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Report for American Councils

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During the summer and fall of 2012 I received research and language training support in Tbilisi, Georgia through the Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training Program administered by American Councils for International Education. The research conducted is part of a larger dissertation project in partial completion of a PhD in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan. The dissertation explores the implications the campaigns to eradicate illiteracy and state language policies in the South Caucasus on Soviet Nationalities Policies with a view to contemporary understandings of national difference in the geopolitically important region of the South Caucasus. The final dissertation will include materials gathered from Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Russia. The American Councils funded portion of the project focused exclusively on Georgia, but the findings are in dialogue with materials acquired from Armenia and Azerbaijan on separately funded segments of the ongoing dissertation research process.

This project included research in the national state archive in Tbilisi and the Central committee/Party archive of the Muxiani region of Tbilisi as well as research in the national parliamentary library in Tbilisi and the district library in Gori. These repositories of the past are under-utilized by international scholars because so few speak Georgian. Learning Georgian and working in archives and libraries gave me access to materials otherwise unavailable to foreign scholars of the region who do not speak regional languages. Additionally, American Councils staff provided valuable meetings with local historians and professionals who could enrich my

research and research process. American Council's local director Timothy Blauvelt was an extraordinary interlocutor on many levels and enabled a research experience in which I was able to grow as a regional scholar and a professional academic researcher.

To date, histories of literacy in the Soviet Union have tended to be limited in scope to the study of Russian-language literacy among Russian speakers. While scholars of Central Asia have sought to understand the role of literacy in the early Soviet project, their studies have largely been limited to the linguistic contexts of Russian and the titular languages of the relevant republics. By contrast, my research, focusing on the highly diverse, historically significant space of the South Caucasus, frames literacy campaigns as large-scale, multilingual efforts. By studying the ideological and practical role of language and literacy in the overall transformative Soviet project in the South Caucasus, my research evidences that historically-specific local realities not only dictated the resources available for literacy promotion, but also shaped the shifting multiple meanings of and discourses about literacy deployed by both state actors and individual citizens. Archival evidence reveals the important connection between women as central subjects of reform and the essential role literacy played in reform cannot be neglected here. It is my hope that in the dissertation by interrogating the role of Women as reformers and subjects of reform during the literacy campaigns that I can further discussion of gender as a central category of early Soviet politics.

December of 1922 saw the consolidation of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR), an administrative unit encompassing the newborn Armenian, Georgian, Abkhaz and Azerbaijani SSRs into a single administrative unit with the Georgian city of Tbilisi as its capital. Through American Councils sponsored research, I explored the Georgian component of this unit and the connections between republics as articulated in Georgia.

Using the multinational, multilingual administrative framework of the TSFSR, my project focuses on the early attempts of Soviet actors to increase regional literacy and the ways in which local citizen-learners received and negotiated the literacy campaigns. A cornerstone of traditional European assessments of modernity, literacy and its promotion figured centrally in early Soviet social reforms. As Soviet authorities began the process of korenaizatsiia, literacy in local languages came to be seen as elemental to Soviet understandings of "national culture" and to the larger multinational socialist project. Furthermore, Party leadership viewed literacy as a crucial mechanism for the transmission of political information across space. Arguing that the promotion of local-language literacy was part of a larger process of promoting national groups in the context of Soviet decolonization efforts, Terry Martin describes the efforts of korenazatsiia as occurring across both Eastern and Western national territories but suggests a specific set of problems faced Soviet authorities in the East, where "the major problem was a lack of literate, educated titular nationals so the policy emphasis was on affirmative action in education and hiring to create national elites."¹

While most Anglophone scholars have argued that literacy played a purely practical role in the dissemination of party directives, newly literate publics demonstrably utilized their reading skills to diverse ends. Over time, reading and literacy became imbued with a variety of culturally- and temporally-specific meanings. Documents in Georgia suggest that comprehending the role of the literacy campaigns in the South Caucasus requires an understanding of how these meanings form over time. What does it mean to be able to read in different contexts? The ability to read conferred upon literate individuals unparalleled access to information which they could then transmit orally, thereby accruing power and authority in the particularly unstable and

¹ Martin, Terry. *Affirmative Action Empire*. 24.

chaotic environment of the early Soviet South Caucasus. The material forms in the local archives of Georgia reveal the particular chaotic nature of early Soviet material realities. I found numerous party documents from the early 1920s that were scribbled on reused paper.

However, the unidirectional transference of information was only part of what was facilitated by the creation of literate publics. Through literacy classes, Soviet citizens learned not only how to read, but also how to write in their own languages. In Georgia schools were established in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Ossetian, Persian, Estonian, German, Ukrainian, Russian, Abkhaz and French. I argue that the productive aspect of literacy campaigns in the Soviet Union has been unfairly neglected by historians of education; individuals with the ability to write could become more actively engaged citizens: they petitioned the state, communicated with one another, and authored important local and regional publications. Numerous Narkompros documents reveal the active participation and engagement of newly literate citizen in the early Soviet project. Letters from newly literate citizens to the party show the ways in which early Soviet citizens engaged directly with the state and utilized their own new found literacies to conceptualize and form identities as Soviet citizens marked by national and class categories.

While literacy enabled Soviet citizens to participate more fully in the project of building socialism, literacy initiatives were not always welcomed at the local level. The archives of the TSFSR Zhenotdel (Women's Sector) are peppered with numerous anecdotes describing the harassment and occasional murder of females participants in literacy initiatives, attacks propelled by local beliefs that literacy might negatively affect traditional community life. By the same token, Georgian KGB files reveal that many male participants in the 1931 "peasant uprisings"--a

series of insurrections long framed as peasant attempts to resist collectivization--were in fact reacting against state edicts that forced women to attend literacy schools.

The Russian Civil War, coupled with the flurry of wars and brief independences of the early 1920s, led to the drainage of regional coffers in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. While this shortage of resources limited the scope of literacy campaigns, a vast paper deficit, antiquated printing presses, and economic hardship restricted the efficacy of educational reforms. Ancillary documents produced by the Georgian Central Committee reveal that what scarce paper existed was constantly reused and repurposed. During this period, the efforts of citizens learning to read and write were materially constrained. Owing to the scarcity of paper and limited availability of functional printing presses, newspapers and early Soviet magazines served as key tools of South Caucasian literacy instruction. The Tbilisi-based Russian-language newspaper *Komunist* included monthly editions of introductory-level texts for pedagogical use. Photographic evidence reveals that reading rooms in Tbilisi incorporated these texts into their pedagogical strategy, encouraging beginning readers to copy and recopy these sections for educational benefit. This practice was likely encouraged and enabled by the increased line spacing of text printed in these sections.

In general, literacy promotion and the creation of reading publics has historically allowed for the emergence of new genres of popular literature targeting a variety of social groups. Through women's magazines and journals, women were identified as voracious consumers in and by late 19th- and early 20th-century print-capitalist systems. Under regimes of print socialism, women's magazines were used to enact material and ideological transformations of the basic concepts of domesticity and create new categories of women.

Georgia's *Akhli Gza* (*The New Way*) and *Chveni Gza* (*Our Way*), two publications with

which I have worked closely, both took steps to engage their readership, sometimes featured introductory "readers' corner" sections and publishing images of adults learning to read these periodicals in community reading rooms. In addition to these pictures of readers, each magazine routinely included sections explicitly designed for adult beginning readers as well as texts produced by literacy students, sometimes even reproducing these texts in students' own handwriting.

In addition to promoting literacy, the pedagogical importance of magazines and newspapers also encouraged the circulation of state-produced information in the classroom. While some scholars of Russian literacy have suggested that the state only began to utilize literacy-promotion texts as a means of spreading state ideologies during the 1930s Stalinist era, archival evidence suggests that the linkage between achieving literacy and taking up ideology can be made much earlier in the South Caucasus. The multiple uses of texts in reading rooms parallels the multiple functionality of reading rooms as physical spaces in and for local communities.

Coupled with the scarcity of material resources, the complexities of translation and publishing information in multiple languages meant that those minorities learning to read in lesser-spoken languages, or in languages whose orthographies were new, were primarily exposed to learning materials derived from official documents. In Georgia, Kurdish-language education in Ottoman Turkish orthography was almost exclusively limited in its first few years to translating a few key texts. However, reading teachers and minority language activists sometimes developed their own pedagogical materials, which were not always linked to state-determined official literary forms.

I through a nuanced analysis of the data collected in Tbilisi, I intend to explore the

translation, circulation, content, and use of literacy materials in public space, placing special emphasis on the role of performance in early literacy campaigns. The predominant participants in these performances were young women, who would perform in public spaces with scripts in hand. I have uncovered the actual (often hand-written) scripts from several of these performances, along with written descriptions of the performances by Party activists. During the campaign against the chador in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijani women's reading rooms in Georgia performed a play in which women donned exaggerated veils, only to be unveiled to reveal that they were reading scripts. As indicated in this and other examples, Zhenodel efforts to promote literacy among women and to discourage the practice of veiling were twinned missions in the South Caucasus. Archival materials evidence the performative uses of literacy and broaden the role of literacy as a means of increasing the oral circulation of information through reading aloud, suggesting that the pedagogical and psychological roles of orality are key to understanding the negotiation of Soviet ideologies in specific local contexts.

While significant work has been done on the local reception of Soviet reforms in Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus remain little-studied. Much of the extant scholarship about the history of 1920s and 1930s South Caucasian social and educational reform has been extrapolated from sources that address the Soviet Union at large. The post-Soviet historiography of 1920s Georgia (and Azerbaijan and Armenia) has been influenced by this scholarly tendency to extrapolate from general Soviet trends rather than regionally-specific records. Those few historians who have attempted to engage regionally-specific sources base their analyses almost exclusively on data culled from the 1926 census--a particularly problematic strategy, as the census relied mainly on community self-reporting as a means of determining literacy rates. In addition, archival data suggests that the 1926 census was hindered significantly by census-takers'

rampant economic, transportation, and health problems. Following Historian Mariann Kamp, who problematizes the way categories were used and translated in the 1926 census in Uzbekistan, I question the utility and accuracy of census-derived data, while also exploring the categories employed to better understand how state actors imagined citizens--in particular, the ways in which the terms "literate," "semi-literate," and "illiterate" map on to previous activist-rendered regional descriptions.

Unlike in the RSFSR, the Zhenotdel retained significant standing in the TSFSR Central Committee until the TSFSR's reorganization. The TSFSR was essential to the political geography of the campaign to improve the life of women of the East. Preliminary archival findings suggest that aspects of this campaign were conducted on "western" nationalities. This may in part be due to a negotiation of the imagined geographies of Easternness during the early Soviet period. The material of popular magazines and literacy education texts dwelt specifically on the unveiling of rural Georgian women.

Complicating the literacy education of multiple populations in TSFSR was the rapid deployment of literacy activists and creation of literacy materials during a time when sweeping orthographic changes were being debated and when language was being standardized. The orthographic reforms for Turkic-speaking populations were handled first at the titular-republic level in 1925, and then at a Soviet Turkic level in 1927. The shifting orthographies meant that literacies were contingent on scripts; as a consequence, when the Soviet state mandated orthographic switches and shifts, once-literate populations were essentially rendered illiterate. The contingency of state notions of functional literacy on prescribed scripts meant that it was quite possible for an individual to cycle through various literacy categories multiple times over the course of a single lifetime. In Georgia between 1921 and 1936 four successive

orthographic reforms impeded Turkish women's efforts to achieve literacy. Documents collected will allow me to explore how these processes of de- and re-literization shaped local understandings of literacy, education, and the larger Soviet project.

Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, national identities and their associations with language were reinforced by the campaigns to eradicate illiteracy in which citizen gained rights specifically through their own national language in addition to knowledge of Russian. In the Caucasus complex debates about the development of national literatures for national minorities and ethnic groups was reinforced by Soviet political geographies that gave territorialized minorities more language rights than those groups without politically delimited spaces.

Ultimately the resources I gained during my American Councils supported research visit to Tbilisi are an essential part of a project that hopes to shed light on the complexities of early Soviet nationalities policies. The shaping of national identities in the Soviet South Caucasus must be better understood in historical context for proper analysis of the violent and geopolitically important present. By living the present and working on the past, I am constantly confronted with the influence of the Soviet past on the discourses and material realities of the present. In particular, the articulation of national identity, largely associated with language, is sharply marked by Soviet forms of distinction.

Language Training

The majority of my language training took place in the Language School. The school provides excellent, intensive language lessons tailored to individual students' needs. All of my interactions with Dr. Shavtvaladze and her staff were efficient, productive and professional. Dr.

Shavtvaladze pays specific attention to the various needs of foreign language learners, providing the highest level of instruction through her network of qualified instructors.

The school employs a wide range of language teachers. I have had the privilege of working with three of the teachers from the school. Each was highly skilled and qualified. Each was trained to work on specific aspects of the language and had extensive experience with foreign students. All of my teachers were flexible in their approach to language learning, listening to my concerns and tailoring their approaches to best meet my needs.

The curriculum utilized by the Language School is the only language learning curriculum for Georgian language that uses the methods commonly associated with learning languages in American and European classroom settings. The books offer valuable and extensive exercises to reinforce what has been learned in each lesson. Additionally, there are dialogues, listening exercises and short texts designed for language learners. The Biliki curriculum focuses on practical use of the language. Each chapter covers valuable everyday vocabulary while gradually introducing complex grammatical concepts.

On my journey to learn the Georgian language, I have utilized three separate schools with numerous teachers and curriculums. The Language School with its Biliki curriculum has been by far the most useful and productive. Under American Councils sponsored language training at the language school, I successfully achieved a level of working fluency necessary for more efficient research. Learning Georgian is not easy, but American Councils employed wonderful teachers who made the experience productive and professional.