

THE CREATIVE CAULDRON OF THE CAUCASUS

The Caucasus seems fated to have become the cradle of our poetic talent.
The source and mentor of its muse, its poetic homeland.

Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848)
Russian Literary Critic

The vast region of the majestic Caucasus that stretches between the Black and Caspian Seas has long served as a creative inspiration to many of Russia's greatest talents. A venturesome voyage to this remote mountainous expanse provided an exotic escape that was steeped in such heroic daring and romantic intrigue that even ¹Alexander Pushkin penned many stirring poems based on his adventures here.

I've long been attracted to these arresting lands that so keenly captivated Russian writers from Pushkin, Lermontov and Tolstoy to Mandalstam, Mayakovsky and Pasternak. So after many months of research and planning, I set out to travel parts of the Caucasus in a quest to touch upon the area's fascinating history, untamed landscapes and fabled lure. And, as Mikhail Lermontov, I hoped to encounter the same enchantment: "He who, like me, has had occasion to wander over these wild mountains and scrutinize their fantastic shapes, and avidly swallow the vivifying air, will certainly understand my desire to render, to relate, to paint those magical images."

I christened my arrival in Georgia's picturesque capital of Tbilisi at the historic *Chreli Abano*—the Motley-colored Bath, tucked below the hilltop ruins of the Narikala Fortress. Built with a Persian-style façade, complete with stunning blue mosaic tiles and rooftop minarets, the colorful 17th-century bathhouse was built around the famed hot springs that gave this distinguished city its name—*T'bili* in old Georgian means 'warm place.' A plaque at the entrance of the iconic building commemorates a visit by Alexander Pushkin in 1829. I booked myself into the 'Pushkin Room'; and, after a sensuous soak in the warm sulfurous water, I could better understand why the famed poet wrote: "I've never encountered anything more luxurious than this ²Tiflis Bath."

The initial push into the Caucasus dates back to Peter the Great, but it took another century before the country was able to fully defeat the neighboring Persians and Ottoman Turks to expand its southern territory. By 1801, Russia had also disposed of Georgia's ruling monarchy and then went on to govern the area until the 1917 Revolution. So, by Pushkin's time, these new extensions of the empire—which included large portions of the Crimea, Georgia and Armenia—were still turbulent with resentment against Russian rule.

During this period, a rebellion was also brewing within Russia itself as secret organizations plotted against autocratic repressions. When Pushkin's own political verse, "Ode to Liberty," was discovered, Alexander I had him exiled from St Petersburg to a small provincial town in the Ukraine. From here, in 1820, Pushkin set out to explore the far-flung Caucasus frontier for several years with all its anticipated freedoms and resplendent nature. Greatly inspired, he wrote poems exalting Mt Kazbek, along with other delightful descriptions:

¹ Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799-1837) is considered Russia's greatest poet and the progenitor of modern Russian literature.

² Until 1936, when the Soviet government officially changed the capital's name to Tbilisi (Тбилиси), the city was known as Tiflis, after the Persian pronunciation.

*Below me the silver-capped Caucasus lies...
Here rivers are born that tear mountains asunder.
And landslides begin with a crash as of thunder...*

The gripping impressions Pushkin gathered also provided material for his famous narrative poem, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, the story of a young officer, who, disillusioned with his frivolous life, decides to seek adventure in this idealized region. While on duty, he's captured by local tribesmen, but then later saved by a beautiful village girl who has fallen in love with him. In the dedication, Pushkin describes the place "where warlike raiders roam the hills / and a wild imagination / lies in ambush in the empty silence." Because of Pushkin's popular publications, the Caucasus went on to inspire the next generation of Russian writers.

Now rejuvenated after the baths, I strolled about the historic Old Town by the Mtkvari River and used my own imagination to conjure up scenes of Silk Road merchants converging here in caravanserais at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. On a cliff above the river stands the landmark 13th-century Metekhi Church of the Assumption. In the early 4th century, Georgia became the second nation in the world (after neighboring Armenia) to adopt Christianity as its state religion. Upon entering the church, I immediately fell under the spell of its choir. Georgia has one of the world's oldest unbroken oral traditions, known for its Polyphonic style of singing in three-part harmony that is symbolically associated with the Trinity. Pushkin nostalgically recalled the harmonies:

*I beg you please sing no more,
the songs of Georgia,
for their mournful sounds
recall for me
a distant life
a distant shore.*

I headed up Rustaveli, the main thoroughfare, and crossed Pushkin Square to the Argo Café, where the proprietor explained that Georgia was invaded so many times by Persians, Turks and Arabs that its cuisine became a fusion of all these tastes. The traditional *khinkali* dumplings came from the Mongols in the thirteenth century. After this filling feast that included *khachapuri* cheese-filled bread and the candle-shaped *churchkhela* grape-flavored dessert, I learned the Georgian word *shemomechama*—used to describe when a person is full, but the meal so delicious, one continues to eat more anyway!

While reviewing my notes, I came upon the 1822 literary review that '*Prisoner of the Caucasus* sends the reader to a poetic land which saw Prometheus' suffering and the sojourn of the Greek Argonauts.' Of course Pushkin would have known about these mountain myths where Prometheus—after stealing fire from the Gods to gift humanity—was chained as punishment to a rock high on Mt Kazbek, and Jason and the Argonauts sought to retrieve the³Golden Fleece.

A week earlier I was high up in the mountains of northern Armenia, just south of the Georgian border, at what is now known as Pushkin Pass, to partly trace the poet's second journey through the Caucasus. This time his trip again led to Tiflis, but then continued on

³ It may not be a myth as there is evidence that locals panned for gold in mountain rivers by stretching a sheepskin across rocks to collect gold particles, which turned the fleece a golden color.

to eastern Turkey to visit his brother, who was serving in the army at Arzrum (now Erzurum), as Russian forces then controlled the area. Based on his travel diaries, Pushkin later wrote *A Journey to Arzrum* (Russia's first travelogue), in which he recounts how on June 11, 1829, he came upon the following scene:

I began to climb Bezobdal Pass that separates Georgia from ancient Armenia...Two oxen, harnessed to a cart, were ascending the steep road. Several Georgians were accompanying the wagon. "Where are you from?" I asked them. "From Tehran." "What are you carrying?"...It was the body of a dead Griboyedov...I departed from him last year in St Petersburg, before he left for Persia. He was sad because of a strange premonition...

This grim encounter took place four months after the murder of the young Russian playwright and emissary to Persia,⁴ Alexander Griboyedov. The attaché and embassy staff were massacred in Tehran by an angry mob due to an unpopular⁵ Russian Treaty that had stripped Persia of its last remaining territories in the Caucasus. The men were now taking his remains to Tiflis. While in Tbilisi, I visited Griboyedov's grave at the Mtatsminda (Holy Mountain) Pantheon, located in the cemetery of St David's Church in the western part of town. His widow, Nino Chavchavadze, had these words engraved on his monument: "Your mind and deeds are immortal in Russian memory. But why has my love outlived you?" Upon her death, thirty years later, the princess was buried next to her beloved husband.

Only one year earlier, Griboyedov had married⁶ Nino, the 16-year-old daughter of the renowned Georgian military leader Prince Alexander Chavchavadze, whose godmother was Catherine the Great. (He was born in 1786 in St Petersburg when his father served as ambassador in the capital.) After participating in many Russian military campaigns, including the war against Napoleon, Alexander eventually retired to the Tsinandali family estate, where he set out to Europeanize Georgia. He introduced the grand piano and his family rode in the country's first horse-drawn carriage around the manor's English-style gardens. A well-known poet himself, Chavchavadze greatly influenced Georgian literature, and moved the antiquated style of the⁷ language closer to the native vernacular.

From Tbilisi, I jumped on a local bus to Tsinandali (near the city of Telavi), now a functioning museum, located some sixty miles east in Kakheti Province. I entered through the wrought-iron gate, and ambled along a rose-scented path, lined with a sentinel of green cypress trees. At the northeast corner of the estate I found the historic stone wine cellar, built in 1835. (It contains a vintage collection of over 16,000 bottles.) At his winery, the prince rejuvenated the millennia-long Georgian winemaking tradition by introducing European technology. Wine is a major symbol of Georgia today. Holding aloft a bowl of wine to offer her guests in hospitality, the towering 65-foot aluminum sculpture of *Kartlis Deda* (Mother of Georgia) dominates the Tbilisi skyline.

⁴ Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov (1795-1829) was a diplomat and writer, who wrote the verse comedy, *Woe from Wit*. He also worked on the romantic drama, *A Georgian Night*, based on Georgian legends. Today, a memorial obelisk stands commemorating the meeting spot, on which is written: 'Here A.S. Pushkin saw the body of A.S. Griboyedov.'

⁵ The Russo-Persian War of 1826-28 was the last major military conflict between Persia and the Russian Empire.

⁶ Nino Chavchavadze was named after St Nino, Georgia's most venerated saint, who introduced Christianity to the region c. 327 CE. The saint's distinctive grapevine cross, with its slightly drooping horizontal arms, is a symbol of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

⁷ Georgian is an ancient language with unknown origins. The modern Georgian alphabet has 33 letters, and its distinctive curlicue script is known as Mkhedruli.

The museum's curator explained that Georgia has been making wine, *ghvino*, for some 8,000 years and continues to process it by the same method: fermenting the liquid for several months along with grape skins and pips in large clay amphorae, known as *qvevri*, buried underground. This skin contact is why traditionally made Georgian whites have a more amber/orange *karvisperi* tint than other white wines. The Georgians so love to drink that they have a designated toastmaster, known as the *tamada* at each *supra* feast, whose job is to keep the toasts and wine flowing. (Georgians only drink beer with their enemies, so they say!) At a wine tasting, with a glass of Tsinandali dry white, blended from Rkatsiteli and Mtsvane grapes (Georgia is home to over 500 grape varieties), I toast⁸ *Sakartvelo*, the native word for Georgia, followed by *Gaumarjos*—Cheers!

Tsinandali was known as the Heart of Poets and Writers, and once served as the cultural and intellectual center of the country. The two-story manor house, a unique blend of Italianate stonework and Ottoman-style wooden porches, often hosted Russian literary guests, including Pushkin and Lermontov. After Pushkin was tragically killed in a duel in 1837, Lermontov composed “Death of the Poet,” in honor of his friend. The text was regarded so seditious—as he blamed inner court circles as “hangmen who kill liberty, genius and glory”—that Nicholas I ordered him banished to a regiment in the Caucasus. In one of his best-loved poems, Lermontov elaborated on his exile:

*Clouds in the heavens, eternally wandering!
Across the blue steppe like a long string of pearls, you go
Quickly, as though you were exiled, as I am now,
From the dear North to the far-distant southern lands.*

In the same year, Nicholas I departed from St Petersburg on a three-month trip through the Caucasus to show Europe and the indigenous populations (comprised of more than 50 ethnic groups) that Russia had no intention of relinquishing its claim on their territories. In addition, the Tsar wanted to cultivate an altruistic image that Russia was needed to civilize the uncultured tribesmen. From the Black Sea, the royal entourage proceeded to western Armenia and continued on to Yerevan, and then north across the Georgian border to Tbilisi, where inhabitants submitted hundreds of petitions against the local Russian administration. Ultimately, the Emperor's presence in the region failed to resolve the tense conditions, and the local populace continued to choose resistance over cooperation.

Thus, it was during this unsettled time that the great figure of Russian Romanticism found himself in the Caucasus. Born in Moscow to an aristocratic family, Lermontov had already visited the land several times as a child. While serving in Georgia, he was attracted to the spectacular scenery, local languages and colorful folkloric tales. At the end of Lermontov St., situated in an historic square in downtown Tbilisi, I found the famous *Tsisperi Sakli* (Blue House) where, in 1838, the young soldier spent several nights in this former Officers' Hotel. During his journey throughout the country, Lermontov painted extensively, and ardently wrote of his experiences. In a letter to a friend, he declared: “The Caucasus for me are sacred...the mountain air acts like a balsam...the heart starts beating, the chest heaves...”

⁸ The Western name ‘Georgia’ derives not from St George (the country's patron saint), but from the Persian word *gurj/gurjan*, which can be traced back to mean “land of the wolves.” In Russia, the country is known as *Gruzia/Грузия*.

To visit the spiritual heart of the country, I traveled a half hour north from Tbilisi to Mtskheta, which long served as the capital of eastern Georgia until King Vakhtang Gorgasali switched his base to Tbilisi in the fifth century. Situated on a hilltop, overlooking the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi Rivers, the highly revered Jvari Church stands where King Mirian is said to have erected a wooden cross after his conversion by St. Nino to Christianity. While visiting this sacred spot, Lermontov started up a conversation with an elderly *Beri*, a Georgian monk, who recounted the tale of his extraordinary life. The writer was so taken by the account that he penned his celebrated poem, *Mtsyri*—The Novice. Its story extols the free and daring spirit of the highlanders, while also praising the supreme beauty of this mystical land.

From Mtskheta, I then headed farther north along the legendary Georgian Military Highway that winds over a hundred miles from Tbilisi through the Greater Caucasus to Russia's current southern border. In 1801, Alexander I ordered the road—a route in use since antiquity—improved to facilitate troop movements and communications. Today, it's considered one of the world's most spectacular and scenic mountain arteries. While Anton Chekhov was vacationing in the area, he exclaimed: "the Georgian Military Highway, it isn't a highway, but poetry...the vistas are maddingly beautiful...every shadow in the mountains, all the delicate shades of sky, offered me a thousand plots." And Lermontov, who also traveled along this Military Road, would have encountered the same soul-stirring scenery.

In 1838, once back in St Petersburg, Lermontov began work on the partly autobiographical *A Hero of Our Time*, considered a pioneering classic of psychological realism. It opens with: "I was traveling along the military road back from Tiflis. All the luggage in my *telezhka* cart consisted of one portmanteau half-filled with my travel notes on Georgia." The novel consists of five closely linked tales unfolding the drama of two conflicting characters who, while serving together as Russian officers, move toward a tragic finale as they also question the morality of Russian imperialism in the Caucasus.

In his own introduction to the story, Lermontov writes: "People have been fed enough sweets and it has ruined their digestion; they need some bitter medicine, some acid truths." Upset with his challenging of Russia's presence in the region, Nicholas I wrote in a letter to his wife: "The author suffers from a most depraved spirit, and his talents are pathetic." And yet the great literary critic, Vissarion Belinsky, went on to praise it as a masterpiece.

After rejoining the army and returning to the Caucasus several years later, Lermontov, as his hero Pushkin, participated in a duel. The dispute took place on July 27, 1841 at the foot of Mt. Mashuk, where the 26-year-old 'Poet of the Caucasus' was tragically shot and killed. A few months before his death, Mikhail Lermontov composed a prophetic poem, *The Dream*: "In that dale lay the corpse of one she knew; / Within his breast a smoking wound showed black, / And blood ran in a stream that colder grew.

Only 150 miles south from where Lermontov was fatally wounded and several miles from the town of Stepantsminda near the Russian border, I began my trek up a mountain pass that led to the iconic 14th-century Gergeti Trinity Church. Here, at an elevation of over 7000 feet, I spent time silently feasting upon the sea of glistening snow-capped mountains

whose summits soared into the misty heavens. A passionate sentiment of the landscape, written by the narrator in *A Hero of Our Time*, echoed my own:

Further in the distance a massive amphitheater of mountains grows ever bluer and mistier...What a delight to live in a place like this! A feeling of elation flows in all my veins. The air is pure and fresh like the kiss of a child, the sun is bright and the sky blue—what more could one desire?

A few days later on an unseasonably warm and bright sunny day back in the capital, I sought out Leo Tolstoy St, which aptly led to the event—Tolstoy Days—to celebrate the 170th anniversary of the famous author’s stay in Tbilisi. In 1851, Lev Nikolayevich joined the army and traveled to the Caucasus with his older brother Nikolai, who was already stationed in the mountains. Here, Tolstoy served for several years, and kept a diary of his first-hand experiences of war. When in Tiflis, the young cadet even visited the *Chreli* bathhouse; and, while lounging in the elegant marble pools, he ‘imagined himself a Pompey or Lucullus,’ eminent Roman generals. He also began work on “The Raid,” a short-story set in the Caucasus, which depicts the ruthless violence often inflicted upon native rebels by the Russian army.

Tolstoy then went on to write his own *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, based on an incident he experienced while serving in the military. He also penned the roughly autobiographical novella, *The Cossacks*, about a nobleman who joins a regiment in the Caucasus to escape the boredom of his daily existence. Here, he takes part in Cossack customs and falls in love with a charming local maiden while coming to terms with his conflicted inner life. Facing the mountains and the “infinite of all that beauty,” the protagonist realizes that life in the Caucasus is better for the body as well as the soul.

The last of the Russo-Turkish wars ended in 1878. By this time, Tolstoy was on the other side of his deep moral crisis, one that had begun in the mountains of the Caucasus and ended in the Crimea on the coast of the Black Sea. He would now advocate a path of non-violence for the rest of his life. Not published until after his death in 1910, *Hadji Murat*, based on a true story, is mainly about the futility of Caucasian resistance against Russia’s military might. Reading a passage from the tale, I was taken by how the views it expresses still ring true today, especially after Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine.

What happened was what always happens when a state possessing great military strength enters into relations with primitive, small peoples living their independent lives. Either on the pretext of self-defense...or of bringing civilization to a wild people...the servants of large military states commit all sorts of villainy against small nations, insisting that it’s impossible to deal with them in any other way.

For over a century, Russia fought to maintain its presence and control in the Caucasus. Then came a tumultuous revolt of its own, and the country reinvented itself as the Soviet Union.

The majesty of the mountains, the romantic temperament of its people were the two factors transforming me from a tramp into a man of letters.

Maxim Gorky (1868-1936)

In 1880, at the age of twelve, Alexei Maximovich Peshkov ran away from home and later went on to travel across the Russian Empire. His menial work included building roads in Georgia and working on the Caucasus Railway. These countless experiences would later influence his proletarian writings in praise of the common laborer. When the Tiflis newspaper *Kavkaz* (The Caucasus) published his first short story, “Makar Chudra,” in 1892, the fledgling writer started using the pseudonym Gorky (горький, meaning “bitter”). Opposing the Tsarist regime, Gorky was determined to speak the bitter truth about life in Russia, and readily participated in dissident politics that led to the 1917 Revolution. He would later be nominated five times for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

In one of the chapters of *Through Russia*, published in 1922, Gorky describes Georgia as sown with “kaleidoscope treasures,” and that the “Caucasus resembles a magnificent cathedral built by great craftsmen...to conceal their past from the prying eyes of conscience.” After the revolution and collapse of the Russian Empire, many nations of Transcaucasia, including Georgia and Armenia, declared their independence. But, freedom lasted less than three years. By 1921, the Red Army had invaded the territories, and the countries would remain part of the Soviet Union until its own downfall in 1991. Thus, for nearly two centuries, the lands of the Caucasus were governed either by Russian or Soviet rule.

In the small town of Gori, located some fifty miles west of Tbilisi, I entered the Stalin Museum, built over the modest two-room hut where he was born in 1878 and christened Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili. In 1912, the communist activist began to use the pseudonym Stalin (from the Russian word *stal*/сталь meaning “steel”) to portray himself as a ‘man of steel’ or perhaps, as many suggest, to distance himself from his Georgian roots. After Lenin’s passing in 1924, Stalin assumed leadership of the Soviet Union until his own death in 1953.

As an irony of fate, the young Joseph received a scholarship to the Tiflis Orthodox Spiritual Seminary, where he trained as a priest and even wrote poetry—*a rosebud has just blossomed, to become entangled with the violet next door...* Following a Georgian proverb, “Don’t expect heaven from a parish priest,” Stalin went on to become an atheist, a Bolshevik radical and to support the Georgian League of the Militant Godless.

As the world’s only cult shrine to Stalin, the massive Doric-columned temple was built to glorify one of the world’s most ruthless men. The red-carpeted stairway led me up to a life-size statue of the totalitarian leader, eerily bathed in blue light that was pouring in through a stained glass window. I found myself alone as I gazed upon exhibits of his childhood, his boyhood spent fomenting revolutionary activities, his adult rise to power... and on to the many other cabinets chocked full of mementos and memorabilia. Even fellow Georgian, Lavrenty Beria, Stalin’s secret police chief, had his own display.

Upon entering one of the final rooms, I stopped dead in my tracks as I beheld a circular-columned and velvet-lined darkened chamber, where Stalin’s bronze death mask was saintly illuminated under a shaft of white light. To add to the surreal experience, the museum’s gift shop sells a wide selection of Stalin-themed tchotchkes—everything from decorative plates, mugs and tote bags to miniature busts, shot glasses and bottles of Stalin vodka.

*We are living, but can't feel the land where we stay,
More than ten steps away you can't hear what we say.
But if people would talk on occasion,
They should mention the Kremlin Caucasian.*

Osip Mandalstam (1891-1938)
Poem, Stalin Epigram

Authorities frequently targeted Osip Mandalstam as his writings didn't often favorably portray Stalin and the new Soviet regime. So, in 1930, Mandalstam and his wife were sent off from their home in Moscow to Armenia on an eight-month sojourn, where he was to report on the triumphs of socialist progress in this backwater republic. The prominent poet, who had long felt 'the quivering of the Caucasus in his breast,' looked forward to leaving the "watermelon emptiness" of Bolshevik Russia and settle into the "Armenian fullness of life...and their splendid intimacy with the world of real things."

After I had settled into my hotel in downtown Yerevan, I set out to locate 92 Spandarian, where the couple had resided during their stay in the capital. This fashionable street, today known as Arami, was once lined with 19th-century Belle Époque mansions. Arriving at the address, I caught a view in the western distance of the resplendent ⁹Mt Ararat, flaming pink in the setting sun. Upon his first glimpse, Mandalstam wrote: "I managed to observe the clouds performing their devotions to Ararat. It was the descending and ascending motion of cream when it's poured into a glass of ruddy tea and roils in all directions."

As the Mandalstams, I then headed forty miles east to Lake Sevan, one of the world's largest freshwater high-altitude lakes. Here I jumped aboard an old rusty fishing boat, where Captain Arshan was keen to take me out for a spin upon the dazzling azure-blue waters. Osip too couldn't hide his delight: "On the island of Sevan, which is conspicuous for...its monastery and architectural monuments that date back to the seventh century...I spent a joyful month enjoying the lake water that stood at an elevation of over six thousand feet above sea level."

Mandalstam also fell in love with the ¹⁰Armenian language, which "cannot be worn out; its boots are stone. And he "felt the joy of pronouncing sounds forbidden to Russian lips." The captivating journey throughout Armenia, along with experiencing its ancient culture, inspired the author to create his own breathtaking meditative prose in a book entitled *Journey to Armenia*; it would be the last work he ever saw published.

For later in 1933 came the secret poem, "Stalin Epigram," with the lines that would exacerbate the dissident's own demise: "With ten fat grubs for fingers.../ and laughing cockroaches on his upper lip.../ He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries." The derisive verse eventually led to his arrest and death in a Siberian transit camp. When asked: "What tense would you choose to live in? I want to live in the imperative of the future passive participle—in the 'what ought to be.'" Today Mandalstam is ranked as one of the great poets of the 20th century.

⁹ Rising to nearly 17,000 feet. Mt Ararat is a dormant, snow-capped volcano, located in eastern Turkey. Since the 11th century, Armenians have identified this biblical mountain as the Ark's final landing place.

¹⁰ Armenian is not closely related to any other language. Its alphabet and own unique script were developed c 405 CE; there are 38 letters—31 consonants and 7 vowels.

Another of the Soviet Union's celebrated writers, Sergei Yesenin, also decided to journey to Georgia for renewed inspiration after the break up of his marriage to American dancer, ¹¹Isadora Duncan. When visiting Griboyedov's grave at Mtatsminda Pantheon, friends took him to a nearby spring to perform a local tradition. He was to pick up a pebble from the water, stick it on the church's entrance door and count until it dropped. The number then foretold how many years one had left to live. After only counting to 'one,' it fell. Yesenin would die a year later in 1925.

While in Tbilisi, he wrote 'In the Caucasus:'

*The Russian bard since ancient times
Has yearned for countries strange and distant,
And most of all Caucasian climes
Have strangely lured with mist insistent.*

*Here Pushkin, flamed with passion, wrote...
And Lermontov, in jolly screed...
And Griboyedov's buried here...
And then there's Mayakovsky...*

As Lermontov had for Pushkin, Vladimir Mayakovsky composed a poem in honor of his friend Yesenin. The future revolutionary poet, actor and artist was born in western Georgia in 1893 of Russian parents, and could trace several generations of his family back to this area. In downtown Kutaisi, as I sat outside on a park bench near his childhood Gymnasium, I tried to imagine the young boy, whose father was a forester, growing up around such pristine beauty; he also spoke fluent Georgian. Even though the family later moved to Moscow, Mayakovsky would always claim Georgia as the inspiration behind his artistic life. He later wrote: "I know, it's nonsense, Eden and Paradise, but...it must have been Georgia, this joyful land, that those had in mind."

While still a teenager, Mayakovsky met revolutionary-minded students and supported the socialists. He went on to attend the Moscow Arts School before joining the Russian avant-garde Futurist Movement of which he became the leading light. And as a Constructionist, he demanded that "art be spread everywhere—the streets, in trams, factories, workshops..." in order to help construct a new society. The artist went on to illustrate over three thousand Constructionist-style posters; and, some speculate that the rich geometric patterns surrounding Georgian saints in church frescoes inspired his abstract designs.

In Tbilisi, I ventured to the northern part of town to the white and pale-pink Neo-classical circus building, established in 1888. It stands near what had been the end of the Georgian Military Road at the entrance to the city in the imperial era. When Mayakovsky later returned to Tbilisi, he penned several poems about his journey, and was inspired to create *Moscow is Burning*, a satirical pantomime for the Moscow State Circus to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the 1905 Revolution. But he would not live to attend its premiere in 1930.

¹¹ In May 1922, 25-year-old Yesenin married Isadora Duncan, a woman 18 years his senior. She knew only a few words of Russian, and he spoke no foreign languages. Yesenin then accompanied Duncan on her tour of the United States. They parted fifteen months later upon their return to Moscow in 1923. Two years later, the popular Lyric poet committed suicide in St Petersburg, reportedly writing a last epitaph in his own blood.

Towards the end of his life, Mayakovsky became bitterly disillusioned with the communist system he had once so wholeheartedly promoted. He also committed suicide—not by hanging as Yesenin, but by playing Russian roulette. In *Tamara and the Demon* (based on Lermontov's short balled, *Demon*, set in the Caucasus), and wrestling with his own personal demons, the downhearted poet foretold his own demise.

*My work here is finished,
It is not my affair.
Let Pasternak write about it,
For all I care....*

In *My Sister—Life*, Boris Pasternak does write about “In Memory of Demon” and dedicates this book of verse to Lermontov. (Pasternak, born in 1890, grew up reading Lermontov as his father had illustrated a popular version of Mtsyri—The Novice.) When the respected author later visited Mtskheta after the Revolution, he mercilessly describes “the mist-enshrouded Mtkvari River...where, far above, the silhouettes of executed castles heave up their Adams’ apples like the throats of men decapitated.”

While traveling in the Caucasus, Pasternak was greatly attracted to Georgian culture, with its ample flow of wine and warm hospitality. In one letter to his father, he noted that with a large group of friends—in the course of twelve hours—they drank some 100 liters of red wine. “It’s excellent, it can make you unconscious, but never hung over.” Pasternak’s correspondences with cherished friends in the country over a thirty-year period were later published as *Letters to Georgian Friends*. And he would go on to praise Georgia as ‘his second homeland.’

In the summer of 1931, Pasternak stayed for several months in Tiflis at the home of Paolo Iashvili, a leading force of the Georgian symbolist movement. Here, Boris Leonidovich also met Titsian Tabidze, whose stunning lyric poetry he would later translate into Russian. While in Tbilisi, I searched out Tabidze’s former apartment on Griboyedov St., where he lived from 1921 to 1937. After entering the rickety front door of the now dilapidated building, I walked up several flights of stairs to find the abandoned flat. Not a trace was left of the dining-room table where Tabidze and his family would gather with other Russian friends, such as Mandalstam, Yesenin and Mayakovsky.

But the joy of friendship was sadly short lived. During Stalin’s great purges of the 1930’s, one quarter of Georgia’s artists were either exiled or liquidated. To investigate a few of these tragic events, I stopped by the historic Art Nouveau mansion on Machabeli St. that once housed the Writers’ Union. (The site was ironically hosting an exhibit to mark the centenary of Soviet occupation.) In 1937, after being pressured to denounce fellow writers, Paolo Iashvili committed suicide here on the second floor. That same year, Tabidze was also arrested and then secretly executed several months later. It’s said that Tabidze’s distinguished poetic life and later unjust execution profoundly influenced Pasternak’s *Dr Zhivago* for which he received the Nobel Prize in 1958.

Right before his death in 1960, Pasternak summarized: “My life will end soon; so what was the most important thing that happened? The examples I had of my father’s outstanding work, one or two new chords in my creation, Russian nights in the village...and Georgia.”

A century before Pasternak's birth, the composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky had already proclaimed Georgia his 'sweet dream.' From 1886 to 1890 Tchaikovsky visited the country five times, and often stayed with his brother who worked as a lawyer in Tbilisi. (I was delighted to find the house still standing at 16 Tchaikovsky St.) The composer expressed that "Tbilisi is clearly a European city...with unusual climate, luxurious shops and a magnificent opera."

Today one cannot miss the striking neo-Moorish style building on Rustaveli Avenue, which houses the National Opera and Ballet Theater, established in 1851. While staying in Tbilisi, Tchaikovsky worked on his famous *Sleeping Beauty* and enjoyed listening to Georgian folk songs, including the well-known lullaby, "Megruli Nana," which he incorporated into the music for *The Nutcracker*. In a magical moment of serendipity, the theater was staging a performance of this beloved two-act ballet; so I immediately bought a ticket for the evening. Afterwards, I did a petit jeté into the starry night with a melody of Georgian lullabies dancing in my head...

On my final day, I gazed out upon the majestic Caucasus one last time. I now certainly understood why the region had become the muse for so many memorable poets and writers. And, as Lermontov, "I doubt if I shall ever see such a panorama anywhere again...the crests of mountains each higher than the next, covered with snow...and all these snows burning with such a ruddy glow, so merrily, so brightly, that it made one wonder why not stay forever."

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