Uncertain divides: religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands

Pelkmans, M.

Citation for published version (APA):
CHAPTER FIVE

Caught between States

Whenever the weather conditions allowed it, elderly male inhabitants of Sarpi would gather in what was called the ‘old men house’ at the entrance of the village. During my stay I often sat down with them to ask questions, or conversely, was asked questions about my home country. On several occasions I noticed a peculiar behavior. When talking about Europe some of these men would point not to the West but to the East, that is, away from the border. There was some logic in this, as I discovered later during an interview. The man in question had just started to talk about his visit to relatives in Turkey in the early 1980s and he illustrated his journey by moving his arm east and then southwards. Basically this mirrored the route that he had followed at the time. First, he had traveled eastwards to Tbilisi, then southwards to Yerevan in Armenia, then westwards crossing the Soviet-Turkish border-gate in Leninakan, and finally northwards by bus to Hopa at the Black Sea coast – a town some twenty kilometers from Sarpi. Indeed, it was only logical that ‘at the end of the world’ people would point to the East, in the direction to which even travels to the West necessarily started.

The relevance of ‘East-West’ geography was more dramatically displayed in another case. The house of Nazmi Koridze, a man now in his seventies, was located on the hill-slope next to the village road that connects the upper part of the village to the coast. At the back of his house, on the eastside, started citrus-tree plantations which were traversed by narrow paths that ran to the houses of several of his relatives. On the other side of his house, across the road to the West, there was a splendid view over the Turkish part of Sarpi and the hills behind it. Nazmi’s house was built in the 1960s, with windows facing all directions. But in 1987, one year before the border-gate at Sarpi would be re-opened, Nazmi sealed off the two window gates that looked to the West, that is, in the direction of Turkey. According to his daughter-in-law, the reason for this action was that whenever people would pass the house, her father-in-law would freeze, terrified that they would come and arrest him.

These anecdotes point out two features of the border that will be further explored in this chapter. First, in Sarpi the international border was, and for some still is, associated with fear. Numerous stories were told about the dangers of showing interest in the border, about sanctions for antennas turned westward and of the risk being caught pointing or looking across the ‘Iron Curtain.’ Second, the anecdotal remarks suggested that the international border represented, in a very real sense, ‘the end of the world.’ Like the body gestures discussed above, oral statements indicated that for the people living in Sarpi, the international border was a fixed and unquestioned certainty. Villagers would say that for fifty years, between 1937 and 1988, the
border running through their village was completely closed. They stressed that except for the few who went through lengthy and risky procedures and were lucky enough to obtain official travel visas for Turkey, no one ever went to the other side. Another indication of the unquestioned rigidity were the stories told by middle-aged villagers about their experiences of living along the Iron Curtain. They usually did not talk about the international border but rather about the internal ones, about the fences and checkpoints between the ‘border-zone’ and Batumi. These internal borders had been an everyday nuisance, and had limited villagers’ contacts with colleagues and relatives living outside the village. Those fences had been far more troublesome than the ‘Iron Curtain’ which was simply there. In short, these middle-aged men had fully accommodated to the reality of the impermeability of the international border.

According to available literature such waterproof borders are impossible. Herzfeld for example writes about “the ease with which even – or especially – the most fiercely guarded borders can be penetrated” (Herzfeld 2001: 138) and Henk Driessen states that “no matter how clearly borders are marked on maps, how many border guards are appointed, how many fences are built, people will ignore borders whenever it suits them” (1996: 289).1 Evidence from the Mexican-American border, the borders of the European Union, or the border between Israel and Palestine, all heavily guarded and patrolled borders, shows how easily the protection measures of states can be defeated. Yet the border running through Sarpi was an exceptional border. It was a “border of fear and control,” to use Donnan and Haller’s phrase (2000: 12), and almost completely impermeable.

However, its rigidity did not appear overnight and like most international borders, this one was initially a border that divided and connected, a border representing danger as well as opportunities. But eventually this two-sided nature was lost and the border came just to divide. This was achieved not simply because of restricting measures imposed from above (including acoustic alarm systems, high-voltage fences, watchtowers, roles of barbed wire, and patrolling guards), but because of a culture of secrecy that forced villagers to test the limits of the possible and thereby aid in setting them. To understand the rigid qualities of this border then, we need to investigate the particular relationship between state and local life that evolved after the establishment of Soviet power. Paradoxically, the fact that in Sarpi the border was (sometimes literally) located in people’s backyard contributed to configurations that reinforced the border regime.

An exploration that looks at the dynamics of the relations between state and villagers along the border also involves a critique of studies that have described the Soviet state or the Stalin era as ‘totalitarian,’ as an omnipotent force implanted from above. Instead, following Stephen Kotkin (1995), we need to understand ‘totalitarianism’ – if we wish to stick to the term – not as an implant from above but as a dialecti-

1 See also Baud and Van Schendel, who write about the gap between official rhetoric concerning the rigidity of borders and the daily life in borderlands: “In the vast majority of cases it was possible for borderland people to cross the border, legally or illegally” (1997: 220, also page 211).
cal process that developed and reinforced itself through the interaction of citizens and state structures. Even on the highly politicized and fiercely guarded border in Sarpi, border-dwellers were not passive victims. Instead, their actions were often subversive. But by challenging the forms of control, the villagers simultaneously defined the limits of power (cf. Berdahl 1999).

Moreover, a one-sided focus on the repressive measures of the state would fail to capture the ‘real’ tragedy of life along the Cold War border. Because villagers acted in ways that resulted in deeper entrenchment in the power-webs spun by the state, stories about living in the border region often reveal a two-fold ambiguity. On one level, this ambiguity refers to the mixture of positive memories about the ‘securities’ that socialism provided and the deeply negative experiences with the rigidities of the border regime. Perhaps even more importantly, this ambiguity stems from the unexpressed awareness of villagers that they were not only ‘victims,’ but also ‘collaborators’ of this border regime. The combination of victimhood and complicity, of being subjected to powers larger than oneself but not outside these powers, partly reveals the ‘real’ tragedy of the border. The stories exemplify that people are still coping with a past that simultaneously must be forgotten and remembered. Moreover, the convergence of victimhood and complicity also provides clues to answer the question of how, despite the hardships of deportation and the loss of close relatives, villagers continue to express nostalgic feelings for the Soviet era.

**Border regime**

In this section I will provide a basic overview of the efforts of the state to demarcate its territory and to inhibit cross-border movement. I thus explore the development of the border during the Soviet period, noting how it came to be remembered and imbued with meaning. The presented information is based on interviews with elderly villagers and, to a small extent, on archival material collected in Batumi.

**Open Border: 1921-1937**

After the border was delineated in 1921 the village Sarpi officially consisted of two parts, Turkish Sarpi and Soviet Sarpi. Although during the first years customhouses were established and a fence was erected to mark and defend the state-boundary, it was still relatively easy to cross the border. Many families still owned property on a narrow alluvial strip of land near Makriali (present-day Kemalpasha) on Turkish territory, where it was possible to cultivate rice. This land was either purchased by ancestors or obtained through marriage arrangements. Villagers received permits to travel fifteen kilometers into the bordering state, allowing them to cultivate their land. Aman Abuladze still remembered that he and his mother went down to the customhouses when they wanted to visit relatives: “We had a document like a
passport in which the soldiers wrote for example ‘is allowed to visit brother for two days.’ Then we had to go through a small house where they would search us, men and women separate.” Besides administrative hazards such as these, villagers had no real difficulties in crossing the border. In fact, it may be argued that the implementation of the border and the resulting economic differences created the reasons to cross the border.

In 1921 the Soviet leadership had already started its attempts to establish a centralized distribution system including fixed price-settings for most goods. These policies meant that on the Soviet side many goods became scarce, while price differences between Turkey and the Soviet Union rose steeply. Smuggling was widespread and the markets in towns near the border were especially well stocked with contraband. The existence of the border enabled villagers to earn additional income by trading in silk and woolen cloth, shoes, coats, soap and other goods. On the Turkish side, villagers erected stalls where they sold consumption goods. The smuggling remained small-scale – involving mostly European goods that could be bought in the Turkish border-town Hopa and resold in the Soviet Union at much higher prices. A report of the custom-officers in 1926 states: “smuggling is mostly unorganized, involving people without land or permanent job. The smugglers mostly carry the goods on their shoulders across the mountains south of Sarpi, an area which is almost impossible to control due to its abundant and impenetrable vegetation.” In those years several hundreds of people were caught smuggling, though only a few were from Sarpi. However, this should not lead one to conclude that the villagers’ involvement was insignificant. It is more likely that their knowledge of the local geography and their extensive family-networks across the border made them almost impossible to catch. As one old man told me, they had to be careful not to attract attention from the custom-officers or soldiers, but he and his brother always managed to bring certain goods back to Sarpi without ever being caught.

Despite the existence of the border and the presence of soldiers, during the 1920s and early 1930s the two Sarpis were in several respects still an undivided village, only partially affected by the respective states. Neither the Soviet Union nor Kemalist Turkey had fully developed their state structures. The respective governments were more concerned with improving their power basis than with rural life in the peripheries. Until 1924, when a new school was established, education for children in the village was provided in the medrese on the Turkish side. The deceased were still buried in the common graveyard (now located on Turkish soil), and several men continued to attend the Friday-prayers in the mosque which was also on the

---

2 Between 1921 and 1929 the policies which regulated trade were often contradictory. At times private trade was allowed or even encouraged, while at other times the private undertakers were prosecuted. Private trade became more and more restricted at the end of the 1920s.

3 See Ball (1987:123) for an overview of economic policy in the early days of the Soviet Union.

4 Central State Archive of the Ajarian ASSR, Fond 44, file 1 (03/1923 – 09/1925; file 2 (10/1925 – 02/1928). See also Paustovsky’s account of the numerous luxuries that were available on the Batumi markets (1969: 136).

Turkish side. This situation however did not continue for long. While the mosque was located on Turkish soil, the *hodja* lived in Soviet Sarpi. In the late 1920s when the Soviet ban on religion was first enforced, the *hodja* had to turn in his passport and was forbidden to speak in public and in effect could no longer perform his duties. These and other measures soon meant that only a few older men from Soviet Sarpi continued to attend the Friday prayers in the local mosque. The increasing restrictions of the early 1930s forecasted to some extent what was to come. As Aman put it: "When Kemal Pasha died and the authorities over here started their search for Trotzkiyists these [trips to the other side] were over once and for all."

**FORTIFICATIONS 1937 - 1956**

In 1937 this period of relative freedom of movement abruptly ended. Aise Tandilava, an elderly lady who was born in Turkey but married a young man from the Georgian side recalled: "My husband and I were harvesting our plot in Turkish Sarpi. We had almost finished and planned to go back the next morning to collect the crop. But when we arrived at the gate the soldiers started laughing: ‘You are not allowed to go any more,’ they said, ‘we just closed the border.’"

Although 1937 is usually mentioned as the year in which the border became impermeable, more detailed conversation revealed that this was not completely the case. Several informants still remembered that initially there had been limited communication between the two sides of the village. One informant sang to me the same song his relatives had sung across the border when his sister had her first child:

Listen to the happiness that has overcome us
Our Feride she is fine and doing well
It is a boy who has been born to her
And Omar is his name

These lines were sung while working on the land and thus appeared to be nothing more than an innocent folk-song. Since the border-guards did not know Lazuri they did not understand what was being communicated. But the same people who told me about these early forms of communication also explained that singing was only possible during the first years after the closing of the border. As Aman remembered it: "If someone had died we would cry and then they cried from the other side. That way people knew in which house there was a funeral. But afterwards they even forbade that. They said, ‘if you want to cry, go home and cry there.’ It was a very severe regime."

With the growing threat of a possible war between the Soviet Union and Turkey, special repressive measures were introduced to halt cross-border communication. It was forbidden to leave the house after sunset and windows had to be covered with black cloth. Everyone vividly remembers these restrictions and many recalled how they were sitting in the dark at home, fearing that the soldiers’ footsteps would halt in front of their house. Even the smallest irregularities could be interpreted

---

6 With reference to Sarpi, so-called border singing has sometimes been mentioned as a tacit and illegal means of maintaining contact (Hann and Beller-Hann 1998: 245; Pereira 1971).
as sending messages to the enemy. Villagers told me that during those years, and long after, no one even dared to look in the direction of Turkey. When I pushed an informant to find out whether there were perhaps other ways of communication, he replied: “No, no, those things didn’t exist, who would ever try it? The people were simply afraid; they didn’t even try to look to that side.”

During the 1940s and 1950s Soviet Sarpi was sub-divided into several sections. A zone of restricted movement was announced, including part of the village and a 500-meter wide stretch of land along the border. On the Georgian side, this was the area where many villagers had their own private plot for cultivating vegetables and fruits. In order to work their lands villagers had to descend first to the seashore where they would receive written permission to work during precisely fixed hours. Further restrictions on movement were made in the 1950s when a fence was placed along the seashore. Whenever villagers needed to enter the beach, they first had to go to the military camp to fetch a soldier who would open a gate. A subsequent commander decided that the existence of such a fence was wholly unnecessary and actually bad propaganda, for what would people on the Turkish side think of ‘the good life in the Soviet Union’ if the whole village was fenced off? The fact that these measures were initiated by the military commanders assigned to Sarpi was typical of the border regime, in which state representatives on each level were anxious to prove that they had complete control over the border.

SEALED BORDER 1956-1988

Commenting on the border-situation in the 1960s and the time thereafter Niaz Kakabadze explained: “If you would have tried... Well, there were eight meters until the fences where the ground was cleared. Behind it there was a fence with an alarm system and then there was a second fence. Soldiers with dogs patrolled [the area] between those two fences, they would shoot or catch you even before reaching the fence. But no one [from Sarpi] ever even tried.” The impermeable nature of the border was even remembered as a positive development for the village. Aman, whose house was near the border, told me the following, “After 1956 we didn’t need permission anymore to work [on our plots] near the border. Simply because they had fortified the border – fences, alarm systems and so on – so that we were free in our village again.”

The situation along the international border became normalized. Village life continued in a territorially constrained environment. The strictly regulated and highly limited communication that was allowed following the late 1960s fits within this ‘normalized’ border condition. New regulations of 1965 made it possible to send letters to relatives across the border. The letters usually took between three and six months to arrive on the other side of the village; they were censored and contained only limited information about familial affairs. After 1970 it became possible to apply for family-visit visas. The application procedures required at least five and up to ten years to be approved and involved the risk of losing one’s job or ruining one’s
children’s career opportunities. If a visa was finally provided one could go to Turkish Sarpi by traveling via Tbilisi, Yerevan and Kars, a trip of roughly 1,400 kilometers. The adjustments to these forms of communication, important though they were for Sarpians as I will discuss in later chapters, also suggests that villagers by and large had accommodated to the restrictions and the limitations imposed by the state.

As an illustration, it is interesting to discuss a novel written about Soviet Sarpi in the 1960s. Don’t be afraid mother!, was written by the popular GeorgIan writer Nodari Dumbadze, who had been officially assigned to write a book about the life of border-guards. For this purpose Dumbadze lived in Sarpi for some time, or rather, in the military compound located at the coast. Throughout his novel, it seems that the author is struggling to fill the pages, not knowing what can be said about a village where nothing ever happens. The main character, soldier Jakeli, repeatedly complains that life at the border is eventless and boring (1986: 455, 542, 544, 616) and that during his two-year service in Sarpi not a single person even attempted to cross the border (this changes at the end of the novel when the soldiers arrest a Russian youth who tried to escape to Turkey). In the novel, life in Sarpi is very peaceful and harmonious. The villagers assist the soldiers by forecasting the weather and supply food and drinks to them (ibid. 534-5), and friendships are established between the soldiers and villagers. The rosy descriptions converge in the main message of the novel, which is to present the border as a regretful though necessary defense, as an accepted part of everyday life. Many villagers had read Dumbadze’s novel and insisted that the descriptions were not very different from reality. But the timing of this novel needs to be taken into consideration. It was written thirty years after the initial closure of the border. During those thirty years many things transpired in order to make the border as impervious and uncontested as it was. Dumbadze was clearly not allowed to write about the events – deportations, executions, and the loss of relatives across the border – which made the ‘peaceful’ life of the 1960s possible. To these tragedies, I will turn now.

Espionage, executions and deportations

The Lazi of Sarpi, like all Soviet citizens, were subjected to a series of harsh and often erratic policies and regulations that were justified as a part of ‘the building of socialism’ and ‘protecting Soviet society from class enemies.’ During the first decades of the Soviet Union’s existence, a largely backward society heavily dependent on agriculture with a mainly uneducated population was transformed into an industrial empire. Stalinist modernization was not simply ‘development,’ but class war fought against ever reappearing ‘enemies’ of the Soviet State. This war resulted in the elimination of private traders, the deportation of kulaks or peasant ‘bourgeoisie,’ prosecution of Trotskyists and other internal enemies of the Communist Party and
finally the deportation of ‘unreliable’ ethnic groups.\(^7\) State terror obtained specific characteristics in Sarpi because the border-dwellers were both instrumental to the Soviet state, but also suspected because of their possible loyal feelings regarding their relatives in Turkey. This was especially true between the 1930s and 1950s when the region was still contested area - the Soviet Union made claims on a large area in Turkey, while Turkey, although comparatively much weaker, still had pretensions to include Ajaria in its territory. Intelligence services of both countries were active across the border and the villagers living on the border were caught between both powers.

In the early 1930s, an aged villager named Omer was arrested and imprisoned in Tbilisi. The man was known in the village as a hard and honest worker. He was not exceptionally rich nor was there anything extraordinary about his background. The authorities did not provide the reasons for his imprisonment and the man never stood trial. But several months later Omer sent a letter home in which he ordered his son to sell the gold that they had buried under the house. Soon thereafter Omer was released and returned home. He refused to give much clarification on what had taken place in prison. He spent the rest of his days gardening his small plot. Never again did he go to the gathering place of the old men, preferring to stay in the safe environment of his house and associating only with his closest relatives.

This episode, as little information as it contains, marks the beginning of repression in Sarpi. The case of Omer was not exceptional. Around that time, the first disastrous effects of forced collectivization in the Ukraine and parts of Russia became apparent and the authorities took desperate measures to resolve the economic crisis. Villagers and town-dwellers alike were confronted with a government decree to sell all their jewelry and gold to the state. During the preceding decades most families in Sarpi had earned quite good money through their cross-border trading activities. Of course, most villagers preferred to hide their gold rather than exchange it for what they still considered worthless Soviet paper money.\(^8\) Even when it became possible to exchange the gold for rare consumer goods, only a few families decided to sell.\(^9\) Trust in the new Soviet State was still low and many villagers reckoned that sooner or later they might have to leave their village, in which case they would be in need of their savings.\(^10\) Unfortunately, it turned out that KGB-agents had quite precise knowledge about the amounts of gold owned by each family; they prepared actions to requisit these hidden valuables.\(^11\) One day, agents entered the villagers’ houses and gave them

---

\(^7\) An early overview of the Soviet deportations of nationalities is Conquest (1995), but see also Nekrich (1978), Bugai and Gonov (1998), and Pohl (1999).

\(^8\) Paustovsky (1969: 86) observed during his stay in Batumi in the early 1920s that most transactions were in Turkish lira because Soviet money was still scarce.

\(^9\) Between 1930 and 1936 so-called Torgsin stores sold luxury goods in exchange for gold and silver, in order to increase Soviet hard currency reserves for its industrial drive ( Fitzpatrick 1999: 56).

\(^10\) Many older villagers had fled the village already twice – during the Russian-Turkish war in the 1870s and with the outbreak of WW I in 1914 – and anticipated a possible new migration.

\(^11\) Although the state security apparatus of the Soviet Union had different names during various periods (Cheka, OGPU, NKVD, KGB) I will only use the more familiar term ‘KGB’ to prevent
the choice to either show the hiding-places or be arrested. The fact that they knew exactly what could be found implies that several people within the village worked as informants for the KGB. Sarpi was certainly not exceptional in this; the reliance on networks of informants on each level of society formed a main characteristic of the repressive system of those days.

By the mid 1930s, relations between Turkey and the Soviet Union — which had been relatively friendly during the 1920s and early 1930s — started to deteriorate. The position of Sarpi within the Soviet Union was distinctly affected by these changing international relations and the Lazi of Sarpi got caught up in between. Sarpi was virtually the only Laz-village within the boundaries of the Soviet Union; the majority of their ethnic affiliates lived in Turkey. Most inhabitants of Sarpi had large family-networks across the border and they maintained intensive contacts with their kin when cross-border movements were still possible. For the Soviet authorities these relationships and the fact that the villagers were Muslims, made it very likely that the real loyalties of villagers were with Turkey instead of the USSR.

The status of border-village made the situation even more complicated. Since most Lazi were living in Turkey, the Soviet authorities came to see Sarpi as a bridgehead for their international aspirations. The Soviet Union still had ambitions to incorporate the provinces of Kars and Ardahan, which had been part of the Czarist Empire between 1878 and the 1910s. As preparation for this ultimate goal, propaganda campaigns were developed which included the introduction of a Lazuri alphabet and the publication of several booklets in Lazuri. Secret agents and carriers were ordered to distribute propaganda material in Turkish Lazistan. For example, young men from Soviet Sarpi were approached by KGB agents and requested to deliver packages or collect information from contacts across the border.

Especially in the late 1930s and during World War II, when food was scarce, the rewards for performing these tasks were tempting for many villagers. Regarding these temptations one villager said, “I remember that my mother repeatedly asked my father why he could not go to the other side [as other men did], so that we would also have white bread on the table. But father always replied with the same words: ‘wife, you better eat black bread and sleep calmly in your bed, instead of eating theirs and regretting it later on.’” People were certainly aware of the dangers involved in performing these tasks. As an informant told me: “There is such a rule, that if they send a spy, they will send a second one to check what the former is doing.” But refusing was not all that simple, as the following story illustrates:

confusion.

12 The strained relation was initially a result of Turkey’s improved relations with Western Europe and became even more severe when Turkey signed a Non Aggression Pact with Germany in 1941.

13 See Feurstein (1992) for an overview of official representations of Laz and Mingrelian culture during this period.

14 Soviet propaganda addressed at Turkish Lazi was not confined to this period. Even in the 1970s, a weekly radio broadcast was transmitted in Lazuri. A former radio-employee told me that they never received a response from abroad and consequently the broadcast was taken off the air after a few years.

136
At the time my father was still single. One day he was approached by two of these chekisty (agents). They asked him to cross the border, but he refused firmly stressing that he wasn’t a spy and would never be one. Thereupon they put a gun to his head and repeated the demand. Father replied: ‘I don’t have a wife or children, so shoot me if you want. You can force me to go, but remember that I will only go once and never return.’ Then the agents gave him a pat on the back; told him he was a good man and let him go.

This example – whether or not it happened exactly as it was told – displays the pressure which was put on people, and shows the attitude toward those who actually went. People involved in these covert activities were often suspected of working simultaneously for the Turks. One tragic case vividly illustrates the dangers involved and the atmosphere along the border in those days. Five young men were sent to Turkey. They crossed the border by boat on a dark night and awaited a signal from the coast. When they finally saw the signal and answered by flashing back, Turkish soldiers opened fire on them. Four of the men died and were anonymously buried on Turkish soil. Although villagers on the Turkish side must have recognized these men, they probably denied knowing them fearing negative repercussions as a result of their familial connection to these ‘spies.’ Only one of the men survived the attack and with the assistance of relatives he made it back to Soviet Sarpi. The next day he was taken away by KGB-agents and was never heard of again.

In the 1930s and 1940s the Laz community of Sarpi was living on a highly contested border, caught between the two states in multiple ways. The origin of the deportations of families from Sarpi should be understood within this context. In the aftermath of World War II, the party leadership designed a strategy to both punish those who supposedly collaborated with the Germans and to clean the border region of the Soviet Union of so-called unreliable elements. The difference between these repressions and those of earlier periods was that these measures were not directed against individuals but against whole groups. But whereas many of these groups were completely deported, only part of the Laz population was sent to exile in Siberia and Central Asia. The two-sided nature of borders again helps to understand this situation. On the one hand, the villagers were distrusted because of the fact that they lived right on the border. On the other hand, sending all of them away was undesirable, because this would give a negative impression to the Turkish part of Lazistan.

The first deportation that struck the village took place during World War II. The measures were then directed against the Kurds and Hemshins. Approximately eight Kurdish and Hemshin families resided in Sarpi and the neighboring village Qvariati. They did not live in the village proper. During the winter they kept their sheep and cows in a compound a few kilometers up in the hills and during the summer they traveled to grazing areas in the mountains. Their semi-nomadic way of

---

15 In 1944 and 1945 many groups were deported from the North Caucasus (Ingush, Balkars, Karachai), as well as Kalmyks, Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars, ostensibly for collaboration with the enemy. From the border-region of Soviet Georgia the Pontian Greeks and some 80,000 Muslim Georgians were deported, along with Turks and the mentioned Kurds, Hemshins and Lazi (Suny 1994:289).
life might not have been acceptable for the communist leadership – especially in the
border regions -- since their movements and activities were difficult to control. The
Kurds and Hemshins were accused of performing spying activities for the Turkish
army. Besides this, it is likely that their refusal to enter the collective (since they were
unwilling to give away their cattle) also played a role in the decision of the Soviet
leadership. The families were sent to eastern Kazakhstan. While the victims of later
deportations were allowed to return to the village, the Kurds and Hemshins were
never given the opportunity to return to their place of origin. After the opening of the
border and the relaxation of Soviet politics in the late 1980s, several Hemshins visited
Sarpı while on their way to Turkey. They told the villagers that too much time had
passed to consider returning and that they had built up new lives in Kazakhstan.

In 1949, the next uprooting took place. This time three Laz families were
departed. In all three cases the deportation involved women who had kept their
Turkish passports. They were born in Turkey but had married in Georgian Sarpı in
the 1920s and 1930s when it was still possible to cross the border. Although they had
moved to the Soviet Union and had married Soviet citizens, they officially remained
citizens of Turkey. Several villagers mentioned that these women never changed their
passports because they wished to retain the possibility of easily crossing the border
should the border situation improve. Others maintained however that it was not
possible for these women to change their passports into Soviet ones. Whatever the
case, the result was that in 1949 these women still carried Turkish passports. Two
families were deported as a whole, while in one instance the family was divided. The
little children were sent with their mother to the Tomsk district in Siberia, while their
father stayed behind in Sarpı. Living circumstances in Tomsk were especially harsh,
as a villager remarked about the deportation of his aunt: “there was nothing over
there, just forest and forest. They did not even have potatoes. We had to send all the
foodstuffs from here just to help them survive.” The unbearable circumstances are
reflected by the fact that out of the fifteen people who were deported to Tomsk, six
died. After having stayed for seven years in Siberia, those who survived were finally
allowed to return to Sarpı.

Given the previous experiences, the largest deportations, those of 1951, did
not come as a complete surprise. Villagers had been living in fear for more than a
decade and several had prepared for the worst. During the weeks prior to the depar-
tations, the KGB had been active in the village administration building, checking the
files and documents of the collective farm and of individual villagers. One villager
told me that his father had prepared a box with essentials in case they were sent away.
A former deportee told me that his mother had hidden gold coins in her underwear,
which later helped them to survive. Nevertheless, few families had really expected
what was going to happen. Although the experiences for all the involved were
traumatic, the living conditions in Central Asia varied. For example Necat, who
ended up in a collective farm with three other Laz families from Sarpı mentioned that
they started selling home-made wine to other deportees and in this way managed to
provide for their basic means of living. Most deportees were less lucky or successful and suffered great impoverishment, exhaustion and even starvation. A story told by Niaz Kakabadze, provides a good description of his years in exile.

The soldiers came to our house and told us that we had to go with them. We were only given half an hour to pack our belongings. A truck was waiting in the village center to transport us straight to Batumi-station. I remember that the train we boarded had large banners saying 'Volunteers', implying that we had volunteered to cultivate the steppes of Central Asia. They put us in a wagon which was usually used for cattle - 28 people were packed in together. On New Years day we passed the Ural Mountains. It was freezing cold. They only opened the door once a day so that you could go to the toilet. I didn’t see it myself, but they told me that there was even a woman who gave birth... Two weeks later we arrived in Kazakhstan. We stayed in a collective farm in the Aral district, approximately 90 kilometers north of Tashkent. We were given one very small empty room where the four of us had to do everything: washing, cooking and eating. We slept on some blankets on the floor. We didn’t receive any help at all. There was nothing; not even a shop to buy sugar or bread, there was only one place where we could get water. The land was empty - steppe and mountains - many people died on the dry steppe. Our only luck was that at the time of deportation we had stored several sacks of grain at home [which they brought along] and that our neighbors gave what they had. It is only because of this that we managed to survive.

My sister and I had to start working right away. I was only thirteen years old at the time, but there was no other choice since my father was disabled. The collective farm specialized in cotton production. The laborers had to carry bags that weighed more than 50 kilograms. I helped them but the pay was so low and irregular that we hardly had anything to eat. My sister collected cotton. She had experience working in the tea-plantations so she knew how to do it. Soon thereafter I got a new job. They were looking for volunteers who would help the tractors. Although the work was very heavy, I told them that I would take the job and would work night and day. At least they paid in grain and cotton oil which we could sell or trade. The collective farm consisted of huge stretches of land, which were more than a kilometer in length. When the fields were plowed I would walk behind the machine and lift up the plow at the end of the field. The tractor would turn and then it could be set down again. In one year I earned 515 working days. I was such a small boy but I worked two shifts a day - two times the official norm. Of course by the end I was little more than skin and bones.

At the moment of our deportation my oldest sister was already married and lived in Gonio [which is located five kilometers east of Sarpi]. She was allowed to stay with her husband, while my other sister, who was married in Sarpi, was deported. She ended up in a different collective farm in Kazakhstan. At first we didn’t know anything of her whereabouts. We sent letters to Sarpi asking about her and we finally found out that she was living only 20

---

16 The term ‘working-day’ applies to a centrally stipulated amount of work. Workers could try to surpass this norm and in this way, earn more money or goods.
kilometers away from us. Father went to visit her but even for this he first needed permission. The leadership had lists with our names and the places where we stayed. We couldn't just leave the collective farm. The nearest town was eight kilometers away. In order to go there you first had to see the commander in charge and receive written permission to leave the farm. The papers mentioned exactly when you had to be back...

We lived this way for almost two years. During that period we heard rumors that Stalin had died. Finally, in November, we were summoned to go to Tashkent. The government acknowledged that our deportation had been a mistake and we were officially repatriated. Once again we were put in wagons. It took fifteen days by train. We returned to Sarpi just before winter began.

Between 1953 and 1957 all Lazi who had been deported returned to the village. The political climate had changed after the death of Stalin in 1953 and the rise of the new leader Krushchev. For once the border had a positive influence. Because Sarpi was located in the restricted border zone, the authorities did not resettle other families in Sarpi. It therefore remained the compact community it had been before the deportations. The houses left behind by the deportees were in most cases taken care of by relatives and could be reoccupied upon return. This however does not mean that the return of the deportees was not accompanied by tensions. Emine, who at the age of thirty was deported with her only daughter to Siberia, recalls: “When we left, we had a large house near the border, but my relatives decided to tear it down. They sold the parts in order to buy goods to send to Siberia. So when we came back, we had nothing left. My son-in-law built a small house, actually more a stable, in which we lived during the next 30 years.” Nugzar, who returned as a child from exile, told me that he often felt that he was looked upon differently. The other children would make jokes about these ‘enemies of the state.’ Necat Dolidze remembered: “They didn’t tell us anything – why we were sent away, what we had done wrong – nothing. Everyone thought that we were kontrabandisty (smugglers).” And with a laugh he added, “then we didn’t smuggle, but now we do.” In this small-scale community however, most people were relatives, which prevented people from being excluded from social life as is reported from other cases.

The evidence that has been presented so far indicates that the border zone, in which Sarpi was located, formed the unfortunate site where a system of state repression intermeshed with the effects of changing international relations. In hindsight, it is possible to reconstruct the reasons that lead to the deportations. The historian Nekrich wrote that the resettlements often were attempts to colonize the border regions with ‘reliable’ Russian population (Nekrich, 1978: 103). In the case of Sarpi, it is obvious that the underlying reason was to remove ‘unreliable elements’ from the border zone. This ‘cleansing’ of the border took place within a context in which information was highly constrained and where lifestyles that could not be fully controlled were seen as a threat to the state. The authorities on each administrative level

17 Nanci Adler (1999:10-16) describes the numerous problems of returnees. They often experienced great difficulties in finding jobs and housing and for a long time were the outcasts of Soviet society.
attempted to protect themselves from accusations by pretending to have full control over the situation. These characteristics of the Soviet system had often bizarre and unpredictable effects, especially along the contested border of the USSR and Turkey. The two-sided nature of the border – representing both potential for expansion and embodying the fear of foreign infiltration – made the outcome complicated and erratic.

**Remembering and forgetting**

The Lazi are hardly mentioned in the literature on the Soviet deportations. The numbers of Lazi deportees are small in comparison to other groups and only part of the ethnic group was deported. Moreover, all Lazi deportees returned shortly after Stalin’s death and subsequently received official rehabilitation. Nevertheless, the deportations had a strong impact on the lives of the villagers; so it is not surprising that even today the deportations are a hotly debated topic in the village. The following quotation, taken from an interview with Niazi serves as an example of the ambiguities and questions that still continue to trouble those who were sent to Central Asia in 1951.

Nobody really had a clue about the reasons for our deportation and of course we immediately started writing and asking for explanations. We were certain that a mistake had been made or that there was some sort of misunderstanding. Only once did we receive an answer from Moscow. An official representing Stalin wrote that our exile had been according to the rules and that no mistake had been made. Our relatives also sent letters asking for clarification, stressing the possibility that a mistake had been made. We just couldn’t believe it. Mother had received the award ‘mother hero’ [awarded to women with five or more children] and my sister had a ‘Lenin medal.’ My father was a very trustworthy person; he put the first pillar in the soil when the fence was constructed along the border. He worked on the collective farm and on his back they built up everything. He got a medal for his work! First they gave him a medal and then afterwards... There is no one who knows exactly why this has happened. I don’t know, some people in the village received money and goods in exchange for certain information... Perhaps they were afraid to lose this [source of] income. Maybe that is why they gave away false information about us.

The issue that stands out above all others – even today – is the simple question ‘why?’ First, why was it decided in the first place that ordinary villagers should be exiled to Central Asia? Second, how were the deportees selected? Why were certain

---

18 Even in the most recent overview of the Soviet deportations (Pohl, 1999) the Lazi are not mentioned, although a section is included on the Meskhetian Turks, Kurds and Hemshins.

19 The fate of the Soviet Lazi living elsewhere was different. Those living in the town Anakli, some 80 kilometers north of Batumi, were never deported, whereas Lazi from various villages in Abkhazia were sent to Siberia in 1944, where they lived for about ten years. When in the 1990s war erupted in Abkhazia, many decided to leave the villages and settle permanently in Turkey.
people deported, while others were allowed to stay behind? The fact that the questions are posed with such force—like in the cited account—shows both the bewilderment of former deportees who found it incomprehensible that they were treated in such a manner, as well as the continuing importance of creating meaningful and livable pasts from contradictory experiences and memories.

PURIFYING THE SYSTEM

Everyone in Sarpi knew of course what tragedy had befallen which family, who had been deported to Central Asia or Siberia, and who had lost relatives as a result of state terror. When they discussed the reasons of the deportation they also commented on how they evaluated the nature of the Soviet state. The question for them was essentially whether the purges and the deportations were to be understood as inherent characteristics of communism or as unintended side effects of a basically just system. The nature of the responses and stories varied with the social distance between the narrators and victims of the repressions, between those who had had lost close relatives and those who remained relatively unaffected by the events of the 1930s–1950s.

The remarks of middle-aged villagers—those who had not directly witnessed the tragedies of the Stalin period—often displayed a certain detachment from the tragedies. My host father, who was born in 1938, was usually critical of 'the communists' but at the same time would defend their behavior by saying that if you wish to build an empire you cannot expect to do it without force. He explained the misfortunes that befell several of his relatives by referring to the geopolitical location of Sarpi: "This was a Cold War border where the Warsaw pact opposed NATO, so what do you expect." He had grown up during the 1950s and 1960s and he was able to keep a distance from the tragedies. For him it was out of the question to denounce all the benefits of socialism. He told me once, "Right now it is fashion to criticize the communists, but one thing I know, there were Trotskyists, they really tried to take over the government." Like my host-father, others would say about the Soviet period, 'Life was good then and if only that border had not been here, it would even have been better.'

Such detachment was more difficult to maintain for elderly villagers. Osman Narakidze, a retired physician, witnessed the deportation of his older sister to Siberia. He told me, right before he abruptly decided to change the subject: "All the neighbors are guilty, they simply betrayed each other, but nobody knows why." Another accused the 'dictator-like' chairman of the collective farm who was in office during the Stalin era of being responsible for the deportations, "Instead of protecting our village he told them [KGB officers] that he did not trust us; that he could not guarantee the loyalty of everyone in the village." These short statements display a tendency to seek the origins of the deportations on the local level, thus fostering a view that portrays the communist system as inherently just.
Even former deportees tend to explain the deportations as mistakes or as the result of evil intentions of local power-holders, and only rarely as an inherent aspect of the Soviet system. For an outsider, it is difficult to understand that several villagers remained devoted communists, despite the fact that they experienced the effects of forced collectivization, the purges of the 1930s and had witnessed the deportations of their relatives. The impregnation of Soviet ideology and state control over information make this attitude easier to understand. But what may be more important is that people had to go along with the system in order to continue their lives and to establish careers for themselves and their children. Statements of elderly villagers often shuttle between positive memories about the stability offered by the Soviet system and the negative memories about the deportations and executions. The following statement is of Murman Bakradze, chairman of the kolkhoz in the 1960s and was typified by others as a real communist (‘but a good one,’ some would add). Real communist or not, his statements also reveal how difficult it is to create meaningful pasts from a history that has known so many extremes.

On the wall of Murman’s house there is a picture of Stalin in the prime of his life. We are drinking coffee at the table when the conversation turns to the issue of the deportations: “that is the only feature of communism I can never forgive them. How could they send away those poor people? My own sister-in-law died in Siberia, she was the most honest person I knew in my whole life, what could she have done, she could barely read, had only finished four classes.” Murman reaches for a mandarin, remains silent while peeling and then, as if he forgot the whole issue, starts pondering over the life he has lost. “At that time [the Stalin era] everyone worked on the collective farm. People were honest; it was unthinkable that someone would take even one kopeck as a bribe. Everyone contributed and that is why we lived rich lives. Look at what we have now, the tea plantations have turned into forest, no one buys our fruits and we can do nothing about it. Then we lived well, we had a life, now we merely exist.”

One aspect of the tragedies that befell the villagers in Sarpi is that a whole generation lived their lives under a repressive system, only to find out later that the new ‘freedom’ implied new uncertainties like economic hardship, widespread corruption and political chaos. As Aman remarked: “Now we don’t have such a regime anymore, but without money, where do you want to go? These are difficult times.” The Soviet legacy left traces on all spheres of social life and engendered complex patterns of remembering and forgetting. In a way, the past has returned now that the frame of reference to which memories and ‘dis-memories’ were attached, that is the Soviet state, has disappeared. As a result, basic ambiguities underlying the verbal statements about the repression have returned with renewed force.

---

20 See also Adler (1999:16), and Nekrich (1978:128, 142).
PURIFYING THE SELF

Another recurring theme in discussions about the deportations concerns the ‘arbitrariness’ of the system, the issue of why certain people were sent away while others were allowed to stay in the village. Because most villagers in Sarpi are related to each other in multiple ways, people were often hesitant to speak openly about this issue. Inquiries about people who were deported were often answered by a reconfirmation of their honesty, the fact that the involved had been ordinary kol-khozniki (peasants) and had kept far from politics.

During the years after the deportations, people were required to forget about what happened to their families. They sent endless petitions to Moscow – ritual acts of purification to regain their rights as full citizens. They often denied having relatives across the border and would omit that their fathers and mothers, or they themselves, had been classified as enemies of the state.

It may seem that at present the need to forget is replaced with the need to remember. The Soviet state is no longer and there are no political repercussions to be feared. But this does not imply that people can remember freely. Indeed, it might be that the decline of shared knowledge concerning ‘how it used to be’ provides new reasons for forgetting certain aspects even further. Claims like ‘such was life’ no longer adequately function now that there are fewer people around who experienced socialism, let alone Stalinism. Now that the local media, the intelligentsia and the political elite increasingly dismiss the communist past as an alien, oppressive and totalitarian implant, there is a strong need (among the younger generation especially) to redefine one’s own positions vis-a-vis that past. This results in new dilemmas of remembering and forgetting, especially where personal involvement is concerned.

During my research in Sarpi, there was one story that in my view exemplifies the dilemmas particularly well. This story is about a lamp and the consequences it had.

Phadime and her husband Hasan lived in a house located 10 meters from the fences separating Georgia from Turkey. The house had a special history of which I was unaware when I interviewed the couple for the first time. I asked them about their experiences in relation to living on the border during the Stalin era, and the discussion that ensued between husband and wife seemed to be typical of how the period of repression is remembered, as well as avoided, in speech.

Hasan: We led our lives, the same way as we do now. Of course then you had to conform to the rules, but that is normal when you live next to the border.

Phadime [in strong disagreement]: Of course it was terrible then, life is much easier now. You know, we had this window [facing Turkey] right there, where you see that wall. When Stalin was alive… I tell you one thing. I don’t like Stalin. They may kill me for it, but I say that I despise him. I am not afraid of anything… We had this window, and every night we had to nail a black piece of cloth in front of it, before we could turn on the light. If you hadn’t done it correctly, they would come knock on your door immediately, shouting ‘fast, turn of the lamp, light is escaping!!’ What was the problem I ask you? Let the light shine, what is so bad about that!
Hasan: It was war at the time.
Phadime [again in strong disagreement]: No! There was no war at all. Their brains didn’t function. Those people weren’t capable of thinking. ..pff... In Turkey live people just like me. My cousins live there. What harm would they do to me? Now that they opened the border, now that the soldiers who used to march here have gone, everything has remained quiet. Nobody ran away. So what was the problem during Stalin?!

In the weeks after this interview I collected more stories about the Stalin era, and one of the recurring elements were the windows that needed to be covered. I started to see these windows as powerful symbols of the fear that characterized the period. But it was only after I had interviewed Phadime’s mother Nuriè that I thought to understand what the blinded windows referred to in a more literal sense.

I was nineteen years old at the time. Our [only] daughter was only one year old. She was in bad health, because there was hardly any food back then. One night she was very ill. She was crying in bed and I asked my husband [Osman] to look what was the matter. With a match he lit the lamp and he looked in the baby bed. It turned out that she was crying in her sleep. So he let her sleep and turned the lamp on low. Not much later we suddenly heard [our baby] scream. I jumped out of bed and turned on the light. Then, maybe one minute later, soldiers rushed into the room. Without explanation they took Osman away. They thought he was signalling to the Turkish side. They took him and shot him. Only years later they discovered their mistake and wrote a document that it was very regretful that Osman had been shot.

This short text was an important element in Nuriè’s stories. On various occasions she referred to the lamp that ‘changed her life.’ The events surrounding the lamp caused the death of her husband; it had left her in poverty and with the care of their child in difficult times. The lamp symbolized the horrors of the Stalin era, and not only for her. Many villagers knew the story of the lamp. And often when the deportations or the rigidity of the border were discussed, the story of the lamp was evoked. But the story was not finished yet. The reflections of others suggested that there was something more about the story than just the lamp and the window. My host father Anzor especially, had strong doubts concerning the validity of the story.

I know that story, but I don’t think that the lamp had anything to do with it. You know, Osman [Phadime’s father] used to perform activities for the KGB. I don’t know exactly what he did, but in his household they always had white bread. And he had been in Turkey during the weeks before he was killed. Just to deliver a message or so. But as I told you before, the KGB never trusted its employees and always had them followed. Osman was seen with a Turkish officer in a teahouse. And you know why I especially think that the story isn’t correct. Once I overheard Nuriè say to a friend of hers: ‘Ach, if only he hadn’t gone that time, if only he had said no....’

Many indications suggested that Anzor was not far off the mark. Data on genealogical lines showed that the family had extensive family relations across the border, that Nuriè was born on the Turkish side and that she had kept her Turkish passport (Nuriè stated that she had never been able to obtain a Soviet passport). Crosschecking of
Anzor’s statement demonstrated to me that Osman may indeed have carried out certain services for the KGB.

Finding out what ‘really, really happened’ is both impossible and unnecessary. What is important though is that the events were probably not only about the lamp. Even if Anzor’s account were true it would not bereave the story of the lamp of its relevance. On the contrary, its evocative power would only be enhanced. The stories did not only point to the period of repression but also to the ill-fated actions that inhabitants of Sarpi were driven to. The inhabitants were not simply passive victims of irrational repression. They tried to find ways out of the situation. Whether it was by accepting small assignments from the KGB, by keeping one’s Turkish passport, or by retreating from social life – everyone tried in his or her way to deal with larger powers. The tragedy was that many – through their attempts – ended up more deeply entrenched in the webs spun by the omnipresent state. Everyone was in his or her way both a victim and a ‘collaborator.’ As Daphne Berdahl suggested: “Rather than viewing the state’s power as totalizing therefore, it may be more useful to conceptualize it as a dialectical interplay between above and below, to explore how daily interaction helped stabilize the state” (1999: 64).

It is exactly this ‘interplay’ and the resulting feeling of complicity that are impossible to express. The story of the lamp liberates the involved from the burden of ‘guilt,’ of the ever returning thought, ‘if I had acted differently...’ In the story people were being killed because they lit a lamp for a sick and innocent baby. The story aims to convince the audience that the terror took random victims; it aims to prove the arbitrariness and irrationality of Soviet state terror. But although the whimsical and unpredictable actions of the Soviet state structures cannot and should not be denied, it is important to look at the internal logics of the border regime. People were sucked into the logics of this regime; not as passive victims, but through their attempts to survive. It is that two-sidedness – of border-dwellers used and mistrusted, of victimhood and complicity – which in my view forms the real tragedy of that period.

The story of the lamp thus symbolizes not only the terror of the 1930s, but also points at the internal dynamics of the Soviet system, which forced people to live forever with the idea: ‘if only he had not gone to the other side.’ The light of the lamp that was shining across the border seems to be a livable substitute for the spouse who went to Turkey. The substitution of the husband by the light seems to convey: “We were innocent. We couldn’t help it.” The story tells what needs to remain unspoken.

**Time and the border**

There used to be a large billboard in the center of Sarpi, which showed the faces of a Soviet soldier, a civilian and a school-kid under the text “The entire Soviet nation guards the border!” In one sense the billboard referred to the practical tasks that villagers (had to) perform in the maintenance and defense of the border. It
referred to the activities of school kids who would assist soldiers in clearing twigs and leaves from the strip of land along the fences and who helped rake the ground after rainfall so that footsteps would be visible. It also referred to the substantial number of male inhabitants of Sarpi (some 20 to 25 at a given time) who were members of the *druzhina*, a kind of civil guard that helped patrol the border, and reportedly caught more potential refugees than the soldiers.

But the image and text on the billboard also seem to refer to another, much harsher aspect of ‘joint defense.’ Villagers defended or rather ‘fixed’ the border through their actions. Sometimes these actions were intentional as in the case of the man who prided himself on having caught three Russian refugees while being a member of the *druzhina*, other times they were performed unwittingly, when attempts to beat the system ended up strengthening it instead. If we look back at the deportations, it may be obvious that villagers never formed a real threat to state security. Nevertheless, it is also clear that it was not simple randomness that influenced the executions and deportations. The villagers deployed their own strategies for survival within a rigid and unpredictable system. As we have seen in the preceding pages, some villagers were involved in espionage activities and carried out services for the KGB. Some were involved in smuggling during the first seventeen years of Soviet rule, while others decided to retain their Turkish passports to be able to cross the border at a later stage. What these people did not realize at that time was that the Soviet system was organized in such a way that each of these tacit strategies actually entangled them in the system even further. Consequently, they became more vulnerable targets of the erratic decisions of the Soviet authorities.

The billboard was removed shortly after the Soviet collapse. Perhaps with the billboard, one type of memory will also disappear. That is the memory of complicity, which is gradually replaced by memories of unambiguous victimhood. Such memories of victimhood are instrumental in attempts to ‘overcome’ the Soviet past. An observation by Catherine Merridale in her book about death and memory in the Soviet Union is insightful: “The oral testimonies reveal a much-neglected image of the Soviet past. In some respects however, the rediscovery of one kind of ‘real’ story obscures another ‘real’ story, which is the process of accommodation, the means by which people survived, for fifty years, and did not talk at all” (2001: 175).

For fifty years, Sarpi constituted the end of two worlds. The mechanisms which created and sustained the separation were so pervasive that they determined not only the freedom of movement but also had vast influence over all other aspects of life including the way people expressed their relation to the state and nation. This was especially true for villagers who had grown up with an impermeable border, and for whom the border represented the inviolable limits of their social world. As one of them told me, “We were born here; we didn’t even feel the presence of the border.” These ‘eternal’ qualities of the physical divide forces us to step away from the border and to look how everyday life continued on the Georgian side of the border.