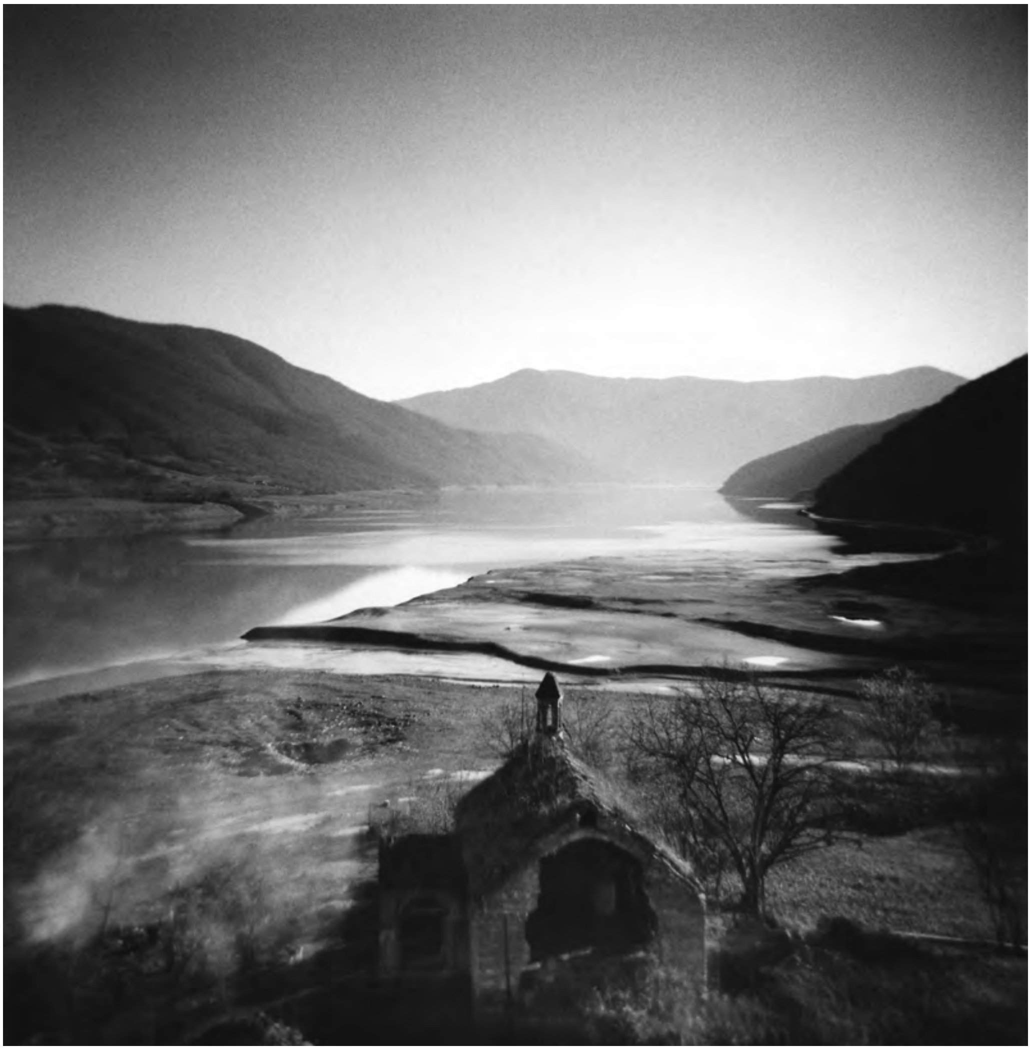
PART I AN ABUNDANT LAND



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1 A TASTE OF HISTORY

Visitors from the kolkhoz celebrating Saint George's Day at the Alaverdi Monastery near Telavi, 1972. The eleventh-century Alaverdi Monastery was for centuries the tallest church in Georgia. The holiday of Saint George, one of Georgia's patron saints, is celebrated twice a year, on November 23 and May 6. © Magnum photos / Henri Cartier-Bresson

(previous page) Ruins of an old church at Ananuri Fortress, 2008. The village of Ananuri, about an hour north of Tbilisi, once lay along the fabled Silk Road. The dukes of Aragvi built the fortress to protect their domain, which they ruled from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries. © Michael Kenna

REMOTE AS GEORGIA MAY SEEM, this small nation once occupied a pivotal place in the world. Georgia was much featured in the mythology of ancient times, chronicled by historians and travelers who ventured to the farthest reaches of the known classical world. Stretching from the Black Sea to the Caspian, Georgia lay athwart important East–West trade routes. Through the vagaries of history, Georgia enjoyed independence one thousand years ago, only to be subsumed by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. More recently, the republic existed within the borders of the Soviet Union. In 1991, the Soviets' relaxed hold on their constituent republics allowed the proud and restive Georgians to proclaim independence. With a number of contending political groups, Georgia today finds itself in flux. Yet it still represents a Shangri-la of bounty, tucked away in mountain valleys and fertile lowlands.

The Russians are only the latest in a series of foreign powers to have dominated Georgia, and a state of agitation is hardly new to this country, which has endured centuries of turmoil. Remarkably, however, through all the invasions, sieges, and subjugations, Georgia has managed to maintain a strong national identity. This societal pride is something greater than patriotism, more akin to a religious belief in the sacredness of the earth and its ability to sustain. Gathered around the feast table, Georgians like to retell the tales of how their land was made. One of their favorite creation myths finds the first Georgians seated under a pergola at a table laden with wine and food. So engrossed are they in feasting on grilled lamb with plum sauce and garlicky roasted eggplant that they miss God's deadline for choosing a country, and the world is divided up without them. His task complete, God sets off for home, only to find the Georgians still merrily toasting and singing. God stops to reproach them for their negligence, but the *tamada,* the toastmaster, is not worried that the Georgians have no place to live. They have spent their time well, he explains, thanking God in lavish toasts for having created such a magnificent world. Pleased that the Georgians have not forgotten him, God rewards them with the very last spot on earth, the one he had been saving for himself. And so it was that the Georgians came to live in paradise.

Another myth is slightly less reverent. While creating the world, God wisely took a break for supper. But he became so involved in his meal that he inadvertently tripped over the high peaks of the Caucasus range, spilling a little of everything from his plate onto the land below. So it was that Georgia came to be blessed with such riches, table scraps from Heaven.

Georgia's topography is indeed varied. The country embraces both alpine and subtropical zones in an area smaller than Scotland or South Carolina. Nearly four-fifths of Georgia is mountainous, making the various regions quite self-contained, each with its own customs and culinary traditions. The Likhi Range, running north to south, effectively divides the country in half. Western Georgia, bordering on the Black Sea, is marked by high precipitation and steamy temperatures. Here tea and citrus fruits thrive. Eastward the climate grows progressively drier; sere Central Asian winds buffet the plateaus east of the Likhi chain. This hot, dry atmosphere produces the lush fruits and grapes of the Kartli and Kakheti provinces.

The area around the Black Sea, the Euxine of the Ancients, boasts the older civilization. The Georgians trace their own culture back to the sixth century B.C., but other peoples inhabited this region beginning around the fifteenth century B.C. From the outset the populace profited from the native riches of the coastal region, which the Greeks knew as Colchis. Here the wealthy King Aeetes had his dynasty. Homer refers to Aeetes and his legendary land in the *Odyssey,* when he tells of Jason's exploits. It was to Colchis that Jason and his Argonauts sailed in search of the Golden Fleece. Most likely a golden fleece did exist—a sheepskin used to trap nuggets of gold from the mountain streams. More momentous for Jason than the Fleece, however, was his discovery of Medea, King Aeetes's daughter. Medea was renowned for her herbal sorcery. No matter that she used one of her potent concoctions to poison their children when Jason abandoned her, Georgian folk etymology still connects the word *medicine* with Medea's name, since before resorting to vengeance she was the first healer, the first to use plants for their curative powers, a practice that still prevails in Georgia today.

Impressed by the progressive agriculture of the early Georgians, the Greeks established the colonies of Bathys (Batumi), Phasis (Poti), Pitiunt (Pitsunda), and Dioscurias (Sukhumi) along the Black Sea coast. But Greek control came to an end in 66 B.C. when Pompey invaded, and the area fell under Roman authority. As documented by such classical historians and geographers as Herodotus, Strabo, Pliny, and Ptolemy, Greeks and Romans alike considered outposts in Colchis important links in the trade route to Persia. From the Black Sea, ships could sail up the Phasis River (today's Rioni), then travel by portage over the Likhi Range to the Kura River Valley, continuing overland to Persia.

From the earliest times Georgia's central geography and fabled riches beckoned outsiders. As the centuries passed, merchants established caravansaries throughout the country, and by the early middle ages the capital city of Tbilisi had become a major stopover on the medieval trade routes, a midpoint between Muslim East and Christian West. Travelers left journals describing the wild landscapes and exotic customs they encountered.

Both Marco Polo and Friar William of Rubruck mention Georgia in their travel notes, and Sir John Chardin, on a seventeenth-century visit, extravagantly praised the abundance of the land:

> Georgia is as fertile a country as any can be imagin'd, where a man may live both deliciously and very cheap. Their Bread is as good as any in the World; their Fruit is delicious and of all sorts. Neither is there any part of Europe that produces fairer Pears and Apples, or better tasted, nor does any part of Asia bring forth more delicious Pomegranates. Cattel is very plentiful and very good, as well the larger sort as the lesser. Their Fowl of all sorts is incomparable, especially their Wild-Fowl; their Boars-Flesh is as plentiful and as good as any in Colchis. . . . The Caspian Sea which is next to Georgia and the Kurr, that runs through it, supplies it with all sorts of salt and fresh Fish, so that we may truly say that there is no country where a Man may have an Opportunity to fare better than in this.
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> —*The Travels of Sir John Chardin into Persia and the East-Indies . . .* (1686)

Travelers kept mainly to the established trade routes, rarely venturing into the highlands that loom north of the fertile plains. Chardin did not experience the romance of these intimidating, inspiring mountains, which give shape and definition to the Georgian land. The Caucasus has also given birth to many a legend. The earliest tales tell of fierce women warriors inhabiting the mountains. These were the Amazons, a matriarchal society whose adherents did not flinch at cutting off a breast in order to use their bows more effectively. Then came Prometheus, who stole the secret of fire from the gods and in punishment was chained to Mount Kazbek, destined for eternal torment as an eagle pecked at his liver, which continually regenerated itself. Further west on Mount Elbrus, Noah's dove is said to have alighted before flying on to the ark grounded at Ararat. And what of the mysterious Tamara? This Caucasian Lorelei enticed travelers to their deaths as they passed through the Daryal Gorge of the Terek River.

Tethered sheep, Kazbegi, Georgia, 2008. This photograph was taken at a fabled location, the fourteenth-century Holy Trinity Church near the village of Gergeti, beneath Mount Kazbegi in the Caucasus range. While the Greeks believed that Prometheus was chained to a mountainside for eternity for sharing the secret of fire with mankind, Georgian legend is more specific, holding that Amirani—the Georgian name for Prometheus—was chained right here, to Mount Kazbegi. © Michael Kenna

Between the sheer cliffs rising on either side of this gorge, the Terek cuts a raging swath, making for hazardous passage. No less an explorer than Alexander the Great is said to have struggled through these mountain chasms, though in truth only a legendary Alexander, not the historical one, ventured here. Yet popular mythology persists, identifying the Daryal Gorge as the original site of Alexander's Gate, a massive barrier of iron and steel built to keep the northern barbarians, Gog and Magog, from penetrating the pass. Here Alexander supposedly had a rendezvous with Thalestris, Queen of the Amazons. According to the Latin history by Quintus Curtius, Thalestris's passion for Alexander was so great that she demanded he spend thirteen days satisfying her desire before renewing his campaigns. Thalestris hoped to produce a strong female infant for her Amazon tribe; however, she assured Alexander that if a boy were born, he could take the child for his heir. To the disappointment of his readers, Quintus Curtius does not reveal the outcome of their legendary union.

Today the Daryal Gorge is less impressive than in mythological times. How perilous the passage was for early travelers negotiating the steep, rutted path! When camels stumbled, whole caravans tumbled into the misty depths below. Later, carriages frequently broke their axles and clung precipitously to the brink, waiting for help to arrive. Now hydroelectric stations have tamed the mighty Terek, and a modern road has eliminated most of the hair-raising curves and abrupt descents of the wilder, bygone days. Even so, the highway is terrifying enough to traverse in a Soviet auto fueled by low-octane gas, driven by an antic Georgian flirting with the cliff face. The scenery remains spectacular; the precipice, near enough to touch with your hand.

Modern travelers still experience vertigo until the road levels out onto the broad, windblown plateau of the Cross Pass, the highest point on the highway. Here the vista is magnificent. One feels on top of the world, close to the gods, near the very cradle of civilization, yet in a wild, isolated place. Beyond the pass the road descends, meandering through alpine meadows brilliant with snow in winter, glorious with wildflowers in summer. Shepherds' huts cling to the mountainside, the only sign of habitation for miles. Apart from improvements to roads and villages, the landscape has hardly changed since antiquity. Here is how Georgia appeared to the Russian writer Anton Chekhov when he visited in the late nineteenth century:

> I saw marvellous things. . . . My impressions were so new and sharp that all I experienced seems a dream, and I can't believe it. I saw the sea in all its vastness,

> the Caucasian shore, mountains, mountains, mountains, eucalyptuses, tea plants, waterfalls, pigs with long pointed snouts, trees wrapped in lianas like veils, clouds spending the night on the breast of giant cliffs, dolphins, fountains of oil, subterranean fires, a fireworshippers' temple, mountains, mountains, mountains. . . . I survived the Georgian Military Highway. It isn't a highway, but poetry, a marvellous, fantastic story. . . . Can you imagine yourself at a height of 8000 feet? . . . Are you imagining it? Now in your mind go to the edge of the abyss and look down; far, far below you see a narrow basin, along which winds a small white ribbon—the white-haired, grumbling Aragvi River.
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> —Anton Chekhov, letter of August 12, 1888, to K. S. Barantsevich

Not all who passed through the Caucasus were as pacific as Chardin and Chekhov, content to meditate on Georgia's wonders. Nomadic horsemen periodically swept down through the mountains from the northern steppes, routing villages and destroying crops. Even more violent were the frequent incursions by Georgia's mighty neighbors to the east and west, both of whom sought to dominate its resources. Western Georgia, or Colchis, faced the world of classical civilization—first Rome, then Byzantium—while the eastern half, the ancient Iberia, looked to Persia. Georgia's geographical position between the two contending powers of Christendom and Islam brought repeated misfortune to the country as it was buffeted by both sides. The common greeting among Georgians, *gamardzhoba,* is equivalent to our "hello," but its original meaning, "victory," attests to the frequency of battles the people endured. Even though caught in the middle, Georgians managed to preserve their country's own unmistakably Georgian character, an intriguing blend of East and West.

Despite its split orientation, Georgia perceived itself as a separate political entity as early as the fourth century B.C. when King Farnavazi, Georgia's first native ruler, imposed some political order on the country. Farnavazi also introduced the ornate, lapidary script of the Georgian alphabet, an early literacy the Georgians are rightfully proud of. Because their national identity dates back so many centuries, the Georgians have a long historical perspective that allows them to take their overlords less seriously than other peoples who have more recently been overrun. Although the battles against Persians, Turks, Mongols, Bolsheviks, and other aggressors are legendary, for most of their troubled history the Georgians have learned to live in peace with those who invaded them—after an initial period of fierce resistance, of course.

But even the lowest points in Georgia's history could not stifle the innate spirit of the Georgian people, renowned for their joie de vivre. This attitude is encapsulated in a comment once made by the Symbolist poet Grigol Robakidze. Describing the fear and chaos following the Bolshevik occupation of Georgia in 1921, Robakidze noted, "All around, everything was crumbling, and Tbilisi remained the only city that greeted this destruction with a song."

The complex Georgian attitude toward outsiders can be seen in the huge statue of Mother Georgia that towers over present-day Tbilisi. In one hand Mother Georgia holds high a bowl of wine; in the other she carries a sword. The figure herself gazes inscrutably ahead, prepared for either friend or foe, as if heeding the proverb that "an enemy may come as far as the door of your house, but once he enters, he is a friend." The ensuing commensal activity is not taken lightly: the Georgian word for friend, *megobari,* signifies "one who has eaten from the same *gobi,*" or bowl. Georgia's traditional hospitality is rooted in the intricacies of her long relationships with invaders.

Under their latest subjugation, the Georgians continued to celebrate their national identity with seemingly endless feasting and toasting; independence whetted their jubilation. As they toast, Georgians often invoke God's name, though a vital spirituality is far more important to them than religious dogma. The early Georgians, like other pagan peoples, had a highly devout relationship to their surroundings even before accepting Christianity in the fourth century. It is telling that the Georgians' acceptance of the Christian faith was tied up with their deep love for the land and for the good life. Unlike the Muslims around them, Georgians put the fruit of the vine to good—and extensive—use.

For a Georgian, wine evokes a sense of culture and community. Based on evidence of grape pips unearthed during archeological digs, viticulture is an ancient art in Georgia, practiced as early as 6,000 B.C. Scientists believe the species *Vitis vinifera,* the original wine grape, to be native to the Caucasus region, while many linguists consider the Georgian word for wine, *ghvino,* the prototype for such Indo-European variations as *vino, vin, wine, Wein*. The earliest vines were grown on land belonging to the pagan temples, and a cult of Dionysus grew up, with the vine the iconic representation of an agrarian deity. Thus the early Georgians not only cultivated the grape, but worshiped it, too. In the yard the *marani,* or wine storage shed, stood like a sacred temple, just as in the home the hearth stood like a symbolic altar.

Georgians depict the archetypal Tree of Life as a plane tree entwined with vines. The vine symbolizes both life and faith, a belief that Saint Nino of Cappadocia adapted to Christian doctrine when she introduced it to Georgia in the fourth century. Bearing a cross plaited of dried vines and tied with her own hair, Saint Nino seemed to represent divine approval for the winemaking that had been practiced for centuries. The vine and the cross became inextricably entwined, each an object of devotion. In this way the advent of Christianity served to elevate the importance of viticulture, just as the focus on wine helped to lubricate the conversion.

Strange as it may seem, even a century after the Georgian nation had converted to Christianity, the capital city of Tbilisi, founded in the fifth century, remained a Muslim city-state under Persian control. In fact, until 1936 the world knew Tbilisi by its Persian name of Tiflis. This foreign appellation not only attests to the city's long years of subjugation but also masks its romantic beginnings. Legend tells that the fifth-century king Vakhtang Gorgaslani, out on a hunt near the Kura River, killed a pheasant that he retrieved fully cooked from the hot springs where it had fallen. Naturally, a feast ensued. Toasting his good fortune, Gorgaslani vowed to create a city on this auspicious spot, which he called "Tbilis-kalaki," or "Warm City." But Tbilisi's fate proved to be less than auspicious. Between its designation as the capital of Iberia, or eastern Georgia, in the sixth century and its absorption into the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century, the city was sacked forty times. Following a mid-seventh century Arab invasion, Tbilisi remained under Arab rule for over four hundred years.

Only in the ninth century, when the Bagrationi dynasty came into power, did Georgia begin to exert itself as a strong Christian nation. The early tenth century saw the rise of an independent feudal monarchy, and during the reign of David the Builder (1089–1125) Tbilisi was finally freed from foreign control. Under the rule of the great queen Tamara (1184–1212), Georgia reached the height of its civilization, experiencing a renaissance a good two hundred years before Italy. Long before the founding of Oxford or Heidelberg, the Gelati Academy in the western province of Imereti had developed into an important school of philosophy, which also practiced advanced teachings in astronomy, medicine, and music. (The main church of Gelati still stands, adorned with beautiful obsidian mosaics and commanding an impressive view of the surrounding hills.) In eastern Georgia, the arts and sciences were assiduously pursued in the famous school at Ikalto. It was here that Shota Rustaveli, the author of Georgia's great epic poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin,* is said to have studied. Rustaveli's epic is striking not only for its beautiful language and lilting cadences, but also for the strong heroines it portrays.

On the roadside in Tserovani, 2012. Scenes like this are typical along Georgian roadsides, where individuals sell their homegrown produce from makeshift stands or right out of the trunks of their cars. The village of Tserovani happens to be home to a large refugee settlement, which was built in 2008 in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war.
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Sadly, Georgia's Renaissance was cut short by a new threat from outside: the Golden Horde. In 1225 invading Mongols from Central Asia destroyed Tiflis. However, after their rampages the Mongols, unlike the Persians, allowed the Georgian Orthodox Church to flourish and daily life to proceed, as long as the necessary tributes were forthcoming. So despite an end to its period of great flowering, Georgia was able nevertheless to remain relatively prosperous and stable throughout its Mongol occupation, which lasted until the early fourteenth century.

New troubles arrived when Tamerlane's armies attacked in 1386. Unlike his precursors, Tamerlane was wanton and ruthless, killing and devastating wherever he went. He even penetrated beyond the Likhi Range into western Georgia, an area the Mongols had spared. Because it lacked a strong leader, Georgia's recovery from Tamerlane's aggression was slow. For the next several centuries the country once again fell prey to campaigns by the Persians as well as by the newly strong Ottoman Turks, who had gained ascendance after Constantinople fell in 1453. Although politics and allegiances kept shifting in the countries that bordered Georgia, the Georgians ineluctably found themselves trapped in the middle. Only Armenia to the south, a second island of Christianity in the Islamic world, presented no threat.

By the late sixteenth century Georgia was effectively split in two, with western Georgia falling under the Turkish sphere of influence and eastern Georgia politically part of northwest Iran. But the region's balance of power began to change as Russia came into its own, testing its new imperial might in Siberia and the Caucasus, where it built Cossack outposts in the northern highlands. Exhausted from the continual parrying between Persians and Turks, the Georgians expressed interest in their Christian neighbors to the north. But their flirtation with Russia served only to anger Persia, which initiated a new series of violent campaigns against them.

Repeated attacks from the Persians, the Turks, and Muslim tribesmen in Daghestan to the north finally caused the Georgians to turn actively to Russia for help. In 1783 King Irakli II, the beleaguered successor to the ancient Bagrationi dynasty, signed the Treaty of Georgievsk, acknowledging Russia's sovereignty. His signing was a sad day in the history of the Georgian nation. Today many Russians look down on Georgians as half-civilized and unpredictable, but the fact is that Russia's acceptance of Christianity in 988 followed the Georgians' by many centuries, as did its receipt of an alphabet. Thus King Irakli's capitulation represented to the Georgians a terrible concession to a less ancient, and to their minds less cultured, society.

Despite the promise of his name, the Georgian form of Hercules, Irakli did not have much choice. As a weak Christian nation besieged on three sides by the Muslim world, Georgia logically turned to the powerful protector to the north. But instead of allowing the Georgians to maintain control over their internal affairs as the Treaty of Georgievsk had stipulated, Russia incorporated Georgia into its empire in 1801 in an attempt to protect itself against the ever more menacing Turks. Army garrisons were set up in remote mountain regions, making the Russian military presence in the Caucasus increasingly strong. Workers began the arduous task of constructing the Georgian Military Highway, a road that would eventually connect Tbilisi with the new Russian city of Vladikavkaz, "Ruler of the Caucasus." (The Russians never hesitated to proclaim their imperial pretensions.) The Georgian Military Highway followed the ancient and perilous route through the mountains, passing through the Daryal Gorge. Up until the second half of the nineteenth century, Muslim tribes led by the valiant Shamyl were engaged in an early form of guerrilla warfare. The Russians attempted to help travelers by establishing a few dismal posts along the highway where an escort through the most difficult reaches could be arranged, but the ferocious mountaineers, waging a thirty-year struggle against Russian rule, often abducted the strangers crossing their territory. The Russians finally captured Shamyl in 1859, but his legend lives on, contributing to the rich lore of the Caucasus.

No less an adventurer than Alexandre Dumas visited the Caucasus during Shamyl's reign. His travel memoirs tell of negotiating the narrow passes of the highway under heavy guard, in constant danger of attack by the roving mountaineers. "Nowhere else," he wrote, "even in Algeria, even in the Atlas Mountains, have I found travelling so exhausting, so fraught with danger, as in the Caucasus." But Dumas père reveled in risk and adventure. One evening at dusk his group had to pass through a particularly dangerous defile, and everyone was wary. Suddenly, a covey of partridge, disturbed by the noise of the entourage, flew up from the bushes. Dumas could not restrain himself. He leapt out of his carriage to shoot a plump bird for supper.

Once the Russian army garrisons were established, Georgia became a favored place of exile for political prisoners, its remoteness earning it the nickname "the Siberia of the South." The soldiers, reluctant at first to be sent to such a distant post, discovered that Georgia was indeed beautiful and exotic, and the Russian people soon grew fascinated with this mountainous, romantic land. The poet Mikhail Lermontov acknowledged the power Georgia held over its northern visitors, stating that “if you go to the Caucasus, you’ll return a poet.” Even such deeply Russian writers as Tolstoy and Chekhov were moved to visit Georgia. Following a trip there in 1852 Tolstoy commented that “I find that a great moral change has taken place in me . . . here I have become a better man.” And Chekhov wrote that in Georgia “nature astonishes one to the point of madness and despair.”

The Russian presence in Georgia continued unabated until 1918, when, following the October Revolution, Georgia declared its independence. The country’s elation was short lived, however. Although the two countries had signed a noninterference treaty in 1920, for the second time the Russians disregarded their agreement, and Georgia’s hopes for reclaiming its ancient glory quickly evaporated. In 1921 Bolshevik troops invaded, and once again Georgia was incorporated into a stronger empire, this time the Soviet Union. As small and prosperous homesteads were amalgamated into massive collective farms, morale sagged. The Georgians could not rally enthusiasm to work for the great communal enterprise. Many did, however, become successful profiteers, transporting scarce fruits to northern cities during the winter months to sell to the citrus-starved Russians at extremely high prices. Anyone who has traveled by Aeroflot between Tbilisi and Moscow may anxiously recall seats and aisles piled high with sacks full of produce in complete disregard for safety.

Unlike White Russians and neighboring Armenians who fled the newly created Soviet state in vast numbers, most Georgians chose to remain behind despite the difficult circumstances. Their ties to the land were simply too strong. The few who did leave established Georgian organizations abroad to help preserve their culture, and notably, even in emigration their devotion to their native food did not die. Throughout the world Georgians found that they could operate successful restaurants, even in the most remote places. More than one White Russian exile has written of the excellent railway buffets run by Georgians in Manchuria.

During the period of Soviet rule most of the outside world knew Georgia only as the birthplace of Joseph Stalin. The issue of Stalin is a sticky one for Georgians. Born Iosif Dzhugashvili, Stalin is unquestionably Georgia’s most famous native son, and as such he is still revered by many—an embarrassment to those Georgians who do not place national pride before all else. Visitors are often alarmed to see a photograph of a smiling Stalin dangling from the mirror of a taxicab manned by a seemingly friendly driver. But this homage has nothing to do with the evils Stalin perpetrated; rather it reflects a misguided national spirit. Georgians are self-conscious about being so little known and rightly afraid of being overlooked. Stalin, at least, brought Georgia to the attention of the world. And although he was an evil force, it cannot be denied that he was a towering figure of the twentieth century. His name is known; his importance to history cannot be dismissed. Hence the ambivalence with which many regard him in Georgia. Educated Georgians find this reverence especially difficult to understand, considering the special cruelty that Stalin meted out to his own people, a point made very clear in Tenghiz Abuladze's 1988 film, *Repentance*. Not only were thousands of Georgians banished from their villages to the Siberian wastelands, but ethnic Georgians were more than proportionally represented in the labor camps, even though their republic, on the outskirts of the Soviet Union, represented no threat to the political center. Both Stalin and his henchman (and fellow countryman) Lavrenty Beria used the occasion of the purges to settle old scores and retaliate against those who had shunned or slighted them when they were first rising to power in Georgia.

Stalin's figure continues to loom large today as his misdeeds are publicly recounted, causing old resentments to flare up between Russians and Georgians. And recent ethnic strife within Georgia has compounded tensions. When the Soviet government carved up the Caucasus, it created two separate political entities within the borders of the Georgian Republic—South Ossetia, in the southern Caucasus, and Abkhazia, on the Black Sea. Encouraged by Georgia's successful independence movement, the Ossetians and Abkhazians are now seeking autonomy. Georgia again finds itself in turmoil caused by shifting political balances.

However precarious the national situation, the Georgians cling fiercely to their land and traditions. Their loyalty can be fervid, expressed during toasts and meals as an act of consecration. In acknowledging their land as a gift from heaven, the Georgians express their most deeply felt values. And by preparing sumptuous feasts, they exalt the fruits of the earth.