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Time to live: Writing war and empire in the South Caucasus

Сборник *Время жить*: литература и империя на Южном Кавказе

Abstract. In 2003 the Georgian and Abkhaz writers Guram Odisharia and Daur Nachkebia published the literary collection *Time to live* (*Vremia zhit'*), which includes eighteen authors from the South Caucasus depicting the late 1980s-1990s armed conflicts in Abkhazia, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. Most of their works were translated into Russian for the book. This volume tried to promote peace and intercultural dialog within the region. However, in doing so it unintentionally illuminated the Russian language's role as agent of oppression as well as intermediary. Russophonia (writing in Russian outside the Russian Federation) and problems of postcoloniality are central to the collection's portrayal of the South Caucasus. The article draws on criticism by Gayatri Spivak, Tamar Koplatadze, Naomi Caffee, and others, as well as research conducted in Georgia in 2018 and 2023.

Keywords: South Caucasus, literature, reception, Russophone writers, postcoloniality

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In 2003 two writers from the South Caucasus published a remarkable literary collection devoted to the bloody regional conflicts that began as the USSR collapsed. The volume, *Time to live* (*Vremia zhit'*), includes eighteen authors writing about war in Abkhazia, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia; most of their works were translated into Russian for the collection. This *sbornik* tried to promote dialog within the region, using Russian as a problematic lingua franca. Through content, philosophy, and language *Time to live* depicts the USSR's enduring influence, whether via the hopes of the late-Soviet intelligentsia or the manipulated borders exacerbating the region's conflicts. The collection did not bring peace but is nonetheless important: it raised the possibility of mitigating as well as portraying the problems that outlived the USSR.

The book also reveals that Russian can be a tool for questioning the Soviet Union's troubling legacy, a stance that contradicts Putin's use of the language to

justify aggression and invasion. My analysis of *Time to live* has three interconnected sections. Following a short introduction section I discuss the book's structure, which tries to create dialog across cultures, then turn to how the *sbornik* evokes problems of postcoloniality after the USSR. The third portion of my article explores how *Time to live*'s multiple (and sometimes contradictory) uses of Russian broaden understanding of Russophone prose in the South Caucasus and beyond.

The volume's two editors symbolize hope for cross-cultural cooperation: Guram Odisharia is a Georgian who fled Abkhazia during the brutal 1992–1993 conflict and Daur Nachkebia is the most important living author in Abkhaz literature (Scott 10–11). Both men were formed by Soviet culture and the ethos of the intelligentsia. Through structure, theme, and use of Russian, the *sbornik* and its editors model communication and compassion between groups estranged by strife. *Time to live* is a collaborative effort to speak for the South Caucasus while relying on the language of the oppressor. This collection is a strikingly postcolonial work despite the editors not envisioning it as such.

Although it had a small print run (5,800 copies), *Time to live* was widely publicized in the South Caucasus. One measure of importance is the precedent it set: eight years after *Time to live* appeared, Odisharia and the Abkhaz conflict prevention specialist Batal Kobakhia published the first of three related literary almanacs, *South Caucasus* (Kobahia, Odišaria 2011; Kobahia, Odišaria 2012; Kobahia, Odišaria 2013). These continue the mission of *Time to live*: uniting writers from the South Caucasus through literature translated into Russian for a wider readership. The almanacs appeared after the Russian-Georgian war (2008) and during the ongoing hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Praising all four collections, Georgian Russophone journalist Inna Kulishova argues that they show how culture is the most important factor in any peace process. She cites the Abkhaz classic author Fazil' Iskander, the most prominent writer in *Time to live*, who defines culture as "очеловечивание человека" (Kulišova, electronic source). This formulation asserts that art and the positive values motivating it distinguish humanity from war's vicious instincts. In an interview Odisharia highlights this same idea as a key principle (Odišaria 2023). Juxtaposing culture and violence, an opposition dear to the late-Soviet intelligentsia, underscores how this group's ideas influence the volume.

Russophonia is another useful concept for investigating *Time to live*. Naomi Caffee defines this term as writing in Russian by non-Russians and those beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Tamar Koplatadze, building on Caffee's explanation, notes that Russophone literature differs from what is produced by Russians within Russia (Caffee 3, 5; Koplatadze 2019a: 9–10). For Mark Lipovetsky and Kevin Platt, Russophonia includes "far-flung and diverse communities" with a variety of concerns and opinions (Lipovetsky, Platt, electronic source). All these

scholars emphasize that choosing Russian as a literary language does not imply support for Moscow's politics, a sentiment Odisharia echoes when distancing Russian literature from military aggression (Odišaria 2023). This difference is crucial given Putin's coercive conception of the "Russian world" which served as a pretext to invade Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Platt notes how Russophone literature overlaps with writing in the "near abroad", a space that Russians often consider "imperial territory" subject to influence or direct military attack (Platt 10). Odisharia and Nachkebia's collection is one of most important examples of Russophone literature in Eurasia as well as in the South Caucasus. However, the volume's contents and reception manifest the ambiguous, conflicted status of Russian in the former USSR.

Time to live: Structure, war, and dialog

The volume presents the experiences of combatants and civilians to create a conversation about the conflicts in the region. Stories by Azerbaijanis alternate with those by Armenians; an Abkhaz narrative is followed by one from a Georgian, and so forth. Thanks to this obvious yet effective arrangement, the reader sidesteps the trap of endorsing any one ethnicity's monopoly on "victimhood", which Laurence Broers sees as deforming collective memory in the South Caucasus (Broers 42). *Time to live* avoids another problem as well. Odisharia, summarizing the book in an interview, notes the editors chose works that portray war but "в которых не выражалась агрессия" (Čkadua, electronic source). This comment appeared on the site Our Abkhazia, a surprising venue for a Georgian who fled the de facto republic. Such media coverage evinces that *Time to live* stimulated interaction between cultures estranged since the 1990s. Broers, dissecting the wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan, makes an observation that applies to the South Caucasus in general: by the beginning of the twenty-first century belligerent groups had lost contact with each other due to ethnic cleansing, nationalist discourse, and "rival epistemologies of blame" (Broers 17). Odisharia is rightly proud that, thanks to *Time to live*, "впервые за последние 20 лет азербайджанцы и армяне читали произведения друг друга, также как осетины, абхазы и грузины интересовались, что пишут «они» и что пишут «наши»?!" (Odišaria 2009, electronic source). The collection's title underscores the volume's purpose. *Time to live*, a phrase suggested by Azerbaijani author El'chin Guseinbeli, is a Biblical allusion optimistically assuming that the era of bloodshed is over (Odišaria 2009, electronic source; Odišaria 2018, electronic source).

The editors hoped readers in the South Caucasus would choose dialog over conflict. Communication, Odisharia implies, creates empathy for those previously dismissed as aggressors; this precept recalls Karl Jaspers's observation that dialog

lets each person question the beliefs of others while seeing how they react to his or her thoughts. In a similar way Mikhail Bakhtin, commenting on modern writing, noted that literature gains meaning from dialog's variegated voices (Jaspers 74; Bakhtin 279). Building on these ideas, *Time to live* uses communication to alleviate the isolation and hatred that is a cause as well as result of the violence that defined the South Caucasus in the late 1980s and 1990s. In the collection's opening essay, Azerbaijani journalist Fakhri Ugurlu summarizes one of the volume's principles: "Жестокость – ослепление души; если ты жесток по отношению к человеку, ты никогда не прозреешь истину о нем" (Odišaria, Načkebia 9). He adds that those fighting have no wish to learn anything about their enemies – by implication, there is no possibility of dialog. The pointlessness of conflict is a main theme in *Time to live* but Urgulu gives the volume's only extensive analysis of war. The essay decries it as a "machine" that transforms justice into violence and assaults the "sincerity" that is humanity's natural state (Odišaria, Načkebia 9–10). This critique draws on familiar tropes (nature, harmony, machinery of violence) but also recalls the values of the late-Soviet intelligentsia, which deemed *iskrennost'* central to the "truth" Ugurlu lauds.

Few of the volume's stories mention what causes the region's conflicts. In Beso Khvedelidze's *The curse* (*Prokliatie*), Georgian soldier Tartalo has heard about patriotism. "Богоугодное дело, дело принципа, а то очень были нужны Тартало эти этноконфликты и все такое. Деньги были нужны ему, и все" (Odišaria, Načkebia 65). This explanation mocks patriotism as an abstraction irrelevant to soldiers, who need to support themselves and their families during the economic collapse that followed 1991. The reasons for bloodshed remain unclear in one of the volume's strongest stories, Odisharia's *The nephew* (*Plemiannik*). Valerii is held prisoner by an Abkhaz family whose patriarch is grateful that the Georgian soldier saved his grandson's life. The old man wonders who started this war and asserts, "Народ не причем, каждый народ – жертва войны" (Odišaria, Načkebia 259). He exonerates ordinary combatants but implies that defending Abkhazia (or Georgia) is no reason to kill. *The nephew* is a fictional equivalent of Urgulu's essay: both pieces show that, regardless of its reasons, conflict is immoral.

Some stories illustrate parallel suffering on opposing sides of the conflicts. Leonid Terakopian discusses *Time to live* in the only Russian 'thick journal' review of the collection. The critic praises Rafik Tagi's *Similar* (*Pokhozhie*), a story that portrays how a neighboring Armenian and Azerbaijani village endure the same calamities (even their chickens die because each side's veterinarian was shot by enemy soldiers) (Terakopân, electronic source). When one village celebrates a minor victory, the other has funerals (Odišaria, Načkebia 192–193). Odisharia relates how, at a conference in Belgium discussing *Time to live*, an Armenian journalist and Azerbaijani professor realized their sons both served as snipers in

Nagorno-Karabakh. Tagi himself was killed by an unknown attacker after the Azerbaijani government alleged his writing was anti-Islamic (Odišaria, Načkebia 192–193; Čkadua, electronic source; *Tagi Rafik*, electronic source). His stories and death highlight the vital need for what *Time to live* tries to create: a literary space where authors, expressing their separate experiences, advocate for peace through understanding the suffering of others. He and the collection's contributors as a whole contrast the humane virtues of dialog and empathy with the unthinking violence that defines war.

Postcoloniality in the shadow of the Soviet century

My study discusses *A Time to live* more than twenty years after it appeared; the collection itself is retrospective due to portraying the late 1980s and 1990s. This doubled remove is a useful research tool. Since the early twenty-first century, understanding of the South Caucasus and the entire former Soviet space has changed. Already in 2008 Gayatri Spivak noted postcoloniality's importance to the discipline, which in the past was reluctant to include theories (gender studies, subaltern studies) enriching allied fields. Colonialism, she maintains, follows an overall pattern not limited to European or US hegemony: one nation imposes its laws, education, and systems on another region for economic benefit. Russia's centuries-long domination of the Caucasus before, during, and after the USSR fits this definition (Spivak et al. 828, quoted in Koplatadze 2019b: 469). Koplatadze argues for linking studies of trauma with postcoloniality, a task that *Time to live* accomplishes by portraying war and its consequences in light of the Soviet past (Koplatadze 2019a: 18–19).

The collection depicts postcoloniality without mentioning the term. This omission stems from the authors being guided by late-Soviet assumptions, shared by the state and the intelligentsia, that simplistically divided the world between the (imperialist) West and the socialist camp. Nonetheless, *Time to live* is remarkable for the ways it depicts those who survived the USSR's empire. Koplatadze, examining postcoloniality, summarizes how after 1991 the Caucasus suffered from increased poverty, national humiliation (scorned by Russia, ignored by the West), lingering Soviet-era trauma, and local wars (Koplatadze 2019a: 19–20). These factors created what Homi Bhabha terms the "unhomely", where a formerly familiar space becomes alien and threatening (Bhabha 141, quoted in Koplatadze 2019a: viii).

Time to live illustrates this dramatic shift. Lipovetsky and Platt praise writing that avoids grand narratives in favor of personal experiences: the *sbornik* emphasizes such individual stories within a larger context of postcolonial col-

lapse (Lipovetsky, Platt, electronic source). Terakopian contextualizes the collection's discussion of regional violence within other post-Soviet events, e.g., 1990s fighting between Tajiks and Uzbeks (Terakopân, electronic source). In doing so the critic places the South Caucasus within the larger picture of turmoil in the former empire.

The postcolonial, post-Soviet influence on *Time to live* comes from several sources. The volume's contributors themselves all lived under socialism; when *Time to live* appeared the nations of the South Caucasus had been independent for little more than a decade. There is a sense of alienation from this recent past, as well as from neighboring ethnicities and the world beyond the region. Another source of the postcolonial legacy is the Soviet intelligentsia, as Urgulu's essay reveals. Dmitrii Likhachev, who shaped the image of *intelligenty*, defined the group as free-thinking, living according to its own ideas, and rejecting control by others. This idealized self-characterization, promulgated by a figure important during perestroika, matches Isaiah Berlin's description of *intelligenty* as devoted to ideas in the service of humanity (Lihačev 382; Berlin 9). *Time to live* reflects many of these concepts. Odisharia, Nachkebia, and Iskander, for instance, contrast culture with the chaos and brutality of war; the volume begins with Urgulu's essay, which rejects bloodshed because violence precludes thought and communication. Odisharia laments that, in the South Caucasus, "Мы все скучаем по истинному миру и гармонии истинных человеческих отношений" (Odišaria 2009, electronic source). What defines humanity, he suggests, is peace and communication.

The *sbornik* posits that the intelligentsia's values are the first victim of war. Terakopian concurs, predicting that "если сдают свои позиции наука или культура, то распоясывается толпа и пробуждаются дремлющие в ней варварские инстинкты" (Terakopân, electronic source). His terminology is oddly military, urging "science and culture" not to "retreat". One of the volume's stories, Kostia Dzugaev's *No man's land* (*Postrelivaemoe prostranstvo*), uses dark humor to convey a similar message. The Ossetian narrator is stopped by Georgian police during the 1989 unrest in Tskhinvali. He produces a membership card in the Soviet philosophy society and they let him pass, believing the young man works for the security agencies. Later the narrator remarks that the police must respect philosophers because Plato believed that this group should rule the state (Odišaria, Načkebia 129).

In the last years of the Soviet Union *intelligenty* could neither help others nor even protect themselves as ethnic strife, social collapse, and widespread poverty disrupted the region. Terakopian, bemoaning the problems besetting the Caucasus, lamented that libraries are empty and factories are abandoned (Terakopân, electronic source). The statement, while accurate, singles out two Soviet spaces that were symbols of socialist progress that, he implies, were discarded after 1991.

Emphasizing them hints that Terakopian fits into an imperial Russian paradigm: he can only view the region in terms of loss after the end of Soviet colonialism.

There is another, very pragmatic aspect of postcoloniality: the Western funding that financed *Time to live*. The Caucasus Forum of Nongovernmental Organizations supported the *sbornik* thanks to the Heinrich Böll Fund. International Alert, a British NGO, also supplied money for the project and itself received grants from the European Union and British government (Odišaria, Načkebia verso; *Mediation and Dialogue*…, electronic source). The United Kingdom and EU, which include many of the world's most powerful former empires, helped authors in an ex-Soviet periphery to portray wars that came with the end of colonialism.

At times Odisharia unwittingly replicates the language of the collection's Western donors. He praises the volume for promoting "новых мирных гражданских инициатив", a phrase that evokes NGOs' rhetoric of engagement and democratic participation (Odišaria 2009, electronic source). At such moments the *sbornik* presents the South Caucasus within two postcolonial frameworks: one is post-Soviet and the other (Western) European.

Interestingly, *Time to live*'s genre is also part of the postcolonial context. As a collection, the book is a type of writing that deliberately combines varied and conflicting narratives. Anne Ferry defines collections as "the end result of an act, of gathering together related things" where the content and structure are "decided and arranged on principles" (Ferry 15, 2). For Odisharia and Nachkebia these "principles" encourage peace in the South Caucasus. *Time to live* tries to influence the region's identity, a goal that is another trait of collections (Price 3). This type of literature has antecedents in Soviet and prerevolutionary Russian literature. During perestroika *sborniki* presented the experiences of those who had been previously silenced or ignored: late- and post-Soviet Russian women authors, for example, published a surprising number of collections in the late 1980s-early 1990s (Sutcliffe). *Sborniki* introduced new authors to a wider readership than would be available to writers publishing their works individually.

The late-Soviet mindset, another colonial legacy, influenced the volume's function. Odisharia states that *Time to live* used literature as "people's diplomacy" to revive contact between ethnicities in the region (Odišaria 2009, electronic source). A Russian media outlet echoes this sentiment when covering a presentation of the volume in Nagorno-Karabakh; the article commends *Time to live* for "наведение мостов доверия между сторонами, налаживание былых связей" between Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and other groups (*V Stepanakerte sostoâlas' prezentaciâ*…, electronic source). People-to-people diplomacy and "bridges" evoke the Gorbachev era and efforts to lessen tensions between the USSR and the West; within the Soviet context these words also connote the 'friendship of peoples' that supposedly guided interethnic relations under socialism (Neumann).

Terakopian, praising *Time to live*, uses a term from an even earlier era: he applauds how the *sbornik* demands "civic-mindedness" (grazhdanstvennost') and bravery from contributors and readers (Terakopân, electronic source). In a collocation with colonial overtones, he opposes these values (drawn from the Khrushchev years) to more 'primitive' ethnic loyalties fueling the region's conflicts.

Time to live demonstrates that the very portrayal of war is shaped by Soviet colonial esthetics. In *The nephew*, Georgian soldier Valerii no longer wants revenge on his Abkhaz enemies. This desire vanished after witnessing atrocities by both sides: tortured prisoners, charred corpses, and the "искаженное лицо страны" (Odišaria, Načkebia 245). The solider tries wine and drugs but these do not erase the horrors of conflict. At some points *The nephew* and many stories in the collection combine violent images with a sense of hopelessness. Both typified *chernukha*, a prominent trend in Soviet/Russian literature and film in the late 1980s and 1990s that portrayed a world without the culture that Urgulu and Odisharia extol. One of *chernukha*'s sources was describing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which also influences *Time to live*. In a story by Ovanes Eranian, an Armenian soldier worries his comrade will do something "Afghan" to Azerbaijani civilians they discover: his comment references the brutality endemic to the USSR's last foreign conflict (Odišaria, Načkebia 75).

The Great Patriotic War, a central trauma in Soviet culture, also shapes *Time to live*. Several stories contrast hostilities in the Caucasus with the fight against Hitler (Odišaria, Načkebia 113, 119, 258). Despite Stalin's wartime deportations of supposedly treasonous ethnicities in the region, the collection treats the 1941–1945 struggle as more justified than recent conflicts. In Inal Pliev's *Yet another day* (*Eshche odin den'*) an Ossetian veteran walks outside proudly displaying his Great Patriotic War medals, only to be hit by a Georgian shell (Odišaria, Načkebia 59). His death symbolizes the implosion of the USSR; the mythologized values of the nation's battle against the Nazis (heroism, self-sacrifice, and unity) are now worthless. *Chernukha* and references to the Great Patriotic War underscore that the South Caucasus is a space deeply influenced by esthetics and collective experiences key to Soviet identity and memories of the USSR (Tlostanova 13).

Images of sexual violence, a trope of war prose and a prominent feature of *chernukha*, recur in the volume (Odišaria, Načkebia 143). In *The nephew* Valerii cannot forget a comrade entangled in his intestines or the gaze of a girl who had been raped; later one of his Abkhaz captors brags that he assaulted seven Georgian women (Odišaria, Načkebia 246, 255). *Time to live* portrays sexual violence as a terrifyingly unremarkable feature of conflicts that evince men's bestial essence. Tagi's *Those who love classical style* (*Liubiashchie klassicheskii stil'*), one of the volume's most moving stories, discusses rape's consequences. The *rasskaz* first mentions men who died fighting Armenia and are buried in the Baku martyrs'

cemetery (the location paired with "classical stye" in the title). These men may themselves be guilty of rape and murder of Armenians during 1990 ethnic violence (an event that Tagi does not mention in the story) (Odišaria, Načkebia 186).

Then the narrator turns to Azerbaijani women, whose suffering is overlooked because it does not fit masculine concepts of combat. The story sadly notes that those who return from captivity have infants because of being raped by Armenians. One mother wants to make her child grow not by the day but by the hour. She will then match her little daughter's face with that of the father and identify the rapist who impregnated her. The mother hoped to have a child with her fiancé, who vanished during the war. The story explores an even more disturbing possibility resulting from her daughter's mix of Armenian and Azerbaijani heritage:

> И еще один вопрос ее волновал: когда дочь ее вырастит, за кого ее выдать замуж – за врага или за своего? […] Но однажды видела во сне, что вновь война началась. И на этот раз она уже вместе с дочерью попадает в плен; и будет уже отец насиловать дочь. И если вновь начнется война – дед изнасилует внучку. И если дитя, родившееся от внучки, станет вдруг выяснять свои гены, то навряд ли сможет установить их (Odišaria, Načkebia 188–189).

In this nightmare rape and birth echo through several generations. The story envisions repeated sexual violence but also the obsession with "genes" that divide "our own" from the enemy. The mother lies to Azerbaijani authorities, claiming that she found an Armenian orphan and wants to adopt her. However, the bureaucrats decide that adopting a child of the enemy would be a criminal act (Odišaria, Načkebia 189). The story compares rape by Armenians and the refusal of Azerbaijani bureaucrats to see the little girl as more than a "child of the enemy". Blinded by a restrictive sense of ethnicity, they further victimize the mother and her child.

Terakopian assumes *Time to live*'s themes of war and atrocities explain why it received little attention in Russia. He argues that this audience is tired of reading about corpses, whether in Chechnya, Dagestan, Iraq, or the London subway attacks (Terakopân, electronic source). The critic is mistaken. Depicting war is not the problem: portrayal of armed conflict (including in the Caucasus) has been a fixture of Russian writers from Lev Tolstoi to Vladimir Makanin and beyond. The problem is that *Time to live* portrays violence in the post-Soviet periphery from a non-Russian viewpoint. As a postcolonial publication the *sbornik* falls into a familiar yet unfortunate pattern Terakopian overlooks. For Russian readers the book typifies the tragedies bedeviling 'ungrateful' territories that demanded independence then could not govern themselves. Edith Clowes explains such dismissal as part of a pattern where the colonizing 'center' neglects the periphery of its former empire (Clowes).

Terakopian's flawed explanation, however, creates an intriguing indirect dialog. Odisharia complains that "популяризация книги на международной арене

была не в силах участников проекта"; nonetheless, dozens of articles appeared about it in Azerbaijani, Armenian, Georgian, and Abkhaz (Odišaria 2009, electronic source). The editor implicitly reminds Terakopian and others that *Time to live* is a collection by and for the South Caucasus, as opposed to a book whose purpose (and profitability) depends on Russians. This purpose makes the volume part of what Koplatadze and Marco Puleri see as a trend where Russophone authors "talk back" to the former imperial power (Thompson 23, quoted in Koplatadze 2019b: 470; Puleri 10). However, Russian readers and authors rarely took notice. *Time to live* did create dialog between ethnicities but this exchange was limited to the South Caucasus and those few in the former metropole willing to listen.

Russian readers' disinterest is another way the USSR and its legacy influence *Time to live*. The *sbornik* unwittingly draws on patterns from Soviet culture, whether official discourse or intelligentsia ideals. The volume's content (war, poverty, ethnic hatred) illustrates the aftershocks of empire; critics' responses from the South Caucasus and Russia reveal that postcoloniality is central to *Time to live*.

Russophonia in the South Caucasus: Between empire and mediation

Time to live navigates between the literary and cultural traditions of five ethnicities, using Russian as a medium to portray war and troubled peace. Analyzing Russophonia in the volume is impossible without exploring the collection's postcolonial aspects. In *Time to live* the language is tied to the vestiges of empire yet is also neutral: no ethnic Russian authors contributed to the volume and few of the stories were originally written in Russian. Odisharia refers to *Time to live* as "книга пяти литератур" (Odišaria 2009, electronic source). Russian is the sixth; however, the editor's phrasing implies it is a technical aid rather than a designator of literary tradition. Odisharia happily notes that many of the stories were subsequently published in other languages of the Caucasus. In effect, Russian served as a conduit, taking narratives from Georgian, Armenian, and so forth and presenting them to a wider (regional) audience, which then translated them again (Odišaria 2009, electronic source).

The practice of translation has imperial undertones but offers a new role for Russophonia (Witt 159). As Andrew Wachtel explains, before and during the Soviet era Russian was a language of prestige and convenience. It made world literature available for the country's multiethnic readers just as the USSR translated its national literatures into Russian and vice versa (Wachtel 72, 69). *Time to live* changes this scenario in two ways. First, translation was funded by Western NGOs from countries whose own languages spread across the globe along with their

power; Russian in *Time to live* is a way for former colonizers to give a voice to those in the remnants of the Soviet empire. However, the collection also employs Russian to make stories accessible to readers outside the authors' own culture but within the South Caucasus. The language becomes an instrument for those in the region, as opposed to readers in the Caucasus needing Russian to interact with the Soviet empire or outside world.

This use of Russian counters Terakopian's concern over diminished cross-cultural contact in the former USSR. The critic worries that, in the poverty and tumult of the post-Soviet era, readers are no longer interested in those different from them. His comment echoes Likhachev's assertion concerning how, after 1991, ties between the newly independent states are essential to preserve the variation that enriches culture (Terakopân, electronic source; Lihačev 392). *Time to live*, by stimulating translations through Russian into various Caucasus languages, encourages interethnic contact while disproving the myth that Soviet hegemony was the only reason such communication was possible.

Odisharia and Kobakhia place Russian within their effort to tie peace to communication in *Time to live*:

> В основном все рассказы, представленные здесь, были уже опубликованные на национальных языках. Здесь они впервые собраны в одной книге в переводе на русский язык. Книга станет своеобразным диалогом писателей. В ней они делятся своей болью, болью своего народа, пропагандируя мир без войн и насилия.
> Мы верим, эта книга объединит всех читателей, поможет различным обществам Кавказа лучше понять проблемы друг друга (Odišaria, Načkebia 5).

Odisharia and Kobakhia are unaware that they are employing the semiotics of Soviet culture as they distinguish the equal yet subordinate national languages from Russian, the USSR's privileged linguistic medium. However, through translation, Russian helps the volume unite authors, promoting a world without war or violence by letting various societies convey the pain of their people. *Time to live* tries to use Russian to communicate the suffering of neighboring ethnicities to create "dialog" instead of more bloodshed.

The *sbornik* pictures the Soviet era as a relatively tranquil prologue before the violent late 1980s. This fictional representation parallels Broers' depiction of the Soviet Caucasus as "rich in interethnic tensions that remained peaceful" (Broers 4). Dzugaev's *No man's land*, set in Tskhinvali, recalls that during the narrator's childhood Ossetians, Georgians, Armenians, and Russian lived together in the city (Odišaria, Načkebia 126). Some works do portray underlying hostilities and inequality, tying language and education to colonial oppression. Aleksei Gogua's *rasskaz Before the sun set* (*Poka ne zashlo sol'ntse*) hints at the problems between Russian, Georgian, and Abkhaz cultures. In Sukhumi the bully Astik speaks Ab-

khaz, Georgian, and Russians but not well enough to be educated. In their high school protagonist Esma witnesses the class's punishment when Astik defaces a portrait of Brezhnev. Esma's future husband studies Abkhaz history but, the narrator bitterly adds, only those who focus on the 1917 revolution will get a good job (Odišaria, Načkebia 210, 213, 216). The story details Esma's first days as a widow during the Abkhazia war. However, its flashbacks to earlier decades show how Soviet practices helped cause this conflict.

Russophonia and postcoloniality intersect in Iskander's well-written story, *The boy and the war* (*Mal'chik i voina*). The young protagonist overhears relatives describing the battle for Gagra and the atrocities committed by Georgians and Abkhaz alike. He loses faith in the world:

> Мальчик был начитан для своих двенадцати лет. Из книг, которые он читал, получалось, что человек с древнейших времен становится все разумней и разумней. […] И ему казалось, что люди с веками становятся все разумней и добрей. И теперь он вдруг в этом разуверился (Odišaria, Načkebia 271).

The boy's father counters this despair by explaining the importance of culture:

> Вот когда ты прочитаешь древних писателей и сравнишь их, скажем, со Львом Толстым, то поймешь, что он умел любить и жалеть людей больше древних писателей. И он далеко не один такой. И это означает, что люди все-таки, хотя и очень медленно, делаются добрей (Odišaria, Načkebia 271).

"Culture" proves people possess love and pity, a formulation that resembles the empathy that Odisharia praises. In Iskander's story the boy has read Tolstoi's *Hadji Murat*, whose main character perishes because in the Caucasus he will serve neither rebels nor Russian occupiers. The boy relates this to the kind doctor from his childhood who was later killed after criticizing both Georgian and Abkhaz nationalists. The boy's father, however, then produces another example of kindness: a handicapped elderly woman who feeds stray dogs near their apartment. He concludes by telling his son, "Добро неистребимо, и оно сильнее зла" (Odišaria, Načkebia 272–274).

This axiom foregrounds the struggle between compassion and brutality, culture and chaos. Iskander was the USSR's most prominent writer from the Caucasus. In his story the father's comment summarizes the intelligentsia idea that culture, specifically literature, preserves what makes people human. However, this argument is framed in disconcerting terms. The boy alludes to Tolstoi's novella, a resounding rejection of imperial conquest. In referencing *Hadji Murat*, the boy, who lived in Abkhazia but is now in Moscow, views the Caucasus via a canonical Russian author introduced within a postcolonial context. Reading *The boy and the war* illuminates the tangled ties between the South Caucasus, Russian literature,

and the Soviet intelligentsia that shaped the volume. Platt, discussing Russophonia, argues that we must question the colonial roots of such literature – *The boy and the war* shows why he is correct (Lipovetsky, Platt, electronic source).

Iskander's *rasskaz* concludes the argument Urgulu begins in *Time to live*'s opening essay: culture must oppose violence. The final story of the volume, Nachkebia's *Khabydzh's defense* (*Zashchita Khabydzha*), makes a similar claim but substitutes farming for literature; both are endeavors shaping humanity that will outlast the ephemeral brutality of war. The story ends with the protagonist possibly preparing for combat. The narrator then reassures readers that "Хабыдж был очарован другим звуком – не оглушительно громким, а смиренным и пронзительно вечным" (Odišaria, Načkebia 277). War is deafening but temporary. *The boy and the war* has a similar conclusion as the father posits that kindness outlasts evil. By closing the volume with these two stories, the editors structurally and symbolically contain conflict within a vision of culture that draws on Soviet intelligentsia concepts to promote peace.

This reliance, along with the collection's emphasis on communication, portrays how *Time to live* tries to promote harmony and empathy in the South Caucasus. The *sbornik* serves as a dialog between warring groups, using Russian to engage a multiethnic audience within the region. Russophonia in this context is simultaneously mediator, postcolonial presence, and the voice of empire's victims. *Time to live* shows that readers and writers cannot escape the influence of the USSR but can envision a future that combines the Soviet legacy with a critique of past brutality and hope for a kinder tomorrow.

* * *

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