why they don't put anything other than „400000 people died in WWII?" While he was pouring off this information, an employee from the museum arrived. Mr Aslan, politely and calmly, asked how he could add a small plaque to the exhibition in order to include the Meskhetians' vicissitudes within the history of occupation. The employee said that, unfortunately, he cannot. „Since the curators of the exhibition passed away, no one is now in charge of the Soviet Occupation Hall" she said. I knew however that it was not true, I spoke with one of the curators of the exhibition who told me that they have no power to make any changes.

He was standing in front of her, surprised, and asked to whom he might then talk in order to change this policy. She said that there is a commission of historians he could present his request to, and they then would take into consideration the matter. Mr Aslan, again, asked whether he could talk to someone else from the administration office or directly with the director of the museum. The employee replied that he can talk with everybody, but that he will not receive a different reply, adding that „the museum is not responsible for the Occupation Hall and they cannot modify anything". Mr Aslan, quite resigned, told her about his family that was deported in 1944 and how many Meskhetians died and were deported, and nothing, nor even a name, is amongst the list of the victims displayed in the exhibition. The employee replied very kindly, saying that her grandfather was deported too and died during the deportation years, and there is nothing about him as well. She added that she also does not like the exhibition and how the repressions are represented, however she cannot do anything. Mr Aslan thanked her and she left.

A few days after this episode, I met with one architect who actively partook in the creation of the Occupation Hall in 2006. He told me that the exhibition was assembled in three months, they did not have the time nor the skills to make a proper research and, for the purpose of the project, the material they gathered was enough. He admitted that now the situation has changed, and the exhibition should be updated and redone, including also the minorities who were deported in those years. He told me that when they created the exhibition, they gathered together the material very quickly. The purpose of the Soviet Occupation Hall was, on one hand, to give a general picture of how bad the Soviet period was, and on the other hand, to show to Russia the political orientation of Georgia. Hence, within this narrative, there was no space for the minorities. However, when I presented him Mr Aslan's issue, and his efforts to ask for a recognition of the deportation of Meskhetians specifically in the Soviet Occupation Hall, the architect shook his head, and said that no, it was impossible to satisfy Mr Aslan's request. When I asked him why, he replied that Meskhetians are not living in Georgia anymore, and even if they would, they speak only Russian, they do not know Georgian language. Additionally, they are very close to Russia, and that would be unacceptable to make a memorial for „pro-Russian people in the Soviet Occupation Hall". Of course, the Meskhetian case is very complex and it is not my intention to simplify such a delicate situation. What I want to underline here is that for the curator of the exhibition the inclusion of the 1944 Meskhetians deportation within the Soviet Occupation Hall cannot happen because, first, according to him, they do not speak Georgian but Russian and, secondly, they are amiable toward Russia, therefore going „against everything that the Georgian national narrative and national symbolism prescribe as inherent nature of Georgianness" (Batiashvili 2015, 20).

This episode shows from another angle the problem that I have been addressing throughout the whole article: the whole Soviet period, wherein the repressions of the Great Purges play a central and yet marginal role, has to be remembered *officially* only in order to support the anti-Russian narrative within the museum. Thus, also the choice of which minority groups to include within the narration proves to be fundamental as to how these minority groups need to fit within a certain political agenda expressed also in the exhibition. Moreover, from the informal talks I had with historians and museum's staff, it seems that a discourse about minorities would challenge this grand-narrative[12], whereby Georgia passively suffered under the Soviet rule, in a way that people should start rethinking what the Georgian Soviet state did in those years. And, apparently, there is no need to do so.

Georgian artists and the Red Terror

In December 2018, the temporary exhibition „Georgian artists and the Red Terror" was inaugurated. On the billboard at the entrance of the Occupation Hall, it is written that the exhibition is dedicated to the artists-victims of Stalin's repressions. It pays tributes to artists that were „falsely accused and sentenced to death in 1937"; amongst these artists, a particular attention is dedicated to Dimitri Shevardnadze, Vakhtang Kotetishvili, Heinrich Hrinievski, Richard Sommer, and Petre Otskheli. Furthermore, on the billboard, it is written that the exhibition is meant to honour those people who escaped from death, but went through all the difficulties of Stalin's concentration camps and also the artists that „were forced to live and create under censorship of the Soviet regime".

The Soviet Occupation Hall was changed a bit to give space to the new objects. At the entrance, on the left, right in front of the wagon, a small wooden statue made by the versatile figure of Vakhtang Kotetishvili. It is called „the kneeling man", and it is one of the few objects made in the 1930s that did not represent the Soviet citizen as smiling and happy to work. It shows a man on his knees, bending his head under a weight that represents the Soviet regime. This statue is now part of the permanent exhibition, a gift from Vakhtang Kotetishvili's grandson to the museum. In the small hall, the video of the 2008 war had been removed and a video about the repressive regime was at play. The video started with a small introduction regarding the use of the arts by Bolsheviks as a propagandistic means. The cinema as well became „the face and one of the main determinants of the Soviet policy, culture, history and the formation of society". Following these sentences, a footage from different propagandistic films that show the collectivisation, the role of the arts, and people working under state socialism. It ended with a small text „The repressive regime 1920-1940, destroyed in the name of novelty, and then, as a surrogate cloaked itself in the mantle of destroyed people; it sowed evil in the name of good, destroyed the society and annihilated the person. Communism was the best weapon for adventurers, marginal and demagogues to gain power and abuse of it."

Entering the main exhibition hall, the maps that start and finish the permanent exhibitions had been replaced as well. The first map of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia had been removed and replaced with an introductive billboard about the repressions occurred during the Great Purges, but also a second wave of repressions that occurred after 1941. The final map of the Georgian occupied territories had been replaced with a painting made by David Kakabadze titled „Meeting in Imereti". The artists drew a meeting amongst workers holding pictures of Lenin, Stalin, and Beria. After Stalin and Beria's death and the anti-Stalin speech made by Khrushchev, Soviet censorship asked the artist

12 There are in fact already several publications that show how, during the Soviet Union, in Georgia many ethnic groups were deported, relocated, displaced and killed (cf. Junge 2015).

David Kakabadze to remove the portraits first of Beria and then of Stalin. In the picture exposed, the two Soviet leaders' faces appear deleted. The main material was exhibited in the space within the prison cell doors.

Billboards about the artists' biographies and paintings were exposed in-between the cell doors. At the sides of the Chekist's desk, two white screens, one showing artists during the propaganda, and one showing the artists' pictures and families. Behind the desk, the Gulag map was replaced by an enormous Stalin's portrait drawn by David Japaridze. No description was attached to this portrait. Eventually, on the upper floor of the main exhibition, the documents and letters of the Democratic Republic of Georgia were replaced by paintings of artists that were shot or that sustained the regime and the propaganda.

The replacement of the maps and the 2008 war video created some tensions amongst the guides of the Soviet Occupation Hall that found their visual narration brutally disrupted. The tours I followed between December and April (the months of the temporary exhibition) showed how the guides felt uncomfortable in not knowing what to tell about the new exhibition, since they were not given an informative text. Hence, they would carry out the tours as they used to be, ignoring the Red Terror exhibition and trying to explain the Tsarist/Soviet/Russian occupation of Georgia without the maps that would support the narrative. The absence of the maps and the 2008 war video created a void between the guides' narrative and the visitors' efforts to make sense of it. The visitors would often ask for clarifications of the big Stalin portrait in the middle of the exhibition hall. Many visitors did not understand the position of Georgia towards Stalin and often criticised the Stalin portrait because they thought it as a glorification of the person of Stalin. To these complaints, the guides often would answer back that Stalin did not do anything for Georgian people and that he betrayed his own country.

When I spoke with the curator of the exhibition, she told me that one of the main goals behind the project was to reaffirm how bad the period was, and to remind those people who are nostalgic of the Soviet Union and who still celebrates Stalin's figure. The exhibition had a very positive impact within the society, and many school teachers would come to the Soviet Occupation Hall to show their students all the paintings and add information and knowledge regarding the paradoxes of the Soviet regime. However, I heard many complaints since the exhibition portraits also some artists that yes, were killed in 1937-38, but that until those years conformed to the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the exhibition reproduces a widely-known narrative whereby during the Soviet regime, the class of intellectuals and literates was the most repressed category of people, whereas many historians say that peasants were the most who suffered from the repressions.[13]

Nonetheless, this temporary exhibition brought up some changes. In fact, throughout all the period of the exhibition, conferences about the Great Purges were held by different professors. These conferences covered different topics, i.e. one specific artist's biography, Stalin's cult in Georgia, the artists' lives under Soviet rule. All of these conferences, some more implicitly than others, attempted at presenting a more complicated and multifaceted picture of those years, also telling that many artists and writers that were shot during the Great Purges were actually supporting the system or were collaborationists. Hence, in these conferences, there was an attempt to give complexity and make the Georgian public reflect upon those years also in a more critical way.

A similar attempt of looking at the Soviet repressions beyond the categories of „occupant" and „occupier" presented in the museum happened during a tour I listened to made for a group of four Georgians who asked specifically for the Red Terror exhibition tour. The guide, having a background

13 See, for instance, Davit Jishkariani's speech for Radio Tavisupleba „საბჭოთა ოკუპაციის კვლევა არ ჯდება საზოგადოების ტრავმულ ნარატივში" (https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/დავით-ჯიშკარიანი-საბჭოთა-ოკუპაციის-ისტორიასა-და-აწმყოზე/29789181.html)

in art, gave a very detailed description of the biographies of the artists whose paintings were exposed in the hall She explained the propaganda and life under censorship for the artists in Georgia. Then, we moved to the upper floor where different paintings by different authors were exposed. She commented on the paintings and then she interrupted. Solemnly, she said that it is important here to notice that many of the artists were not passively submitted to the Soviet regime, but they were conformists to the regime and worked for it, partaking in different activities, repressions included. She then underlined the importance of starting a discussion about the role of Georgians within the system as well, adding that „we, Georgians, should try to speak loudly about the collaborations that we had with the system". She also enhanced that Georgians should stop protecting their ancestors and feel ashamed if their relatives were part of the system of collaborationists, and spies. It is necessary that also Georgia takes responsibility for the crimes committed in Soviet times, in order not to repeat the same mistakes. Amongst the four Georgian visitors, a man was nodding all the time, and after this openness from the guide, he also spoke out. He said that it is important that Georgians understand their own past and educate the new generations also about the role of Soviet Georgia during the repressions.

Final considerations

The sociologist Ami Sodaro, in her book „Exhibiting atrocity: Memorial museums and the Politics of Past Violence" (2018), explores the Memorial museums as a new form of memorialisation of violent pasts that has emerged in response to the efforts of rethinking atrocities and come to terms with the legacy of a dark past. The ways in which the past is displayed and commemorated in these museums embody also discourses of political legitimation of a nation in front of the international community in order to demonstrate „a new regime's willingness to learn from history" (Sodaro 2018, 4). Hence, the memorial museums are mechanisms to create awareness, and educate the new generations with the ultimate, utopian, goal to avoid the repetition of history. However, the author shows very well how specific political agendas interfere and are embedded in the efforts of rethinking and coming to terms with the past. The Occupation Hall is not considered a proper memorial museum, however some of the guides in their narration and practices of re-enacting history behave as if it was. This narrative merges with the one of the former Saakashvili political elite, with the result of a rather ambiguous and hybrid exhibition: if on one hand the Soviet Occupation Hall is used as a site of memory where Georgian nationalism and patriotism are displayed, on the other it is also considered as a memorial that warns the society of the cruelty of the Soviet regime and serves also a moral and educative purpose to show nostalgic people how bad that period in reality was.

Moreover, the Soviet Occupation Hall is also used to re-establish certain truths in a moment where the Georgian government has ambiguous attitudes towards Russia. As I was told by many people within the museum, since the Soviet Occupation Hall is the only institutionalised place where somehow there is a representation of the Soviet past and the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, it is important that the exhibition still functions, even if it is full of mistakes. People from the international community need to know what Georgia went through in the past century, and what it is still witnessing. The Georgian society on the other hand needs a clear narrative that drives away any type of uncertainty and ambivalence regarding how to remember the Soviet Union or Russian-Georgian relations (Batiasvhili 2015, 20).

In this article, I showed ethnographically how the Soviet repressions and the Great Purges made sense of and represented officially during the guided tours. The description of a wall of the exhibition

combined with some examples of the tours presents, on one side, how the curators of the exhibition played with languages in order to exclude, hide, and show information to specific categories of visitors. On the other, it shows how the history of the Soviet occupation, even with some adjustments, is told within the same victimised framework to Georgian, English, and Russian speakers. The assemblage of different events that occurred over 70 years under the category of „Soviet occupation" creates difficulties in trying to rethink critically the Soviet past and focus on some specific events. Given these circumstances, in this article I tried to look mostly at the representation of the Great Purges and to show how it is used, yet marginally, to empower the narrative over the contemporary Russian occupation and Russian-Georgian difficult relations.

The „Georgian Artists and the Red terror" exhibition presents some efforts from the curator to address the Georgian society differently. For instance, the guide tried informally to make the Georgian audience reflect upon the role of Georgians within the Soviet Union and the importance to take into consideration also the Georgian perpetrators within the society. It shows an attempt to give, in a state-institution, a message specifically to the Georgian society, whereas for the foreign visitors the exhibition was just additional visual material to the Soviet Occupation narrative of the museum. Hence, this effort of unfolding the Georgian Soviet past reflects a more urgent need to critically engage with the mistakes that also Georgia committed in Soviet times in the public spaces as well.

These signals, combined with the opinions the museum's staff has towards the representation of the repressions in the Soviet Occupation Hall, show some first informal attempts to challenge the official narrative represented in the museum, at least for the Georgian society. Therefore, the most urgent matter that appears from my research at the museum is to start reflecting upon the inertia witnessed nowadays in regards to the attitudes towards the Soviet past. However, it seems that there is still no space for a discussion regarding the minority groups that equally suffered in those years as it would bring another version and vision of the past that might undermine the contemporary image the Georgian state created within the international community. The situation presented highlights the delicate balance that Georgia is now witnessing politically and socially. If on one hand, there is the need to keep an exhibition that locates Georgia within Europe and restates Russian occupation of Georgia, my research in the museum on the other hand shows also a new form of awareness in narrating this past among the museum's staff. This awareness open spaces for informal conversations regarding how this period of Georgian history should be addressed differently and might lead to further discussions whether to how the Great Purges, and the Soviet period, need to be studied, understood, and criticised beyond the framework of nowadays Soviet/Russian occupation.

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