



## STALIN STATUE IN GORI

Gori, Georgia

41.9818646, 44.1114895

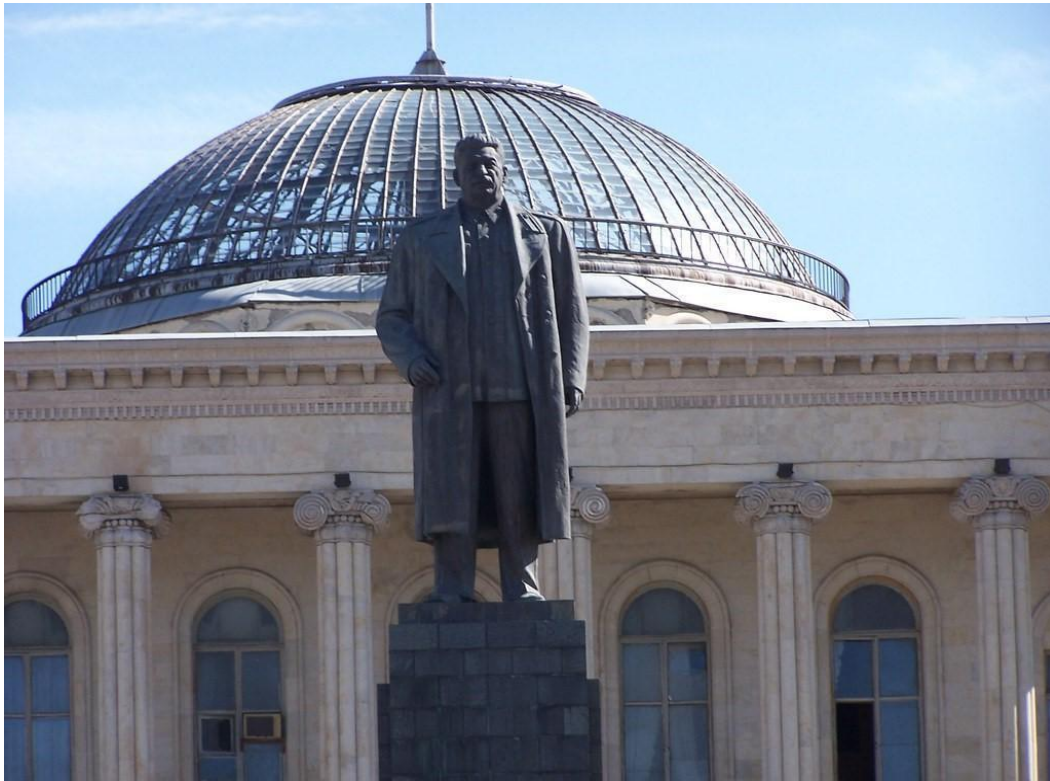


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### Executive Summary

The removal of the Stalin statue from the central square in Gori represents a top-down policy implementation approach to a contested historical monument. Such implementations of Georgia's Freedom Charter illustrate the legal framework under which symbols, monuments and names of sites related to the Soviet past become reconfigured. However, positions differ on the fate of Soviet-era statues in Georgia. Stalin remains a controversial figure in modern Georgia, being regarded as a dictator, a great leader or simply part of Georgia's history. Additionally, it is important to consider the statue's significance for Gori's tourism and the local economy. Currently, the future of the Stalin statue in Gori remains uncertain.

## Introduction

Objections to the removal of the statue of Stalin from the central square in his birthplace, Gori, have revealed a complex relationship between modern Georgia and its Soviet past. The statue was removed on the 25th of June 2010 and since then, local authorities and the cultural ministry have been left with the task of deciding what to do with the removed object. Stalin is a divisive figure in Georgia's past: some see his statue as a symbol of mass violence, tyranny and the subjugation of Georgia, while those who wish to see the statue reinstated often argue that Stalin was a celebrated leader and should be commemorated as such. Additionally, political scientists have suggested that Stalin's statue in Gori prompts debates about the purpose of historical heritage and its meanings to different social groups in Georgia.

## Background

### *Post-Soviet Georgia Between Russia and the West*

The location of the statue is particularly significant to understanding the controversy as Gori was the birthplace of Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), and some political scientists such as Peter Kabachnik and Alexi Gugushvili have attributed Stalin's popularity in Gori to the 'hometown effect'.<sup>1</sup> Today, Gori houses the Stalin Museum and until 2010, a 6-metre high bronze statue of Stalin stood on a plinth in the central square. The statue was constructed in the early 1950s, a few years before Stalin's death. In 2010, the monument was believed to be the last remaining full-length statue of Stalin still standing in its original position.<sup>2</sup>

Since its independence in 1991, Georgia's political landscape has been marked by moves toward democratic political processes, as well as periods of conflict, division and violence. Aspirations for regional autonomy and independence, as well as national sentiments have risen to the fore at various times across the post-Soviet space. In Georgia, these have been manifested in tensions between Georgian nationalists and secessionists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and have erupted into violence at several points. Georgia experienced two secessionist wars and a civil war in the 1990s, as well as a war with Russia in 2008. Georgia thus has a complex relationship with its Soviet past, and statues have repeatedly served as sites of contestation. For example, in the 1990s, crowds defaced and tore down communist monuments in iconoclastic efforts to break with the past. The statue of Sergo Orjonikidze, who played a key role in planning the Soviet Army's invasion of independent Georgia in 1921, was one of the first statues in Georgia to be removed in this way.<sup>3</sup> In spite of this, and partially due to local manifestations, the statue of Stalin in Gori's central square has survived.<sup>4</sup>

With respect to political leadership, following the death of Georgia's first president Zviad

<sup>1</sup> Peter Kabachnik and Alexi Gugushvili, "Unconditional love? Exploring hometown effect in Stalin's birthplace," *Caucasus Survey* Vol.3, No 2 (2015), 101.

<sup>2</sup> BBC News, "Stalin Statue Taken Down in His Georgian Hometown," BBC News, July 25, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Jones, *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence* (London: Tauris, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> BBC News, "Stalin Statue Taken Down in His Georgian Hometown," BBC News, July 25, 2010.

Gamsakhurdia, a junta of military officials struck a deal with Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, to make him President until 2003. The Rose Revolution in 2003-2004, which brought Mikhail Saakashvili to power, was a pro-Western and pro-European Union movement that signalled a significant break with pro-Russian policies. However, visions of the Soviet past remain divided and some Georgians, particularly because of Stalin's Georgian roots and the legacy of his personality cult, regarded Stalin as a positive icon.

Widely reviled as a dictator responsible for millions of deaths in political purges, labor camps and forced agricultural collectivization, Stalin is held up as a hero by supporters who say the Soviet Union would not have defeated Nazi Germany or industrialized without him.<sup>5</sup>

Such positive attitudes towards Stalin have however changed in recent years. The Russo-Georgian War in 2008 (or the August war), was the result of an escalation in tensions between the Saakashvili government and the Russian government in the region of South Ossetia. The Stalin statue in Gori was removed in the aftermath of the conflict. Similarly to the Saakashvili government, his successor's Giorgi Margvelashvili's government continued having a tense relationship with Russia, particularly following the signing of a partnership agreement between Abkhazia and Russia in 2014, which in his view made the Georgian territory a part of Russia. Despite these conflicts between the Georgian and Russian governments, however, 57 percent of Georgians continue to positively rate the historical role of Stalin, in contrast with less than 10 percent of Estonians and Lithuanians, demonstrating varying perceptions about Stalin among citizens of the former USSR republics.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, the divisive nature of the Soviet past and its place in Georgian memory, the secessionist wars in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as tensions between Georgians and the ethnic Armenian and Azeri minorities, are the defining qualities of memory politics in Georgia today. As a result, monuments and symbols such as the Stalin statue in Gori need to be understood within this context of post-Soviet national and individual identity.

## History of the Contestation

### *Gori and the Memory of Stalin*

The Stalin statue in Gori was removed without notice and during the night by the local authorities on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2010.<sup>7</sup> A live video feed of the square was rendered inoperable by a cover placed on the camera during the operation and the police prevented attempts of a local television crew to film the removal.<sup>8</sup>

The decision to remove the statue was met with varied responses. Georgia's Culture Minister

<sup>5</sup> Margarita Antidze, "Stalin Statue Removed in Georgian Home Town," Reuters, June 25, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Alberto Frigerito "The Fate of Statues of Stalin in post-Soviet Countries: Some Critical Reflections on the Management of Contested Cultural Heritage," *Heritage and Society* Vol. 12, No. 2-3 (2019), 141.

<sup>7</sup> Civil Georgia, "Stalin Statue Removed from Gori," Civil Georgia, June 25, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Kabachnik, Alexi Gugushvili, and Ana Kirvalidze, "What about the Monument?: Public Opinion and Contentious Politics in Stalin's Homeland," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 3 (2020).

Nikoloz Rurua was in favour of the decision:

I believe Stalin was a political criminal, who led the Russian Bolshevik army into Georgia in 1921, which eventually carried out Georgia's occupation...Stalin was a man who created hideous autonomies based on ethnic division, which to this day continue to create great problems for Georgia's freedom, democracy and consolidation. Stalin was a man who simply destroyed the best parts of Georgia.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, Jandier Makharadze, who took part in the rally for the reinstatement of the statue in 2019, argued that:

Our first and foremost demand is the return of the Stalin monument to its traditional place, where it was erected in its time. The return of the Stalin monument means respect for Stalin; the man who introduced himself to the whole world as the leader of the defeat of fascism.<sup>10</sup>

After the removal of the statue, government officials stated that it was to be replaced by a memorial of victims of totalitarianism and the August War.<sup>11</sup> There was additionally a parallel initiative to transfer the Stalin Museum to the Museum of Stalinism.<sup>12</sup> Both these initiatives, however, did not become reality due to the continuous protests of Gori's residents.

In 2013, the Ministry of Culture approved a proposal put forward by the local municipality of Gori to rehouse the statue in the Stalin Museum. As deputy head of Gori municipality, Nino Tsetsvadze explained, the impetus for the initiative did not come directly from the municipality.<sup>13</sup> Instead, it came from a petition put forward by locals to Gori's city council (Sakrebulo). The then-President, Mikheil Saakashvili described the decision as a 'barbaric, anti-Georgian, anti-national, anti-state act because it puts Georgia in international isolation.'<sup>14</sup> Despite the petition, however, the monument has not been reinstated. Calls to reinstall the statue or to return it to the museum continued in 2018 and 2019, but with no effects.<sup>15</sup>

The reinstatement of the statue evidently continues to receive widespread support from the Georgian public. According to a survey conducted by political scientists Peter Kabachnik, Alexi Gugushvili and Anna Kirvalidze in 2015, an overwhelming 77 percent of Georgian citizens supported the reinstatement of the statue in some form, with only 4-5 percent supporting its complete removal or storage (the rest were undecided).<sup>16</sup> The survey concluded that males, older citizens and those with favourable attitudes towards Putin tended to be more in favour of reinstating the statue, while women, individuals with tertiary education, those with favorable attitudes towards Putin and residents of Shida Kartli and Tbilisi were more likely to hold negative views. Public support for reinstating the statue, however, should not be confused with favourable

<sup>9</sup> BBC News, "Stalin Statue Taken Down in His Georgian Hometown," BBC News, July 25, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> "სტალინის ძეგლის დაბრუნების მოთხოვნით გორში აქცია გაიმართა," REGinfo, October 10, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> BBC News, "Stalin Statue Taken Down in His Georgian Hometown." BBC News. June 25 2010.

<sup>12</sup> "Stalinism Museum to be Opened in Georgia." RIA Novosti. April 9 2012.

<sup>13</sup> "Culture Ministry: Stalin Statue, Removed Three Years Ago, Planned to be Put in His Museum," Civil.Ge, July 30, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> სტალინის ძეგლის დაბრუნების მოთხოვნით გორში აქცია გაიმართა," REGinfo, October 10, 2019 6); Giorgi Diasamidze, "ძალიან კარგი იქნებოდა სტალინის ძეგლის აღდგენა – გორის ტურიზმის ცენტრის უფროსი," Netgazeti.ge, April 17, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Kabachnik, Alexi Gugushvili and Anna Kirvalidze, "What about the Monument? Public Opinion and Contentious Politics in Stalin's Homeland," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 67, no. 3 (2020), 268.

views of Stalinism. Some political scientists have argued that a substantial proportion of Georgians perceive Stalin as both a cruel dictator *and* the man who defeated Nazism, viewing the statue as a symbol of victory. Additionally, other members of the public viewed the statue as having artistic as opposed to political significance, hence their desire to reinstate it. Finally, some citizens viewed the removal of the statue as an undemocratic attempt at erasing undesirable parts of Georgian history.<sup>17</sup> The overwhelming public support for the reinstatement of the statue, contrasts with the officials' desire to remove it, revealing tensions between the state and its citizens, as well as contested understandings about the meaning of historical heritage, and conceptualisations of history and space.

Currently, the statue continues to remain in storage, away from the public eye. In April 2019, the Georgian news outlet Radiotavisupleba reported that the statue was being stored in a warehouse outside the city.<sup>18</sup> As of June 2021, the exact location and the fate of the statue remains unknown.

## Decision-Making Processes

The Rose Revolution in Georgia and the pro-western movement that brought President Mikheil Saakashvili to power in 2004 formed the basis of a shift in government policy, which is seen by many as the driving force behind the decision to remove the statue in 2010.

It has been suggested that the decision to remove the statue late at night and the obstructions to film the removal were designed to avoid protests and contestation from Gori residents.<sup>19</sup> The removal of the statue in Gori can thus be seen as part of a broader set of governmental policy goals and directions. In 2011, lustration laws were brought into force in Georgia. These laws sought to prevent ex-Soviet operatives from entering public office and forming part of Georgia's Freedom Charter.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted, however, that the contested lustration laws actually became widely spread across Eastern Europe as early as the 1990s, following the fall of Communism. With respect to Georgia, however, such laws did not come into force until 2011.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, In May 2011, the Georgian Parliament adopted a Freedom Charter, which set a strong ideological agenda. For example, the 1st article orders to

provide preventive measures against the principles of communist totalitarian and national socialist (Nazi) ideologies; remove the symbols and names of cult buildings, memorials, monuments, bas-reliefs, inscriptions, streets, squares, villages and settlements of the communist totalitarian regime.

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Instrumental to this purpose, the Freedom Charter mandated the establishment of a commission

<sup>17</sup> Peter Kabachnik, "The power of place, or powerless places? Hybrid attitudes towards Soviet symbols in post-Soviet Georgia," *Central Asian Survey* vol. 37, no.2 (2018), 270.

<sup>18</sup> Goga Aptsiauri, "სტალინის ძეგლი: ტურისტების მატება თუ თავისუფლების ქარტიის დარღვევა," Radiotavisupleba.ge, April 17, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> "Stalin Statue Removed from Gori," *Civil Georgia*, June 25, 2010 4); Peter Kabachnik, Alexi Gugushvili, and Ana Kirvalidze, "What about the Monument?: Public Opinion and Contentious Politics in Stalin's Homeland," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 3 (2020).

<sup>20</sup> Law of Georgia of March 31 2011 no. 4717-ლს (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Lavinia Stan, "Transitional Justice in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Research Handbook on Transitional Justice*, ed. Cheryl Lawther, Luke Moffett and Dov Jacobs (Northampton MA: Elgar Publishing, 2017), 508.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Article 1.

within the Interior Ministry that would be tasked with compiling information on any symbols, statues, place names and monuments in Georgia that contain elements of communist totalitarian and national socialist ideologies.<sup>23</sup>

Georgia's Freedom Charter provoked and continues to provoke controversies. The clarity of the criteria for classification of objects and symbols and as such the charter's ability to provide a means of dealing with Georgia's Soviet past have been called into question.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the effectiveness of the Freedom Charter commission formed in 2015 has raised doubts. The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, a Georgian NGO, expressed concerns that the commission does not meet regularly and poorly informs society about its decision.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the engagement of the Parliament into the work of the commission has been named crucial for the successful implementation of lustration. However, the involvement of the Parliament has remained limited so far.<sup>26</sup>

Although the removal of the statue in Gori was in line with the agenda of the Freedom Charter, it violated the procedure outlined in the document. The decision to remove the statue should have been taken by the commission that has a right to 'appoint a competent person in order to eliminate the symbols, memorials, bas-reliefs, inscriptions and names' related to communist past. However, such a commission was formed only a couple of years after the removal of the statue, and appears not to have even discussed the statue's removal to this day.

The establishment of the commission was also framed as a means of bringing Georgia's struggle to negotiate its past, quite literally, into the light of day. In 2013, Davit Berdzenishvili, a lawmaker from the Republican Party<sup>27</sup>, responded to criticism over how the statue was secretly removed at night. He reported that parliamentary decisions to remove statues of Soviet-era figures would, under the new ruling coalition, be conducted 'in the daylight.'<sup>28</sup> He went on to say that:

The end of the post-Soviet era in Georgia means that the country is getting free from Stalinism, totalitarianism, Bolshevism and their symbols and it is being provided by the law; it becomes part of the state policy.<sup>29</sup>

More recent calls to relocate the statue to the Stalin museum are tied up in tourism policies and revenue generation. Proponents of this position believe that installing the statue in the Stalin Museum would boost the income generated by the museum and that this would benefit the local economy and community.<sup>30</sup> While the total annual number of visitors to the Stalin Museum remains undisclosed, each year over 50,000 foreign visitors come to Gori, with the Stalin Museum being presented as one of the top attractions (according to tourist guidebooks).<sup>31</sup> It should be

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Article 7.

<sup>24</sup> George Topouria, "Georgia's Not So Freedom Charter," *Transparency International Georgia*, July 11, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> "Evaluation of the Work of the Freedom Charter Committee in 2017-2019." *Institute for Development of Freedom of Information*. December 25 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> At the time the Republican Party formed part of the ruling coalition (Dream Coalition).

<sup>28</sup> "Amendment in 'Liberty Charter' Confirmed," *Civil Georgia*, December 25, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Giorgi Diasamidze, "ძალიან კარგი იქნებოდა სტალინის ძეგლის აღდგენა – გორის ტურიზმის ცენტრის უფროსი," *Netgazeti.ge*, April 17, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> William Dunbar "Stalin-land: the struggle for the soul of Uncle Joe's home-town museum," *The Calvert Journal*, January 27, 2019.

noted, however, that the neutrality of the depiction of Stalin in the museum has in fact been called into question, and the museum has been criticised for an overly positive representation.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore in 2012, under the Saakashvili government, the Minister for Culture Nikoloz Rurua, had plans to update and reconfigure the museum. It was to be renamed the Museum of Stalinism and would focus on the repression of the Soviet regime.<sup>33</sup> As of yet this project has not materialised into practice. However, campaigns for an alternative exhibition on Stalinism periodically rise to the surface and local resistance often becomes the stumbling block for these changes.<sup>34</sup> For historian Lasha Bakradze, such a change in representations of Stalin would be an important step for Georgia. Bakradze further believes that the polarised nature of views in Gori between various groups is symptomatic of broader collective memory issues in Georgia, which demonstrate that Georgians “still don't know how to deal with Stalin, or with [their] Soviet history.”<sup>35</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

The removal of the Stalin statue from the central square in Gori represents a top-down policy implementation approach to a contested historical monument. Positions taken by local residents tend to differ from those taken by political figures. The Stalin statue in Gori forms part of broader national and local debates in Georgia about how best to remember and represent the past. The legacies of Communism, authoritarianism and the cult of personality that once surrounded Stalin continue to present challenges for historical negotiation. The implementation of Georgia's Freedom Charter represents the legal framework under which symbols, monuments and place names related to the Soviet past should be reconfigured. However, official positions differ on the fate of Soviet-era statues in Georgia and specifically in relation to Gori there is also the question of tourism and the local economy. Additionally within the local community, certain groups, such as older residents, tend to demand celebrations, while the younger generation tends to seek the removal of symbols and monuments. In relation to the Stalin statue in Gori, political leaders (e.g. Minister for Culture), legal officials (Freedom Charter), Sakrebulo officials, national and local NGOs, local residents and victims of Stalinism are all key stakeholders. Since the statue's removal, no firm decision has been made about its fate. Elsewhere in Georgia, however, local residents have resurrected old Stalin monuments to coincide with anniversaries and birthdays. For example, in 2012 to mark Stalin's 133rd birthday, residents in Zemo Alvani reinstated a statue that had been removed the year before.<sup>36</sup> Political scientists Peter Kabachnik and Alex Gugushvili attribute such differences in outcome to the varying levels of support for Stalin between Georgia's urban and rural areas, with rural areas showing stronger levels of support.<sup>37</sup> What remains clear, however, is that while the future of the Stalin statue in Gori remains to be seen, the significance of the statue for tourism, and its implications for

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Kabachnik, Alexi Gugushvili, and Ana Kirvalidze, "What about the Monument?: Public Opinion and Contentious Politics in Stalin's Homeland," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 3 (2020).

<sup>33</sup> "Transforming Museum of Stalin," *Civil Georgia*, April 9, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew North, "Georgia's Stalin Museum Gives Soviet Version of Dictator's Life Story," *The Guardian*, August 4, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> David Mdzinarishvili and Margarita Antidze, "Georgian Village Reinstates Stalin Monument to Mark Anniversary," *Reuters*, December 21, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Kabachnik and Alexi Gugushvili, "Unconditional love? Exploring hometown effect in Stalin's birthplace," *Caucasus Survey* Vol.3, No 2 (2015), 101.

historical memory would need to be reconciled when addressing this contestation.

Research contributed by Hannah Bowman, Tatiana Petrukhina and Anna Zhukova

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## Figures

Almasudi. "Stalin Statue, Gori." Flickr, October 8, 2006.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/36579634@N00/289480776>. (Cover Image)

## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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