

Between Modernity and Neo-Tradition: Patronage Politics and Bacteriophage Research in Interwar Soviet Georgia

by Timothy Blauvelt

The bacteriophage, championed by the microbiologist Giorgi Eliava, appealed to the early Bolsheviks' aspirations to create a more effective and rational society based on the mass provision of modern healthcare. Eliava used his connections among the Soviet Georgian elite to accomplish the creation of a major bacteriophage institute in Tbilisi. Yet, paradoxically, by the late 1930s Eliava's status and success put him on a collision course with the secret police-based network of that was increasingly ascendant in the Transcaucasian leadership. This article explores the hybridity of modern aspirations and informal politics that underlay Stalinism in practice in the interwar Soviet periphery.

Keywords: neotraditionalism; Stalinism; bacteriophage; clientelism

doi: 10.55337/QFSS5487

The Bolshevik leadership asserted, from the very start, its aspirations to achieve “modernity”, realize ideas of “progress”, and the subjugation of nature. Eager to make use of the resources of the Soviet state, in the name of the revolution and the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” the Bolsheviks aimed to build a new and more effective society based on the Enlightenment values of rationality and science. A key element of such a progressive state and society was the vision, resolve, and capacity to bring to bear cutting edge research and up-to-date methods of mass production and distribution in order to defeat the age old human nemeses of disease and pestilence, making such innovations available to the masses in fulfillment of the ambition to provide for the “economic right” of universal healthcare.¹ Yet despite the Bolsheviks’ objective to implement such aspirations through a rational bureaucratic state order, in practice, both elite politics and everyday societal life often functioned through informal connections, personalized networks, and clientelistic relationships of obligation. This was nowhere more the case than in the Caucasus, where such informal patronage relationships structured (and continue to structure) much of social life; in the first decades of the Soviet Union, a Caucasus-based patronage network would become a powerful force in early Soviet power politics, with the Caucasus region itself becoming a potent patronage resource.

This hybrid of formal aspects of an “ideal type” of modernity, together with pre-modern elements of personalistic informality and particularism (in contrast to impersonal authority), has been referred to as “neo-traditionalism.”² Terry Martin has famously noted that “modernization is the theory of Soviet intentions; neo-traditionalism the theory of their unintended consequences.”³ Yet, as Michael David-Fox has pointed out, most societies that are firmly considered to be “modern” also incorporate elements of tradition, and neo-traditionalism is but one strand of Stalinism; Stalinism itself is a hybrid rather than a coherent, unified phenomenon, and one that needs to be historicized in the context of the particular period and even location.⁴

Based on documents and memoirs from the Georgian National Archives, the Eliava Institute, and the Georgian KGB and Party archives, together with the extensive secondary literature concerning the main actors, their scientific convictions and accomplishments, and the patronage politics of the Soviet Caucasus, this article will attempt to accomplish precisely such a historicization. To this end, it approaches the contest between “modern” and scientific aspirations and the “neo-traditional” means of getting things done in interwar Soviet Georgia through an examination of the Georgian microbiologist Giorgi Eliava⁵ and his campaign to create an Institute of Bacteriophages in the capital Tiflis (renamed Tbilisi in 1936). By the mid-1930s, Eliava’s formidable networking efforts coincided with a major shift taking place within the republic’s ruling Stalinist patronage system. While Eliava ultimately accomplished the creation of his Institute, this very success thrust him into the center of the struggle for power raging between competing client networks.

Giorgi Eliava and The New Science of the Bacteriophage

In the autumn of 1921, some eight months after the remaining members of the government of the Georgian Democratic Republic (GDR) had departed in the opposite direction, the microbiologist Giorgi Eliava returned to the now Soviet Georgia after two years working and researching at the Institut Pasteur in Paris. Arriving in the port of Batumi with 100,000 French francs’ worth of laboratory equipment, vaccines, and serums donated by the Institute, Eliava also brought his enthusiasm for an innovative and potentially revolutionary new approach to combatting bacterial infections, the “bacteriophage”: microscopic and seemingly living organisms that were held to attack and “devour” bacteria.⁶ In the face of recent mass epidemics of typhus, influenza, and other diseases during the Russian Civil War, and in the course of establishing Soviet Power in the peripheries of the former Tsarist Empire, the new Bolshevik regime was eager to encourage such new and cutting edge, albeit controversial, scientific approaches. The practical ethos surrounding bacteriophage and the panache of its inventor and most prominent advocate, the French-Canadian microbiologist Félix d’Hérelle, of whom Eliava had

become protégé while living in Paris and who framed bacteriophage in terms of “symbiosis and an ecological vision of infection,” suited both the emerging design of Soviet scientific and research institutions. It also proved highly conducive to the Bolsheviks’ view of what scientific progress could and should look like in theory and in practice.⁷

Eliava was an unlikely early Soviet success story. Born in Sachkhere in western Georgia to an aristocratic family in 1893, he had been raised in solidly upper-middle class circumstances in Batumi. His father, Grigol Lavrentievich, was a respected doctor and public figure. Eliava graduated from the Batumi gimnaziya in 1907, entering the University of Odessa in 1909 to study literature. He was subsequently expelled a year later in relation to an unclear involvement with student disturbances and was sent back to Georgia with a so-called “wolf’s ticket” (volchiiy bilet) that, for the time being, prevented him from attending university elsewhere in Russia. However, with support of relatives, Eliava went to study at the University of Geneva in 1912, where he became inspired during a guest lecture by the Danish microbiologist Hans Christian Joachim Gram, the inventor of the Gram stain technique⁸. Forced to return home following the outbreak of the First World War broke in 1914, again with the help of relatives, Eliava was able to matriculate to the Medical Faculty of Moscow State University, from where he graduated with honors in 1916. He then went to work as a bacteriologist at field hospitals of the Society of Russian Cities in support of the war effort, first in Trabzon⁹ and then in Tiflis, where in 1918 he became head of the Tiflis Scientific Research Institute of Vaccines and Serums and the Central Bacteriology Laboratory of the Medical-Sanitary Department of the All-Russian Union of Cities.¹⁰ In early 1919, the government of the newly declared GDR, facing typhus outbreaks and gravely lacking in expertise, sent Eliava to France on his first study trip to the Pasteur Institute.¹¹

Apparently, while working in Tiflis in 1917 and investigating water from the Mtkvari (Kura) River for the presence of cholera vibriion, he had observed that a film of microbes in the water, when transplanted to a growth medium, somehow disappeared. According to his daughter Hanna, Eliava had prepared his microscope slides for work, but then remembered that he had to run to an important meeting, locking the materials in the laboratory. When he returned several days later and looked through the microscope, the slides were clear. He repeated the same procedure and, several days later, the results were the same.¹² Other researchers had noticed similar effects around the same time, including d’Hérelle who conducted experiments at the Pasteur Institute in 1917 and published a treatise entitled *Sur un microbe invisible antagoniste des bacilles dysentériques*, in which he hypothesized that the microscopic active agent destroying the bacteria was a living organism, what would later be proven to be viruses.¹³ Hearing about d’Hérelle’s ideas and research at the Institute, Eliava approached the director, Professor Émile

Roux, to conduct a series of his own formal, large-scale experiments to test the hypothesis.¹⁴ These proved successful, and brought him to the attention of d'Hérelle himself. Indeed, having supposedly been summoned from his retreat in the French provinces, upon rushing to the Institute, d'Hérelle had allegedly burst in and demanded "Where is this Eliava? Show him to me!"¹⁵ Like many at the Institute, d'Hérelle was taken with Eliava's energy and charisma, notably his enthusiasm for d'Hérelle's own theory of bacteriophage. Both scientists would later co-author an article discussing the "Uniqueness of the bacteriophage", in 1921.¹⁶

Turning down offers and opportunities to remain in Europe, in late 1921, Eliava chose instead to return home with the donated equipment, informing his Paris colleagues that "Georgia needs me."¹⁷ The Georgia to which Eliava returned was dramatically different than the one that he had left. Although beset with internal economic and political crises; external incursions from Ottoman Turkish and White Russian forces, alongside Bolshevik insurgencies; as well as from devastating epidemic diseases (including Ispanka or "Spanish Flu"), the short-lived GDR had been an oasis of stability and intellectual and artistic creativity in the former Tsarist periphery during the turbulent period of the Russian revolutions and civil war. Writers like Boris Pasternak and Osip Mandelstam, and the Futurist artist Ilia Zdanevich, mingled in Tiflis with the Georgian "Blue Horn" symbolist poets, including Paolo Iashvili and Titsian Tabidze. Moreover, the Georgian Menshevik government was responsible for implementing a prototype form of "Scandinavian" socialism and drafted one of the most progressive constitutions then yet seen in world history.¹⁸

This spirit of creativity and innovation continued even after the Soviet invasion and seizure of power in the country in February–March 1921. Although a more nationalist-oriented Menshevism was overwhelmingly dominant in Georgia, a number of Georgians and other Caucasian socialists also became influential in the more internationalist Bolshevik revolutionary underground. The 11th Red Army that seized Tiflis on 25 February, was itself headed by the Georgian Bolsheviks Budu Mdivani and Pilipe Makharadze, and coordinated from Baku by the head of the Russian Communist Party Caucasus Bureau (Kavbiuro) Sergo Orjonikidze, who had masterminded the "Sovietization" of the entire Transcaucasus region. In 1921-22, Mdivani and Makharadze even led a failed revolt against Orjonikidze - and his main patron Iosef Jughashvili or Joseph Stalin - as the latter attempted to subordinate Georgia to a constituent status within a Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federation. This was part of Stalin's larger vision of Soviet Russia as a unitary state with only symbolic and formal autonomy for its component territories.¹⁹

Despite this conflict (and in part because of it), the Caucasian network of Georgian and other local revolutionaries surrounding Orjonikidze and the Kavbiuro became a key element in the informal Bolshevik system of governance in the USSR during the 1920s, and a central pillar in Stalin's eventual rise to supreme

power.²⁰ Making use of Soviet nationalities policy, the Caucasian Bolshevik elites established powerful political “machines” in the apparatuses of the Georgian and Transcaucasian party organizations.²¹ They also quickly formed (or reinstated) connections with the young and upcoming elites in a range of creative, technical, and scientific fields – writers, artists, engineers, and scientists – offering them encouragement and patronage (and also friendship, or at least comradeship) in a newly emerging and expansively conceived Soviet Georgian intelligentsia.

Despite his aristocratic background and little apparent interest in Bolshevik ideology, or even in obtaining party membership, it seems that Eliava thrived in this vibrant new atmosphere of early Soviet Georgia. A protocol of the People’s Commissariat of Health of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) issued on 18 November 1922 and confirmed on 21 February 1923 established the Bacteriological Institute, on the bases of the previously existing Central Bacteriological Laboratory. This was to be fully funded by the Commissariat, with Eliava as its director and a member of its governing board.²² The Institute undertook diagnostics and treatment as well as research and became the primary producer of serums and vaccines for all of the Transcaucasus as well as for other regions of the Soviet Union. In March 1924, by order of the Georgian Soviet of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom), the Institute was transferred to a larger facility in the center of Tiflis (at Machabeli Street 4) and granted a parcel of land on the outskirts in the neighborhood of Saburtalo, which was then under development.²³

By the mid-1920s Eliava was becoming a major figure in Soviet microbiology and epidemiology. From 1925 to 1927 he was again sent, together with his family, to Paris for an extended research and study visit at the Pasteur Institute, funded by the Soviet Georgian government and Tbilisi State University (TSU). Upon his return he was appointed as chairman of the TSU Hygiene Department and then as head of the Microbiology Department, being awarded the title of Professor by the TSU Scientific Council. In 1930–31 he again returned to the Pasteur Institute and took part in a major conference in microbiology in Paris.²⁴ In addition to his formidable research and organizational skills, Eliava excelled at cultivating relationships with party and government officials and winning their support for his institution building projects.

Outgoing and gregarious, throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Eliava was a fixture of “high society” among the Soviet Georgian intelligentsia in Tiflis, associating with former revolutionaries and now ranking party officials such as Mdivani, Karp Modebadze, Malakia Toroshelidze and Mikhail Okujava; as well as Levan Ghoghoberidze, the first secretary of the Georgian party Central Committee; Petre Aghniashvili, the deputy head of the Georgian Sovnarkom (essentially the SSR’s Council of Ministers) and then Second Secretary of the Georgian Party; and his brother Levan, who would become rector of TSU. Other friends and acquaintances included luminaries such as the hydro engineers Bessarion Chichinadze and

Vladimir Jikia, the latter's wife Tinatin Jikia, the theater director Sandro Akhmeteli, the poets Iashvili and Tabidze, and the writer Konstantine Gamsakhurdia.²⁵

Many party officials also served, in various ways, as patrons and protectors for these Georgian specialists and intellectuals. Eliava's former assistant Elene Makashvili later described his abilities in interpersonal relations:

"It was simply impossible to have bad relations with Gogi [Eliava]; like nobody else he was able to get on peoples' good side, without making the slightest effort he could win their sympathies. The charm of his talent and his heartfelt generosity effected people."²⁶

A working report (*dokladnaya zapiska*) that Eliava addressed to then-Georgian Party Second Secretary Aghniashvili in November 1932 exemplifies the detailed level of official patronage the latter was able to provide to the Institute: Eliava reminded Aghniashvili of the need for support from the Georgian Sovnarkom in securing bricks and other resources to complete the construction of two additional floors as well as for repairing a wall encircling the Saburtalo property. It also highlighted the need to obtain a Ford truck to facilitate deliveries between Institute locations and meet the regional demands for serums and vaccines.²⁷

The Changing Social and Political Landscape: The Rise of Stalin and Beria

The late 1920s and early 1930s were a period of marked change in Soviet politics and society. With the consolidation of power in the hands of Stalin and the launch of the "revolutions from above" of forced industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture, the relative liberality and partial market system of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the lenient attitude of the Soviet regime towards the so-called "bourgeois specialists" began to change. During NEP, these non-party experts in various fields, whose educational experiences and acculturation took place prior to the revolution, had not only been tolerated by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s, but were considered essential.

Under Stalin's first five-year plan from 1928 to 1932, however, regime propaganda began to portray the "bourgeois specialists" as ideologically unreliable and potentially disloyal. In 1928, for example, 53 mining engineers from Shakhty in Rostov faced a public show trial for wrecking and sabotage, a "signal" that such specialists were to be held up as scapegoats for industrial accidents taking place in the course of this new economic strategy.²⁸ This was most notable with the mass arrests of members of the intelligentsia which took place in the Ukrainian SSR in 1929 and 1930, accused of excessive nationalism and involvement in a supposed Union for the Liberation of Ukraine.²⁹

In the context of the "Cultural Revolution" during the same period, the regime both worked to consolidate the institutions and associations of intellectual life such as universities, academies of sciences, research institutes, and writers' unions. By bringing such organizations under state and party control, the

Moscow government hoped to train and cultivate cadres of a new, younger “Red Intelligentsia” who would replace their less reliable bourgeois cohorts.³⁰ At the same time, the massive state investment in industrialization and modernization also involved an expansion of socialized medicine and the institutional base for the provision of mass healthcare, of which epidemiological surveillance and control were a key element. The network of institutes of bacteriology and epidemiology that had been first established in the 1920s continued to be expanded in many of the Soviet republics and major cities.³¹

Fundamental changes were also taking place within the leadership circles in Georgia and the Transcaucasus. Throughout the mid to late-1920s, Lavrenti Beria, an ambitious, young Georgian secret policeman, had been consolidating his position and power base, becoming first deputy head and then head of the Georgian secret police in 1926. In 1927 he was again promoted to the position of Georgian People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs before becoming deputy head and then head of the Transcaucasian secret police in 1931. By 1930, he was also a member of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, and, by the end of 1931, had successfully and fully made the transition from leadership of the secret police to the leading organs of the Georgian party, becoming First Secretary of the Georgian Party Central Committee in November 1931 and then of the Transcaucasian Party Regional Committee (*Zakkraikom*) in November 1932. Like other political elites in the early Soviet periphery, Beria’s steady rise through the secret police apparatus was facilitated by his deft exercise of clientelism, cultivating a loyal cohort of promotees who owed their positions, and thus allegiance, to him personally. While maintaining his secret police power base, Beria brought his network of clients with him during his transition into the party leadership, beginning to challenge Orjonikidze (who had himself been one of Beria’s earlier patrons) for control within the powerful Caucasian party network.³²

The Beria cohort of new party officials differed significantly from the typical profile of the established Georgian party cadres: younger, less well-educated, and often from provincial backgrounds. Their formative career experiences came primarily from service in the Soviet secret police rather than from the revolutionary underground. Thus, the political conflict for position and prestige within the state apparatuses, and ultimately dominance over the ruling network, overlay a cultural and generational conflict between the sophisticated “Old Bolshevik” former revolutionaries of the Tiflis party elite and Beria’s cruder and more thuggish newcomers recruited from the ranks of the secret police. Members of both groups resented and despised one another.³³ Nevertheless, in reality the conflict played out over a number of years and was perhaps less stark than this situation might have initially implied, involving shifting alliances and patronage arrangement, rather than intimidation and violence, as the Beria group gradually asserted its dominance in the police, state, and party institutions. Yet the animosity

and resentment between the cohorts was real enough and would have concrete consequences for the life trajectories of many people.

Aspirations Unfurled: The Arrival of d'Hérelle and Plans for the Bacteriophage Institute in Tiflis

It was in this context that Eliava, returning to Soviet Georgia from his third and final stay in Paris in 1930–31, was attempting to take full advantage of his connections in the leadership to bring to fruition his life's goal: inviting his scientific mentor d'Hérelle to relocate to Georgia and, together, work to create a world-class institute devoted to bacteriophage research and development in Tiflis. By this point d'Hérelle was a professor at Yale University, though apparently dissatisfied and feeling himself underappreciated within American academia. He consequently submitted his resignation letter in May 1933, citing "continued misunderstandings."³⁴ In response, Eliava promptly extended an invitation on behalf of the Soviet Georgian government to relocate to Tiflis and take up a consultancy and professorship at an institute for continuing education. Following d'Hérelle's acceptance, both scientists set about planning their dream bacteriophage institute.

D'Hérelle left few writings concerning his political or ideological views, though it seems that the experience of life during the Great Depression in the United States and Western Europe and a sense that his work was undervalued in the West, combined to make the Soviet (and Eliava's) offer irresistible. In the words of Irakli Georgadze, then a lab employee who worked with d'Hérelle in Tiflis and who later became director of the Institute in the 1970s, d'Hérelle "belonged among those progressive Western European scientists who attempted to place his knowledge and his discoveries selflessly at the service of mankind to the extent that was possible in that social-societal construct in which they lived and worked."³⁵ D'Hérelle's former dean at Yale wrote that he had accepted the offer "to be able to carry out work in regions where clinical and field studies can be carried out more readily than they can in this country [the United States]"; d'Hérelle's wife, Marie, later wrote in her diary that "for the first time in his life, d'Hérelle enjoyed the real appreciation of his work. His laboratory [in Tiflis] was supported in grand style with able technical staff, and he enjoyed the personal attention of servants, including a chauffeur."³⁶

D'Hérelle in fact made two extended trips to the Soviet Union, first from October 1933 to April 1934 and then again from November 1934 to May 1935, intending to return in the autumn of 1935, perhaps for good. During his time in the USSR, he travelled extensively, visiting institutes in Moscow and Leningrad and other cities, participating in academic conferences and events, and giving public talks. However, the majority of his time was spent in Tiflis with Eliava, staying at the Hotel Orient on Rustaveli Avenue, and working daily at the Institute of Bacteriology. He had apparently even turned down offers of institutional directorships in Moscow and elsewhere owing to his preference for the Georgian climate and because of how

impressed he had been with the scientific staff at the Institute in Tiflis.³⁷

In 1935, d'Hérelle published a major scientific work, *Bacteriophage and the Phenomenon of Recovery*, translated into Russian by Eliava, through the publishing house of Tbilisi State University and facilitated by the university's rector (and the publisher's founder), Eliava's old colleague Levan Aghniashvili.³⁸ D'Hérelle dedicated the book to Stalin, and although the phrasing of the dedication may have been primarily an offering of gratitude for hospitality (or an attempt to meet the accepted Stalinist style of panegyrics), it does seem to emphasize an appreciation for the ideal of "Stalinist civilization":

*This book, summarizing 20 years of seeking new paths in medicine, I dedicated to him, who, guided by the indefatigable and merciless logic of history, is building a human society on entirely new bases, and has taken his task to such a height, to such a decisive plane, that the dispassionate observer can have no doubt about the final result: I dedicate it to Com. STALIN.*³⁹

In the book's introduction, d'Hérelle seems to simultaneously pursue the joint goals of reflecting a flattering view of the Soviet Union while also advocating for further institution building. The Soviet Union itself is described as a "remarkable country which, for the first time in the history of humanity, has chosen for itself, as its guidebook, not irrational mysticism, but rather sober science, beyond the logic of which there cannot be true progress," and he expressed the hope that the era of rebirth and an unprecedented flowering of science should be opened in the Soviet Union:

*laboratories devoted to biological discovery are appearing everywhere in your enormous country, scientific life is intensifying ever more and more, while in the capitalist countries it faces a growing tendency towards retardation; they have condemned science as the first victim of the world economic crisis.*⁴⁰

In 1934, Eliava submitted a detailed report (*dokladnaya zapiska*) to Beria outlining the potential of bacteriophages and the need to commit significant resources for their intensive study and for the creation of a dedicated institute of bacteriophage research in Tiflis. Eliava had already secured a commitment, through Petre Aghniashvili, of 200,000 rubles as part of the projected requirement of 940,000 needed for the establishment of the institution from the Sovnarkom. His overture to Beria now requested support from the party to obtain the remainder. Eliava's report stressed the international reputation of d'Hérelle and the significance of his support for the project, as well as the potential military relevance that the further development of bacteriophage would have for treating typhus, dysentery and bacterial infections.⁴¹

According to the narrative surrounding the Eliava Institute's founding, Beria had dismissed this request with a curt expression of profanity.⁴² It was clear that party support for the building of the institute would not be forthcoming. Usually

cold and calculating, but not given to reflectiveness about science and progress unless specifically tasked, in this instance it seems that Beria's vindictiveness had overcome any advantages that he might have perceived from the successful implementation of the bacteriophage institute project. It also seems likely that Beria's hostility towards Eliava stemmed from both the latter's connection to his rivals', Aghniashvili and Orjonikidze, party network and from personal animosity towards what Eliava seemed to represent.

A great number of stories and legends that illustrate the animosity that emerged between Eliava and Beria during this time. According to some, Eliava was irritated by Beria's dilettante remarks about literature, art, and theater, and was overheard critiquing some caustic comment the Georgian party leader had made in the opera theater. Another anecdote concerned a near collision in the street. Both Eliava and Beria's cars had stopped but Eliava did not properly acknowledge Beria, what is known in Georgian slang as "to do a 'ne vizhu'" ("ne-vizhu ketdeba"), pretending not to see somebody. Another story has Eliava among a group of Georgian literati on the balcony of the apartment of Tinatin Jikia, located near Beria's home. Beria, allegedly infatuated with Jikia, had sent an underling to invite her to his house, but she had refused owing to her already hosting guests. One of them, the theatre director Sandro Akhmeteli, had apparently criticized Beria in the presence of his messenger, despite Gamsakhurdia, who was also at the gathering, attempting to restrain him. In yet another story, Eliava, having been training his dog to shake its head to signal "no" to offerings when saying "*beri, beri*" ("take it, take it") in Russian, had exclaimed, "Look, even the dog doesn't want to hear about Beria anymore!"⁴³

According to some accounts, Beria was especially irritated that a copy of d'Hérelle's 1935 book, published by TSU, had been presented to Stalin in Moscow by Orjonikidze, rather than himself. More salacious rumors even suggested the existence of love triangle in which both Beria and Eliava were pursuing the same mistress, sometimes identified as Tinatin Jikia, and in some sources, rather improbably, as Eliava's wife, the Polish opera soprano Amelia Wohl-Lewicka.⁴⁴ Many or all of these stories are most likely apocryphal, but they perhaps hint at an underlying truth, symbolizing the animosity beneath the surface between the sophisticated and privileged Georgian intellectual elite, the old guard of the party, and those state officials who had cultivated and patronized them and the newly ascendant cohort of Beria's secret policemen-turned party bosses, who deeply resented both of these established elite groups.

Conflict in the Georgian Secret Police

In 1933-34, a struggle played out behind the scenes that would have grave significance for both the Beria group's consolidation of power and also their subsequent treatment of the Georgian technical intelligentsia. This conflict,

incidentally, reached its crescendo at exactly the moment of d'Hérelle's first visit. Throughout 1933, the Economic Department (*Ekonomicheskii otdel* – EKO) of the Georgian secret police (GruzGPU) had carried out a series of arrests targeting technical specialists. These included a number of veterinarians, agronomists, and experts in other fields, many of whom were working for the Georgian People's Commissariat of Health, for alleged acts of economic sabotage on behalf of a counterrevolutionary “Georgian National Center.”

During the Perestroika period of the late-1980s, a former secret police official named Suren Gazaryan published a memoir entitled *This Must Not Be Repeated* (*Eto ne dolzhno povtoritsya*). In this text, which had earlier circulated in samizdat form, Gazaryan recounted the story of these arrests and the political conflict that resulted from them within the secret police. This wave of arrests had included “people with international reputations,” such as “the biologist Eliava who created his ‘bacteriophage.’” Gazaryan was mistaken, however.⁴⁵ Eliava had in fact not been among those arrested in 1933-34, though Gazaryan's claims were later presented as fact in some biographies of Eliava and histories on the development of bacteriophages.⁴⁶ Yet, even though Eliava was not among the victims of these events, he was certainly connected with a number of the arrestees and must have been to some degree aware of what was happening. It would have been an unsettling indication of where things might be headed in Soviet Georgia at the very time when d'Hérelle was making his first extended visit to the republic.

Gazaryan's account also frames the conflict sparked by the 1933-34 Georgian EKO arrests as one between the GruzGPU and their counterparts at the Transcaucasian Federation level (ZakGPU). There is, to a degree, some truth to this. However, the primary struggle appears to have been not between different branches or administrative levels within the secret police, but a conflict among networks, specifically the Beria group and another around Tite Lordkipanidze, one of the last remaining holdouts that stood in the way of the former's total dominance in the Caucasus. The specialists themselves were taken into custody by a “special investigatory group” within the EKO of GruzGPU without the sanction of ZakGPU and on the orders of the GruzGPU head Davit Kiladze, a client of Beria.⁴⁷ The arrestees were coerced into admitting to outlandish crimes, with the GruzGPU bringing cases against them based solely on these forced confessions. Gazaryan, himself had been tasked by Lordkipanidze with investigating one of these cases on behalf of ZakGRU. On uncovering the widespread use of coercive measures, he had appealed to the Prosecutor of the Transcaucasian Military District, accusing the leaders of the EKO group, Mikhail Goryachev, Konstantin Savitsky, Nikita Krimyan, and Sergo Davlianidze, of violating the norms of the criminal-procedural codes and of using unsanctioned methods of investigation. It transpired that the EKO group had also concocted a profit-generating scheme to put the arrested specialists to work in designing a dairy combine. Furthermore, while gathered

together to work on this project (in direct violation of the procedures for keeping suspects separated) the specialists had coordinated a plan to admit to outlandish accusations in the hope that this would make the case against them seem absurd. As the result of the complaints from ZakGPU, the EKO group attempted to bypass their federal-level counterparts by appealing directly to the central Soviet secret police, the USSR OGPU, in Moscow.⁴⁸

The situation was further complicated by the fact that a major reorganization was taking place within the Soviet secret police at that moment in mid-1934. Both the OGPU and GPU were in the process of being dismantled and reorganized as branches of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). Considering these changes, the criminal cases against the Georgian specialists, already lacking in evidence, would now have to be heard not by the GPU Collegium as had previously been the procedure, but by a Military Tribunal. The Georgian EKO group thus attempted to backdate a decision from the already defunct Collegium of GruzGPU sentencing the accused to ten years' imprisonment, hoping that this move would be affirmed by the newly founded NKVD. Upon hearing the argument put forward by the former ZakGPU (now ZakNKVD), the NKVD's central branch agreed that these cases would have to be decided by the Prosecutors' Office of the Transcaucasian Military District. The latter, observing that there was no evidence of a crime other than the confessions, ordered that those arrested be released. The convictions remained on their records as a backdated sentence of 10 year's imprisonment, however, resulting in them being issued an "amnesty" by the Georgian Central Executive Committee and sent to work in menial positions in the regions outside of the capital.⁴⁹

The EKO group officers were themselves arrested upon their return to Georgia for "financial crimes" (presumably related to the dairy combine plan) on the orders of Lordkipanidze. However, they were released only a month later when Beria arranged for his rival's removal and transfer to Crimea, having him replaced as head of the ZakNKVD by one of his own clients, Sergo Goglidze.⁵⁰ The EKO group members, all of whom would be later promoted to important positions within the Georgian NKVD, remained embittered by the experience and eager to exact revenge on the formerly arrested specialists as well and those affiliated to the Lordkipanidze group. For them, the experience of extracting confessions in these cases would serve as a precedent for the approaches they were to adopt three years later in 1937, when confessions alone would serve as a more than sufficient basis for convictions and sentencing.⁵¹

A Dream Fulfilled: The Creation of the Institute

Despite Beria's refusal to support the bacteriophage institute plan, from 1934 to 1936 Eliava continued to pursue his campaign to obtain funding at even higher

levels. Mdivani is reputed to have taken the proposal to Moscow on Eliava's behalf where he presented it to Orjonikidze, by then a member of the Politburo and USSR People's Commissar of Heavy Industry.⁵² However the pitch was ultimately made, it had clearly been done in such a way as to bypass Beria, and proved to be stunningly successful: on 14 April 1936, the USSR Sovnarkom, the very highest institution of the Soviet government, issued a decree (*postanovleniye*) committing 13 million rubles for the establishment of an All-Union Bacteriophage Institute in Tiflis and the construction of a special complex.⁵³ In December 1936 the USSR People's Commissariat of Health approved the building plans. Construction began that same month on the plot of land in the Saburtalo district on the outskirts of the city that had earlier been assigned to the Institute of Bacteriology.⁵⁴ The architect F. F. Bernshtamm was invited from Leningrad, and the blueprints were drawn up under Eliava's direction with the active participation of d'Hérelle. Equipment was also ordered and delivered from France.

In addition to the main office and laboratory buildings, the design included a large, so-called "French Cottage": a split residence that would accommodate both Eliava, d'Hérelle, and their families. The residence was completed in 1937, with the complex following shortly after in 1938.⁵⁵ Yet despite achieving what would become his greatest success, and in part most likely because of it, Eliava would not live to see the Institution's final completion. D'Hérelle, who had long intended to build a new life for himself in Soviet Georgia, left the USSR for the final time in the autumn of 1935. He would never return to see the Institute in person.

Even as Eliava would have been celebrating his victory in late 1936, there were ominous signs. Arrests of respected specialists, including Eliava's close friend, the engineer Vladimir Jikia, and party officials who had previously opposed the Stalin group, such as Mdivani, Okujava, and Malakia Toroshelidze, had already begun. Eliava's friends and patrons Petre and Levan Aghniashvili, were arrested in late November and early December 1936. On 23 January 1937, during the opening phase of the escalating "Great Terror," a team of NKVD officers led by Nikita Krimyan, one of the architects of the 1933–34 EKO cases, came to arrest Eliava and his wife.⁵⁶ The procedure of searching, sealing off rooms, and arresting and removing the suspects, which would later become almost ritualized, was still so unfamiliar in early 1937 that Eliava's step-daughter later wrote in her memoirs that she thought at first that the officers might be bandits or burglars.⁵⁷

Arrest, Interrogation and Execution

According to the interview protocols and rehabilitation documents held in the files of the Georgian KGB archive, Eliava was charged with multiple counts of counterrevolution and espionage on behalf of foreign states, primarily France and the United Kingdom.⁵⁸ His first recorded interrogation is dated to the beginning of

April 1937, more than two months after his arrest. This opening sessions focused on Eliava's supposed recruitment to French intelligence during his stays in Paris from 1919 to 1921 and 1925 to 1927, on behalf of a certain "Colonel Vagone." He also was reportedly compelled to give the names of 65 people in Georgia, mainly members of the intelligentsia (including the poet Tabidze and the engineer Bessarion Chichinadze) who had supposedly also been recruited to commit espionage on behalf of France. He subsequently "confessed" that in 1932 he had learned of the existence of a "Georgian National Center" that included the party officials Malakia Toroshelidze, Mikhail Okujava, Vladimir Jikia, Budu Mdivani, Filipe Makharadze and Bessarion Kvirkvelia.

During his secondment in Paris in 1926, Eliava had supposedly introduced Colonel Vagone to Mdivani, then head of the Soviet Trade Delegation in France, facilitating the latter's recruitment as a French agent. Vagone was said to have told Eliava that

the information received from me [Eliava] was meager and covered only the ideological front of Georgia, while in the time when Budu Mdivani was head of the Trade Representation he received a fuller and more exhaustive characterization about different sides of Georgian reality." The colonel had also supposedly told Eliava that "Your song is sung, since Budu can help more effectively."⁵⁹ A key motive behind Eliava's arrest had been to facilitate an organizational link between Mdivani in the Georgian National Center and Petre Aghniashvili, "as aside from tradecraft considerations, the personal relations between Mdivani and Aghniashvili were not acknowledged (publicly), i.e. they pretended not to know each other."⁶⁰

Another interrogation conducted from May 1-4 shifted these espionage assertions from France to the United Kingdom. Dr. Alan Gregg and Daniel O'Brien of the Medical Services Division of the Rockefeller Foundation office in Paris, were reimagined as British intelligence agents, despite both being American. Eliava supposedly corrected his testimony from earlier in April to say that he had not introduced Mdivani to Vagone on behalf of France, but to O'Brien on behalf of Britain, who then acted as Mdivani's handler. It was only during the final interrogation in June, and then in forced meetings (ochnye stavki) with the arrested head of the Vaccination Department of the Bacteriological Institute⁶¹ and the head of the Institute's stables,⁶² were accusations brought of a "terroristic" nature. Eliava had supposedly conspired with Mdivani to use bacteriological warfare against the Red Army in the event of war, as well as to poison wells in the town of Signaghi with typhus bacteria and contaminate jars in a local canning factory with botulism.⁶³ There are no surviving copies of the indictment (obvinitel'noe zakluchenije) against Eliava, but he was sentenced for counterrevolutionary activity by a decree of the Georgian SSR Supreme Court of 2 July 1937, together with Mdivani, Okujava, Toroshelidze and several others, all of whom were executed on 9-10 July. This was

announced publicly in the official newspaper *Zarya vostoka* on 11 July.⁶⁴

The relevance of Eliava's forced testimony for the case against Mdivani is clear from the fact that the surviving materials in the Georgian KGB archive regarding the former are preserved in the latter's case file. Eliava was especially useful in the Mdivani case as he had had the opportunity to interact with Mdivani while both had been living in Paris during the 1920s. Nevertheless, testimony and confessions attributed to Eliava were also used against dozens of victims of the purges in Georgia in 1937–38, most likely because of his hyper-connectedness in intelligentsia and leadership circles, his well-known international connections, and the fact that he was simply among the first to be arrested in early 1937. NKVD officials throughout the USSR were under intense pressure in this early phase of the purges to expand the list of potential "anti-Soviet elements" in order to meet targets for numbers of arrestees based on extracted "testimonies."⁶⁵ Whether Eliava had actually provided the names indicated in the interrogation protocols, or if they were simply attributed to him by the investigators, is unknowable, and ultimately beside the point. Eliava was a convenient mechanism for this purpose through his cultural and political connections.

References to the arrested Eliava (alongside Jikia and Petre Aghniashvili) feature prominently in the transcripts of the infamous meetings of the Georgian Union of Writers in the spring and summer of 1937, during which the majority of members were also arrested and the poet Paolo Iashvili protested by committing suicide in the Union's office. Only a few prior, Beria, in a speech to the 10th Congress of the Georgian Communist Party, had declared that "We have literary figures who are in communication with enemies of the people, like Lominadze, Aghniashvili, Jikia, Eliava . . . Iashvili in particular should smarten up."⁶⁶ During a subsequent session of the Writers' Union on 27 May, which amounted to a public trial (albeit several weeks before Eliava's execution and the public announcement of that and of the charges against him), Iashvili was forced to renounce his associations with Jikia, with whom he had worked on the Rioni hydroelectric dam project. He was also coerced into denouncing his patronage relationship with Petre Aghniashvili, and particularly his friendship with Eliava, whom he described as "a typical sneerer who smiled to your face, a heart-throb, basically two-faced and liked to stir up envy . . . he disliked any inner checks. He was always trying to go abroad."⁶⁷

However, Iashvili also admitted that he did not cut off his association with Eliava soon enough. At a session on 8 June, he conceded that "thanks to my Bohemian, or as they say, 'purely poetic' but insufficiently civic lifestyle" he had grown close to Eliava. "I shall accept my punishment if it turns out that I had any link with Eliava's treacherous sly deeds or that I knew his treasonable behavior and yet went on knowing him," he concluded. A month later, during a presidium session of the Union on 22 July, Iashvili shot himself with a hunting rifle he had brought into the building. In December 1937, Beria announced, with satisfaction, the exposure

and destruction of various high-profile group of counterrevolutionaries and spies among the Georgian intelligentsia, highlighting that Iashvili and Tabidze had collaborated with Eliava in poisoning 50 people with biological weapons.⁶⁸

The Destruction of the Lordkipanidze Group in the Georgian NKVD

Eliava's arrest and testimony likely played a role in the culmination of the NKVD's ongoing internal conflict, that had begun back in 1933–34, between Beria's group and that of Lordkipanidze. Lordkipanidze, along with several of his close associates such as Petre Mkheidze and Valerian Pol'shin, had also been actively spying among the Georgian émigré community in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s while Eliava was living there. The conduct of Soviet intelligence operations abroad among diaspora and émigré populations during the interwar period was surprisingly decentralized, as the Georgian and Transcaucasian secret police had the authorization and a free hand to operate against their own targets, such as the Armenian Dashnaks and the Azerbaijani Musavatists, as well as Georgian Mensheviks and other political exiles in Western Europe and Persia.⁶⁹ During his interrogation protocol of 6–8 April 1937, Eliava was accused of using his connections to “gather information about the methods of work of NKVD personnel stationed abroad,” including obtaining the codenames that Mkheidze had used in Istanbul and Pol'shin in Persia. This would seem a surprisingly precise level of detail and an obscure thing for Eliava to have known, until one notices that this interrogation was conducted by none other than Mkheidze and Pol'shin themselves (together with K. A. Shperling, another NKVD official close to Lordkipanidze).⁷⁰

In June 1937, based in part on confessions extracted from Mdivani and Okujava concerning the supposed Georgian National Center, Beria's old rival Lordkipanidze was arrested in Crimea and extradited (“etapirovan”) to Tbilisi for interrogation. Shortly thereafter, between 2 and 11 July, a large group of former and current high ranking Georgian NKVD officials associated with Lordkipanidze were rounded up, including Gazaryan, Mkheidze, and Pol'shin, as well as M. S. Dzidziguri, G. I. Dumbadze, G. L. Agabalyan, and O. L. Gvilava. Their “investigations” and interrogations were led primarily by the Georgian NKVD 4th Department group of Krimyan, Savitsky and Khazan. Among the “evidence” of the counterrevolutionary intentions of some of them on behalf of Lordkipanidze (particularly Gazaryan) was their “interference” in the prosecution of the “wrecking” case against the Georgian specialists in 1933–34.⁷¹

In the transcript of a closed meeting of the party cell of the 3rd Department of the Georgian NKVD that took place in October 1937 (held in the case file on Mkheidze), Khazan held forth on the arrest of this group of former NKVD officers, supposedly recruited into a counterrevolutionary group by Lordkipanidze in 1934, and their “Trotskyite treachery.” He emphasized in particular that Mkheidze and Pol'shin had purposely taken over the first interrogations of Eliava, handling them

in such a way as to emphasize his supposed influencing activities and information gathering on behalf of France. This, Khazan asserted, had been done to prevent Eliava from revealing anything about them and their links with Lordkipanidze, or about Eliava's own alleged involvement in terroristic plots: "just when he was about to confess, they had him start talking about Col. Vagone and such." Eliava "surrendered [the engineer Bessarion] Chichinadze immediately in the interrogation, and it now became clear that this was so as not to extract testimony on Lortkipanidze; they got Eliava to give completely different testimony on links with the Central Committee of the National Democrats and so on". When Khazan himself was finally able to conduct the interrogation, he said "I had to ask about the real crimes, about the bacterial weapons in Signaghi and about Lordkipanidze." He also accused Dzidziguri of "slowing down the investigation [of Eliava] by constantly redoing and rewriting the interrogation protocols."⁷² While Gazaryan was sentenced to 10 years in the GULAG and survived to write his memoirs, the rest of this group were convicted together on 14 September 1937 and executed the following day. In the aftermath of the arrests Khazan "inherited" the larger central Tbilisi apartment of Pol'shin, and Krimyan that of Dzidziguri.⁷³

Denouement

It is perhaps significant that no mention of, or references to, d'Hérelle or the Bacteriophage Institute, aside from the allegations regarding Mdivani's supposed plan to poison people with bacteria, which were not linked to the Institute, are included in Eliava's interrogation protocols or in the public accusations. Given the categorical commitment of the USSR Sovnarkom to the Institute project, perhaps even the Georgian NKVD was unwilling to cast aspersions in its direction. Work continued unabated on the construction of the new Institute's facilities despite Eliava's arrest, and the main buildings were completed in 1938. D'Hérelle would never return to the Soviet Union, nor would he ever provide any public commentary on the fate of his friend and protégé. He would, however, send supplies to the Institute at his own expense. Based on a suggestion from the All-Union Sanitary inspection, the Bacteriophage Institute was merged with the existing Bacteriological Institute to form the Research Institute of Microbiology, Epidemiology and Bacteriophage, and subordinated to the Georgian People's Commissariat of Health. The existing staff were moved into the new complex from 1939, and it promptly began undertaking research and producing preparations.⁷⁴

Although the institute never achieved the international status that it more than certainly would have under Elaiva and d'Hérelle, it nevertheless made a significant contribution to the Soviet war effort from 1941 to 1945. Moreover, the use of bacteriophages became widespread throughout the Soviet Union from as early as 1946,⁷⁵ while the Tbilisi institute continued to function even after Georgia's

declaration of independence in 1991; it was quietly renamed in honor of Eliava during the Perestroika era. Although interest in bacteriophage research declined sharply in the West following the invention of penicillin and other antibiotics, the collapse of the USSR and increasing concerns over the growth of antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria has seen renewed attention being paid to the potential of bacteriophages, as well as the Institute in now post-Soviet Tbilisi that had been quietly collecting and cataloguing phages over the course of the interceding decades.⁷⁶

Conclusion

In considering this narrative of the history of the founding of the Bacteriophage Institute in the interwar years, one cannot help but be struck by the contrast between the modernity of the aspirations that the project encompassed and the highly traditional (or neo-traditional) nature of the informal networking and clientelistic relationships that brought it to fruition, yet later doomed Eliava and left d'Hérelle disillusioned. Bacteriophage research clearly appealed to the early Soviet enthusiasm for the most contemporary, and even radical, scientific approaches for solving the ills of society, combined with the Bolsheviks' commitment to the provision of public healthcare and hygiene through the technology of mass production. The Pasteur Institute with its international connections and global networks seemed an ideal model to emulate within Soviet scientific institution building. As the science historian Dmitriy Myelnikov emphasizes, bacteriophage research, in particular, captured the imagination of the Soviet scientific establishment for reasons beyond its radical chic: "First, its therapeutic promise suited both the practical ethos and the growing infrastructure of Soviet microbiological research. Second, d'Hérelle's controversial, but thrilling theories about the bacteriophage's role in human immunity appealed to Soviet interest in symbiosis and an ecological vision of infection."⁷⁷ This concept of symbiosis was encapsulated in d'Hérelle's theorizing about how bacteria evolved together with microorganisms (the bacteriophages, in fact, viruses) that consumed them, and that these "phages spread through a population in parallel with bacteria and were responsible for the eventual decline of an outbreak."⁷⁸ Not only was this natural negation resulting in positive progress symbiotic, it was patently dialectical.

Eliava's career flowered in the heady environment of 1920s and early 1930s Soviet Georgia, with its close interaction between the stars of the scientific and technical intelligentsia and the party and state officials who understood the value of their contributions and were eager to provide them with support and patronage. When d'Hérelle arrived for his extended visits in 1934 and 1935, he found this milieu in Soviet Tiflis both welcoming and inspiring. By then, however, changes were clearly underway in the SSR's convoluted system of informal patronage

politics, as Beria and his clients from the secret police gradually pushed aside the established Georgian “Old Bolshevik” elites and consolidated their hold over the Transcaucasian network. The various relationships that Eliava had been cultivating for more than a decade had, by then, reached their peak effectiveness in obtaining a clear mandate from the USSR Sovnarkom to establish the new Institute, securing the allocation of an enormous sum for its construction. Paradoxically, at the same time those very elites in the central Soviet and Georgian leadership were already beginning to fall from grace, finding themselves replaced by a new and less intellectually and ideologically inspired, yet much more ruthless, cohort of party cadres led by Beria.

Eliava’s very effectiveness in navigating the intricacies of elite patronage, and especially his ability to bypass the antipathy and obstruction of Beria, almost certainly amplified the latter’s animosity towards him. The arrest and sentencing of somebody with Eliava’s background – the foreign-educated offspring of minor Georgian nobility with extensive international contacts – in the conditions of 1937 is in many regards overdetermined. Elite intelligentsias and technical and scientific specialists were decimated throughout the USSR during the “Great Terror,” and this was nowhere more the case than in Soviet Georgia, where so many of them had patronage and kinship connections with the highly placed former party and state officials of the previously dominant Caucasian network. Even then, it seems at least possible that Eliava’s international reputation and academic connections might have been a restraining factor, as they were for the writer Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, one of Eliava’s friends and a rare survivor of the Terror.

Eliava’s arrest and execution inevitably came at a cost to Soviet science, as well as the international reputation of the USSR, and likely carried a high price for Beria and the new Soviet Georgian leadership: the presence of a major international institution in Georgia could have been a major asset for the local party, even if Beria had previously obstructed the project. The exposure of Eliava as a counterrevolutionary and spy, and the alienation of d’Hérelle, meant that the institute, although eventually becoming operational, would never gain such a status. Yet Beria was nothing if not a calculating pragmatist, and this was clearly a sacrifice he was willing to make.

Nevertheless, it most likely was the prestige of the project and the importance of the aspirations that stood behind it that allowed the institute to outlive its creator, even if in a diminished form. Beria and his clients certainly lacked the vision to grasp the longer-term benefits of bacteriophage research and of the Institute. Indeed, given the crudeness of the supposed terroristic plots they concocted, involving the use of bacteria to poison essential resources such as wells, it seems clear that they had very little detailed understanding of the scientific principles involved. In their own way, however, they were surely pursuing a vision of modernity, as were the other implementers and perpetrators of the 1937 Terror: a party, state, and society

thoroughly cleansed efficiently and mercilessly of alien class enemies through the application of the latest in communications and transportation technology via the mechanisms of the modern bureaucratic state.

Yet this too was a hybrid modernity, in which clientelistic networks were just as necessary for the successful implementation of tasks as was the technology itself. The secret police actors had sufficient agency and capacity to act so that their personal interests, preferences, and grievances could influence precisely how the purging would be conducted; who would be targeted for purging and who might be spared; and on what pretexts this would be founded, regardless of the presumptions of impersonal and purely ideological vigilance that featured so prominently in the propaganda of the period. Objectives were just as often achieved in the same way within the Georgian NKVD as elsewhere in Soviet society, though a complex combination of procedures and institutions, and also through personal connections and informal relationships.

About the Author

Timothy K. Blauvelt is Professor of Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies at Ilia State University in Tbilisi, Georgia, and is also Regional Director for the South Caucasus for American Councils for International Education. He has published several dozen peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. His co-edited volume *Georgia after Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power*, with Jeremy Smith, was published by Routledge in 2016. Another volume, *The Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic of 1918: Federal Aspirations, Geopolitics and National Projects*, co-edited with Adrian Brisku, was published with Routledge in 2021. His monograph *Cliism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom: The Trials of Nestor Lakoba* was also published by Routledge in 2021.

Endnotes

- 1 See Frances L. Bernstein, Christopher Burton and Dan Healey, “Experts, Expertise and New Histories in Soviet Medicine,” in *Soviet Medicine: Culture, Practices and Science* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 3–26.
- 2 Neo-traditionalism was framed in relation to the Soviet Union in the work of Kenneth Jowitt and to Communist China by Andrew Walder in the 1980s and was a key element in the approach of the “Sheila Fitzpatrick” school of Soviet history in the 1990s–2000s in response to the “Modernity” approaches of those decades. See Michael David-Fox, “Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 54, no. 4 (2006): 535–555.
- 3 Terry Martin, “Modernization of Neo-Traditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism,” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed. *Stalinism: New Directions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 361.
- 4 Michael David-Fox, “Multiple Modernities,” 538;
- 5 Here and elsewhere in the text I generally use a Georgian transliteration for Georgian names rather than a Russian one, so Giorgi rather than Georgiy, Orjonikidze rather than Ordzhonikidze, Lavrenti Beria rather than Lavrentiy Beriia, Jikia rather than Dzhikiya, etc.
- 6 Irakli Georgadze, *Tbilisskiy Nauchno-Issledovatel’skiy Institut Vaksin i Syvorotok MZ SSSR za 50 Let* [The Tbilisi Scientific Research Institute for Vaccines and Sera of the USSR Ministry of Health after 50 Years] (Tbilisi: Tbilisi NIIVS, 1974), 10. Although Georgadze is indicated as the author of this collection, the introduction of which is an important source for the history of Giorgi Eliava and bacteriophage research in Georgia, the Eliava Institute historian Nina Chanishvili suspects that it was actually written by Georgadze’s (and earlier Eliava’s) assistant Elene Makashvili.
- 7 Dmitriy Myelnikov, “An Alternative Cure: The Adoption and Survival of Bacteriophage Therapy in the USSR, 1922–1955,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 73, no. 4 (2018): 6. On the controversy surrounding d’Hérelle and the invention of bacteriophages, see Nina Chanishvili, “Phage Therapy—History from Twart and d’Hérelle through Soviet Experience to Current Approaches,” *Adv Virus Res* 83 (2012): 3–40. See also Dmitriy Myelnikov, “Creature Features: The Lively Narratives of Bacteriophages in Soviet Biology and Medicine,” *Notes and Records*, no. 74 (2020): 579–597.
- 8 It is possible that this was instead a professor of medicine named Hector Cristiani.
- 9 According to Eliava Institution in-house historian Nina Chanishvili, the Trabzon laboratory may have been physically located in Tiflis.
- 10 Georgadze, *Tbilisskiy Nauchno-Issledovatel’skiy Institut*, 9–10.
- 11 Danelia, “dabrunebuli sakhelebi: giorgi eliava,” 61–62.
- 12 *Zarya vostoka* [Eastern Dawn], June 23, 1988 (no. 145), 4.
- 13 Dottore Emiliano Fruciano, “Phage as an Antimicrobial Agent: d’Hérelle’s Heretical Theories and their Role in the Decline of Phage Prophylaxis in the West,” *Canadian Journal of Infectious Diseases and Medical Microbiology* 18, no. 1 (2007): 19–27.
- 14 Danelia, “dabrunebuli sakhelebi,” 62.
- 15 *Zarya vostoka*, June 23, 1988 (no. 145), 4.
- 16 “Unicité du bactériophage: sur la lysine du bactériophage,” [Uniqueness of the Bacteriophage: On the Lysine of the Bacteriophage], *Comptes Rendus des Séances de la Société de Biologie*, n. 85 (1921): 701–702.
- 17 “Pod znakom bakteriofaga: Parizh-Tbilisi,” [“Under the Sign of the Bacteriophage: Paris-Tbilisi”] *Nauka iz pervykh ruk* 71, no. 4 (October 2016), <https://scfh.ru/papers/pod-znakom-bakteriofaga-parizh-tbilisi/> (accessed 05/06/2021).

- 18 For an invocation of the atmosphere of this period, see Tat'iana Nikol'skaia, *Fantasticheskiy gorod: Russkaya kul'turnaya zhizn' v Tbilisi (1917–1921gg)* [The Fantastic City: Russian Cultural Life in Tbilisi (1917–1921)] (Moscow: Pyataya Strana, 2000); Eric Lee, *The Experiment: Georgia's Forgotten Revolution 1918–1921* (London: Zed Books, 2017).
- 19 Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd edition (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994), 213–215.
- 20 See Erik Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of the Soviet Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): Chapter 2, “Between the Caucasus and the Kremlin”. See also Timothy Blauvelt, *Clientelism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom: The Trials of Nestor Lakoba* (London: Routledge, 2021): Chapter 5, “Patronage, nationality and Tsebelda tobacco.”
- 21 See Georgi M. Derluguian, *The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria before and Since the Soviet Collapse*, Vol. 6 of Working Papers, Center for German and European Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1995.
- 22 Georgadze, Tbilisskiy Nauchno-Issledovatel'skiy Institut, 12. Georgian National Archives, f. 289 o. 1, d. 422, l. 61–62, transcribed copy held by the Eliava Institute.
- 23 Georgadze, Tbilisskiy Nauchno-Issledovatel'skiy Institut, 13.
- 24 Danelia, “dabrunebuli sakhelebi,” 62–63.
- 25 An atmosphere richly described in the memoirs of Eliava's stepdaughter Hanna Eliava-Maliyeva, published in *Russkiy klub*, 2017, nos. 3–4.
- 26 *Zarya vostoka*, June 23, 1988 (no. 145), 4.
- 27 Georgian National Archives, f. 600, o. 1, d. 3293, ll. 305-307, transcription held at the Eliava Institute. It also seems that Eliava hired Aghniashvili's sister to work at the Institute as a veterinarian, and his son-in-law as well in an unclear position: see Georgian Party Archive, f. 976, o. 1. d. 1, ll. 11, 47.
- 28 Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 76–80.
- 29 Yaroslav Hrytsak, *Narys istorii Ukrainy: Formuvannya modernoi natsii XIX-XX stolittya* [A Sketch of the History of Ukraine: The Formation of a Modern Nation, 19th-20th Centuries] (Kyiv: Yakaboo Publishing, 2019), 323.
- 30 See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 141–148.
- 31 Myelkikov, “An Alternative Cure,” 6.
- 32 See Amy Night, *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993): Chapter 3, “Leader of Georgia and Transcaucasia: 1931–1936.”
- 33 See Timothy K. Blauvelt “The March of the Chekists: Beria's Secret Police Patronage Network and Soviet Crypto-Politics,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 44 (2011): 77–80.
- 34 Anna Kuchment, *The Forgotten Cure: The Past and Future of Phage Therapy* (NY: Copernicus Books – Springer Science, 2012), 21.
- 35 Or the words of Makashvili, see fn. 4 above, 19.
- 36 Cited in William Summers, *Felix d'Herelle and the Origins of Molecular Biology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 162.
- 37 Georgadze, Tbilisskiy Nauchno-Issledovatel'skiy Institut, 13; Summers, Felix d'Herelle, 163.
- 38 Félix d'Hérelle, *Bakteriofag i fenomen vyzdorovleniia* [The Bacteriophage and the Phenomen of Recovery] (Tiflis: Izdatel'stvo Tiflisskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, 1935); later published in French as *Le Phénomène de la Guérison dans les Maladies Infectieuses* [The Phenomenon of Recovery from Infectious Diseases] (Paris: Masson et cie, 1938). Some works (including Summers,

Felix d'Herelle, 165) on d'Hérelle and Eliava maintain that the book was also published in a Georgian translation, but this does not seem to be the case.

- 39 d'Hérelle, *Bakteriofag i fenomen vyzdorovleniia*, 2.
- 40 Ibid, 6–8. D'Hérelle concluded the introduction with an even more ambitious call for the creation, in the USSR, of an international institution for the verification of experimental science (see p. 9).
- 41 Georgian National Archive, f. 617, o. 1, d. 7698, l. 75, transcription held at the Eliava Institute, and cited in Myelnikov, “An Alternative Cure,” 14.
- 42 Danelia, “dabrunebuli sakhelebi,” 63.
- 43 Peliks Danelia, “dabrunebuli sakhelebi: giorgi eliava,” [“Returned Names: Giorgi Eliava”], *sakartvelos sameditino moambe*, no. 2 (March–April 1992): 64–5; *Zarya vostoka*, June 23, 1988 (no. 145), 4; interview with Nina Chanishvili, Tbilisi 2021.
- 44 Reference to this last rumour appears in an academic article by the biologist David Petrovich Shrayer, “Felix d'Herelle in Russia.” Some of these stories are also mentioned in Danelia, “dabrunebuli sakhelebi,” 64, others in *Zarya vostoka*, June 23, 1988 (no. 145), 4; most have been collected by Nina Chanishvili at the Eliava Institute.
- 45 In an expansive handwritten statement in 1954 (the original is included in the case file on Petre Mkheidze), Gazaryan described the arrests of the specialists in 1933–1934 and the conflict between GruzGPU/NKVD and ZakGPU/NKVD in even greater detail than in his later book. Here he gives the names of several of the arrestees, but does not mention Giorgi Eliava, stating that “These surnames remain in my memory, but I forgot the names of the other arrestees.” (Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6, d. 37969, t. 3, l. 97). The names and case histories of a number of the arrestees are included in two rehabilitation files from the later 1950s (f. 6, d. 33359 and 34345). Giorgi Eliava is not among them, but there is a Zurab Nikolaevich Eliava, an accountant with the Georgian Commissariat of Health and a former Menshevik (and whom Giorgi Eliava had supposedly mentioned in an interrogation in relation to members of the alleged Georgian National Center (f. 6 d. 36224, t. 5, l. 92). Most likely Gazaryan simply later confused Zurab Eliava with Giorgi Eliava.
- 46 The promotion of the narrative that Eliava had been among those arrested by the NKVD in 1933–34 in the pre-existing literature on Eliava and the history of bacteriophage research owes most to the Russian scientist and émigré writer David Petrovich Shrayer (David Shrayer-Petrov). Shrayer had been a researcher at the Gamaleya Institute of Microbiology in Moscow and had spent time in Tbilisi during the late-1970s with Eliava's former subordinates, including Elene Makashvili and Irakli Georgadze. Shrayer subsequently amplified Gazaryan's reference to Elaiva among the NKVD arrestees in a highly influential article published in English in 1996 in the *Bulletin de Institut Pasteur* entitled “Felix d'Herelle in Russia,” an abbreviated version of a chapter from his Russina-language memoir, *Frantsuzskiy kottedzh* (Providence, RI: Arka Publishers, 1999). It was also repeated in William Summers' 1999 biography *Felix d'Herelle and the Origins of Molecular Biology*, 166.
- 47 Several of the investigators within this “group” were officials of ZakGPU, thus in reality this was not entirely an interagency conflict.
- 48 From Gazaryan's 1954 statement in the criminal case file on P.M. Chkheidze, Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6, d. 37969, t. 3, ll. 68–92.
- 49 Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6, d. 37969, t. 3, ll. 75–82.
- 50 The freeing of the EKO group by Goglidze is described in the case file of A.S. Khazan, Georgian Security Archive (Section I) f. 6, d. 38759, t. 3, l. 103. This incident is also referenced in a letter from the group member Sergo Davlianidze addressed to Beria in 1951, contained in Davlianidze's criminal case file, Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6, d. 464358, t. 24, ll. 233–234.
- 51 A law passed on December 1, 1934 in the wake of the assassination of Sergei Kirov simplified the procedure for arrest and conviction in cases of “terrorism,” allowing for an in camera hearing without

defense council and immediate implementation of the death penalty with no appeal. In 1937 the simplified procedure was extended to all political crimes of “wrecking” and “sabotage.” See Peter H. Solomon, Jr., *Soviet Criminal Justice Under Stalin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 236-237.

- 52 That Budu Mdivani took the proposal to Moscow is recounted by Eliava’s stepdaughter Hanna, and the involvement of Orjonikidze is included in the account of Georgadze. *Zarya vostoka*, June 23, 1988 (no. 145), 4. This story was also recounted by Hanna’s daughter Natalia Devdariani to Anna Kuchment, *The Forgotten Cure*, 32.
- 53 Georgadze, *Tbilisskiy Nauchno-Issledovatel’skiy Institut*, 24.
- 54 Myelnikov, “An Alternative Cure”, 14. Initially located just outside the city, Saburtalo was extensively built up in the 1950s and 1960s and is today considered a central district of Tbilisi.
- 55 Georgadze, *Tbilisskiy Nauchno-Issledovatel’skiy Institut*, 24–25.
- 56 The search and arrest are described in detail in Hanna’s memoirs. Although she identifies the NKVD officers only by their initials, “K”, whom she described as a “pithecanthropus” and an Armenian “who was later shot”. The latter was clearly Krimyan. She describes the rest as “S.-I – a Jew (also later shot), a Georgian (I don’t remember his name), and a Russian.” It seems likely that “S.-I” refers to the Russian Konstantine Savitskii, and that the Jew may have been Aleksandr Khazan, as these three officers often worked together. *Ibid*, 35–36.
- 57 Hanna Eliava, *Russkiy klub*, v. 4, 35.
- 58 Eliava was initially charged under article 58–6. However, over the course of the “investigation” other charges were added under 58–1a, 58–8, 58–9 and 58–11 of the Georgian SSR Criminal Code. His case file is not preserved in the Georgian KGB archive, however several documents are held in the case file on Budu Mdivani (f. 6, d. 36224): an interrogation protocol for 6–7 April 1937, apparently his second interrogation, which focused in particular on Mdivani (t. 8, ll. 367–374); and a synopsis (*obzornaya spravka*) on the rehabilitation review of Eliava’s case from November 1955 (t. 5, ll. 88–95).
- 59 Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6. d. 36224, t. 5, l. 90.
- 60 Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6. d. 36224, t. 5, l. 91.
- 61 Izrail Samsonovich Keigeliukhis
- 62 Georgyi Davidovich Gabayev
- 63 Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6. d. 36224, t. 5, l. 91. Though Eliava apparently declined to participate in a proposal by Mdivani to conduct a terrorist act against Lavrentiy Beria.
- 64 *Zarya vostoka*, no. 157, 1. It does seem remarkable that the name of Eliava, a biologist, would be included so prominently together with these former leaders of Soviet Georgia. Additional announcements appear in this edition and in several more of the succeeding days about official meetings in various institutions and factories around Georgia held to denounce this supposedly counterrevolutionary group and applauding their execution.
- 65 See Oleg Khlevniuk, “Archives of the Terror: Developments in the Historiography of Stalin’s Purges,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 22, no. 2 (2021): 374.
- 66 L.P. Beria, *Otchet Tsentral’nogo komiteta KP(b) Gruzii na X S”ezde KP(b) G: Doklad na X S”ezsde KP(b)G 15 maya 1937* [Report of the CP Central Committee of Georgia at the 10th Congress of the Georgian CP] (Tbilisi: *Zarya vostoka*, 1937), 16.
- 67 In Donald Rayfield, “The Killing of Paolo Iashvili,” *Index on Censorship*, no. 6 (1990): 10.
- 68 The sessions of the Georgian Writers’ Union, based on archival documents held in the Georgian Museum of Literature, are covered extensively in Rayfield, “The Killing of Paolo Iashvili,” 6–14. All the translations referenced here are those used by Rayfield. It is also notable that Iashvili also discussed

the accusation that he had provided the denunciations that had resulted in Eliava's arrest, stating on 9 June 1937 that "I gave Eliava no grounds for saying I was in his clutches . . . Eliava was induced to say that I was the cause of his imprisonment. I know from his friends whom I am acquainted with, and naturally a man who's fallen into the hands of the NKVD would do everything and I will sort it out" (p. 13). It is also notable that Rayfield seems to have confused Levan Ghoghoberidze and Beso Lominadze, two major Georgian party officials, with poets.

- 69 See Agabekov, GPU: Zapiski chekista [GPU: A Chekist's Notes] (Berlin: 1930), 27; 169–171.
- 70 Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6. d. 36224, t. 8, ll. 367-375.
- 71 Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6. d. 37969, t. 3, l. 102. Khazan file, 104.
- 72 Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6. d. 37969, t. 1, ll. 39–40.
- 73 Georgian Security Archive (Section I), f. 6. d. 37969, t. 5, l. 54.
- 74 Myelnikov, "An Alternative Cure," 14–15.
- 75 Summers, Felix d'Herelle, 172.
- 76 See, for example, Lawrence Osborn, "A Stalinist Antibiotic Alternative," *New York Times*, 6 February 2000; and more recently, Pearly Jakob, "The Viruses that Prey on Human Diseases," *BBC Future*, 18 January 2021 (<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210115-the-viruses-that-prey-on-human-diseases>, (accessed 23/11/2021).
- 77 Myelnikov, "An Alternative Cure," 6.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 7.