

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONTEXT

In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia underwent significant social, political, and economic changes. One of the most notable transformations was the resurgence of religion and the growing influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Church began to reclaim its role in society, politics, and culture, becoming a central player in post-Soviet Georgia. This religious revival has profoundly impacted community life, social values, and the political landscape.

This was not always the case. The state was officially atheistic during the Soviet era, a stance supported by the Communist Party. The Party systematically suppressed all religious groups as the belief in God was fundamentally at odds with materialism and socialism.

Although the Constitution of the Soviet Union enshrined freedom of belief and conscience (as stated in Article 124 of the 1936 "Stalin Constitution") and claimed to separate church and state, the totalitarian regime brutally persecuted various faiths. The clergymen were targeted en masse during the Red Terror (1936–1937). Churches and monasteries were closed or destroyed and Soviet propaganda actively opposed all expressions of religion and faith. To facilitate this agenda, propaganda magazines were created, like "Saqartvelos Ugmerto/Mebrdzoli Ugmerto," which was published in Georgia from 1933–1934 and laid the groundwork for subsequent mass clerical repression.

The totalitarian regime successfully subdued all religious groups, including the Orthodox Church. Following the Red Terror, all elected patriarchs were required to report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Furthermore, the Soviet state played an active role in the election of church leaders, a fact confirmed by Eduard Shevardnadze, who served as the first secretary of the Central Committee of Georgia from 1972 to 1985 (see [video](#)).

ХРОНОЛОГИЯ И ТЕРМИНЫ

Rusudan (Rusiko) Kobakhidze-Aroshvili was born in 1964 in Tbilisi. She holds a doctorate in philology and is a teacher of Georgian language and literature. For the past 10 years, she has worked as a researcher at the Soviet Past Research Laboratory. Her research interests focus on the social and political processes in Georgia during the late Soviet period, with a particular emphasis on religion.

Rusudan's memories begin in the 1970s but this interview specifically addresses Georgian society's attitudes toward religion and faith during the late perestroika (restructuring) period. Kobakhidze reflects on prevailing attitudes towards the Orthodox Church in the 1980s and how these perspectives evolved alongside political and social changes.

She notes that as the movement for national independence gained momentum, society became increasingly religious. In the early 1980s, young people's participation in Orthodox rituals emerged as a form of rebellion against the atheistic Soviet state.

Over time, the authority of the Georgian Orthodox Church has grown significantly. Public attitudes toward religion shifted notably after the collapse of the Soviet Union, largely driven by the national movement. The movement's leaders frequently utilized Christian symbols, including the "Cross of Saint Nino." Following the tragic events of April 9, 1989, where 21 people died after protesting the Soviet government, candles and crosses began to appear increasingly in public spaces, a phenomenon documented in the photo and video archives of that era.

According to Rusudan, since the 1990s, the Georgian Orthodox Church has established a strong connection between church and state. This relationship often attracts criticism as democratic governance models typically ensure that state and religious institutions remain separate. The narrator emphasizes that the constitutional agreement signed in 2002 between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian state discriminated against other religious groups. It is crucial to recognize that each individual's narrative is personal and subjective. Many factors influence their memories and perceptions. These include the surrounding environment, family background, education, and a person's close friends and acquaintances.

TIMELINE AND TERMS

- **1977:** The consecration of Ilia II as Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia.
- **1987–1988:** Georgia's nationalist movement gains significant strength.
- **April 9, 1989:** The violent breakup of a peaceful rally by Soviet troops, resulting in the deaths of 21 people, including young women.
- **October 22, 2002:** A constitutional agreement (the so-called "concordat") between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the state, granting special privileges to the Church.
- **November 23, 2003:** The Rose Revolution, leading to the ousting of Eduard Shevardnadze and a change of government.
- **Enthronement:** The ceremonial installation of a newly elected patriarch or pope.
- **Military Council:** The de facto government that took control after the 1992 coup d'état which led to the overthrow of the legitimate government.

ASSIGNMENT: SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION ON RELIGION AND BELIEF (9TH–11TH GRADE)

Total Duration: 45 minutes

- **Preparation Time:** 10 minutes
- **Group Discussion:** 25 minutes
- **Presentation of Results:** 10 minutes

Timecodes:

1. **0:51–3:23, 5:00–5:58** (Attitudes towards religion and religious holidays in the Soviet Union);
2. **6:46–10:00** (The growth of the role of religion in the 1980s–1990s);
3. **11:23–14:20** (The Orthodox Church in independent Georgia);

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Divide the Class: Organize students into groups of 4–5.

2. Assign Issues: Each group will focus on one of the following topics:

- Group 1: Repression Against Faith and Soviet Anti-Religious Propaganda
- Group 2: The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Growing Role of Religion
- Group 3: Religion and the State in Modern Georgia

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Print and Distribute to Groups)

For the First Group: Repression Against Faith and Soviet Anti-Religious Propaganda.

Reflection Question: Think about the difference between faith and religion.

1. What methods did the Soviet Union employ against religion, faith, and religious leaders (recall the material learned in the history lessons)?
2. How did Soviet anti-religious propaganda portray the Church and its believers?
3. How do you think people resisted a totalitarian regime that restricted their faith and religious life?
4. In what ways did the Soviet state's restrictions on faith and religious life impact people's daily lives?

For the Second Group: The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Growing Role of Religion

Reflection Question: Think about the difference between faith and religion.

1. How did the collapse of the Soviet Union affect freedom of religion and belief?
2. What role did the Orthodox Church play, and how did it support people during the transition period (during the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Georgia's independence)?

3. Do you think holidays like Christmas and Easter were celebrated in the Soviet Union? What has changed in this regard since the collapse of the Soviet Union?

For the Third Group: Religion and the State in Modern Georgia

Reflection Question: Think about the difference between faith and religion.

1. Do you think society's attitude toward religion has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union?
2. What attitudes do older generations have compared to younger generations towards religion in modern Georgia?
3. According to the Constitution of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia (1921), no religion has priority. How important is it for the state to treat all religions equally?
4. What role do major religions play in addressing poverty, social issues, and education in Georgia? Can you provide examples?

GROUP DISCUSSION (25 MINUTES)

Allow Discussion: Allow students to freely express their opinions regarding their group's assigned issue.

Brainstorming: Encourage students to share ideas, opinions, and associations related to the discussion topic on a presentation sheet.

Teacher Facilitation: The teacher should circulate among the groups, providing guidance and support as needed, and introduce new perspectives to enhance the discussions.

PRESENTING RESULTS (10 MINUTES)

— Each group has one minute to summarize and present the key points of their discussion.

— Summaries can be delivered by selected speakers from each group.

FINAL WORDS (2–3 MINUTES)

The teacher summarizes key issues raised during the discussions and reflects on important insights from each group, emphasizing the overall themes related to religion, society, and national identity.