

PICTURE STORY

Peter Nasmyth's Georgia

January 2009

Peter Nasmyth's Georgia



Today's Georgia can only be understood if it is seen in the light of the events of the past two decades. The very difficult transformation the country went through after it declared its independence in 1991, and the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia which plagued the country since then, still largely shape its present day policies. And nowhere is this better described than in Nasmyth's "Georgia" which is a collection of personal stories of the author and author's friends in Georgia over the years. In his words:

I collected stories of people, very specific ones, through which I tell the bigger story of Georgia over time... I never wanted to write about the political forces here, rather the forces that make the politics. This will always give a book a longer life.

[Interview with Peter Nasmyth, Tbilisi, October 2008]

In the next few pages you will get a guided tour of this excellent book. It is written and it reads like a novel, yet it is full of facts that give a complete account of Georgia's modern day history. The descriptions are so colourful that reading this book is the next best thing to visiting Georgia yourself. What makes the book special is also that the author has updated the book and added new chapters two times after it was first published in 1998. Here we discuss the 2006 edition which covers the modern history of Georgia up to the events of the Rose Revolution.

Peter Nasmyth is a writer and a publisher. His passion for Georgia was born on his first visit there, in 1989.

I have a genuine affection for Georgia. I am not cynical about the country and this I think helps the understanding. Georgia is not like us (the West) with a desire to be all neat and

regulated. Neither is it a shining example of political stability. It is a country proud of its emotional originality and contrariness.

[Interview with Peter Nasmyth, Tbilisi, October 2008]

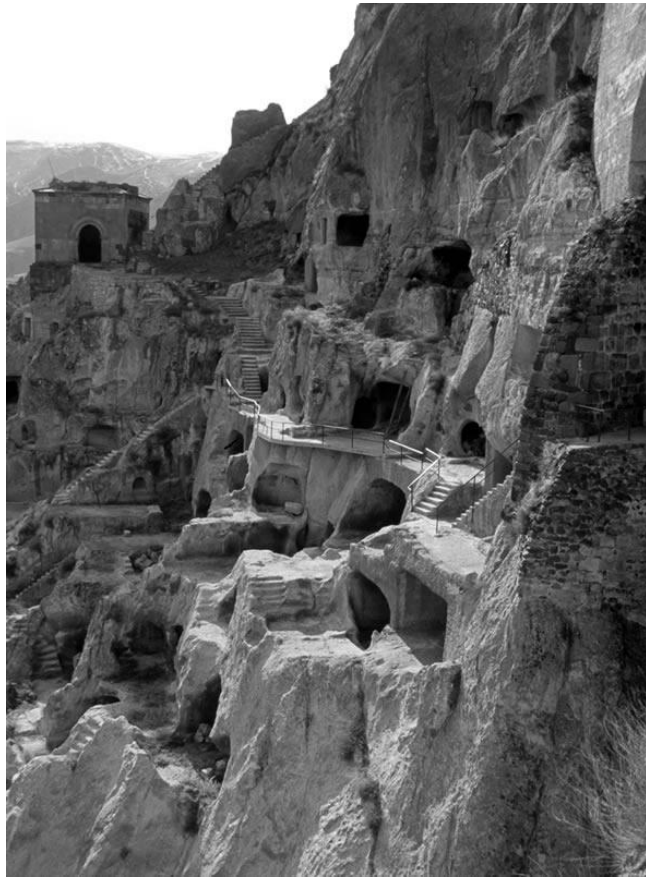
**Peter Nasmyth, Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry, 2006, 3rd revised edition.
[Routledge]**



Table of contents

The Georgian soul: European or Asian?	6
The Woman King	7
The richest jewel in the Soviet crown	8
The Massacre.....	10
Tbilisi: The Resistance	11
Religion: "Cathedral of Atheism"	13
The most Georgian part of Georgia.....	14
Sukhumi: Sliding into conflict	16
The Independence: Freedom, Chaos and Civil War.....	18
A "third world" country.....	20
Batumi: Football and the New Economy	21
New Georgia: Modernisation Georgian style.....	23
How to make a revolution?	24
The Rose Revolution	26

The Georgian soul: European or Asian?



Cave City of Vardzia – a monastery founded in 1185.
Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

Surrounded by Russia and Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the Black Sea to its West, Georgia sits (at times awkwardly) as a bridge between Europe and Asia. Nasmyth calls Georgia "an Asian country with European beginnings."

Georgia once held a key position on the old Silk Route and the mountains served as crucial repositories for religious texts and ideas flowing East to West... One of the first accounts of Buddha arriving in the West came via Georgia in the tenth century...

[p. 27]

Apart from sharing St. George with England as its patron saint, Georgia also carried tantalising archaeological and mythological links with our own European background. The so called "Caucasian" races and Caucasoid Man, out of which European Man was once thought to evolve, took their name from this area.

Approached from its Black Sea side, Georgia was regarded by Greeks and Romans as 'the ends of all the earth.' Within it Prometheus has been chained to the flanks of Mt Kazbeg, Jason found its Golden fleece beside the mountain rivers of Svaneti in the western Caucasus; and Medea, of the great Euripidian tragedy, reputedly lived with her father, King Medes, in her Colchis home (today the Western Georgian area of Mingrelia).

[p. 8]

The Woman King



Queen Tamar as depicted on a mural from Vardzia monastery.
Photo: © Wikipedia Commons

One of the key figures in Georgian history is Queen Tamar. She ruled Georgia during its golden age between the 12th and 13th century when it underwent a major cultural and spiritual renaissance. And she still plays "a pivotal role in the complicated self-image of modern Georgians."

This period marked the peak of Georgian power. The Kingdom of Georgia then covered half of today's Armenia and Azerbaijan. Queen Tamar is also referred to as King Tamar, to symbolize her greatness and success as a ruler.

Nasmyth quotes his Georgian friend Marika talking about Georgian tradition:

We Georgians have a strong feeling for our past centuries; much stronger than Europeans. We feel very close to our 12th century – for some of us it's almost as if it were yesterday.

[p. 49]

The Golden age was a period of great literature and marked the creation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* (Vepkhvistikhaosani), written by Georgian epic-poet Shota Rustaveli. A Queen Tinatin appears as a character in this poem, which is thought to be a personification of Queen Tamar, with whom the poet was allegedly in love. The poem is about more than his alleged love to Queen Tamar: it describes the enlightenment Georgia experienced during the Golden Age.

Disguised within the depth of the texts, lies a purposeful code of chivalry espoused during Georgia's Golden age, a period of enlightenment in full bloom at the same time most European nations hurled themselves into the dubiously motivated Crusades. As Christian sword sought Muslim throat in the holy land, in Tbilisi, Georgians, Armenians, Jews and Muslims lived side by side in relative harmony.

[p. 82]

The richest jewel in the Soviet crown



A souvenir photo of Stalin from his Georgian hometown Gori 1989.

Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

Nasmyth's journey to Georgia started in Russia – on one of his trips to Moscow in the late 80s:

I began to hear about a nation of people with noticeable less stuffing knocked out of them from the years of Stalinism. After all, their present Soviet colonisation had been preceded by the Russians, the Turks, the Arabs, the Persians, the Byzantines, the Mongols, the Romans, the Greeks. Those people regarded their current masters as just another landlord in a long succession. Furthermore as all Russians admitted they'd learnt to preserve their culture – and much of their economic wealth – with a cheeky good humour.

[p. 6]

And this preserved Georgian culture inspired and impressed generations of Russian poets and thinkers: Lermontov, Tolstoy and Gorky set their major works there.

Boris Pasternak described Georgia as "my second homeland" and Maxim Gorky declared "The majesty of its mountains; the romantic temperament of its people were two factors transforming me from a tramp into a man of letters.

As many before him, Nasmyth was intrigued by these descriptions:

[T]he more I heard about this small nation of five and a half million snuggling between mountains ranges just beyond the Turkish border, the more clearly it emerged as the richest jewel in the Soviet crown. It seemed to possess the most dramatic mountains, the most exotic agriculture, the hottest blood, strongest mafia, the most hospitable, wealthiest, religious citizens in the entire Soviet empire.

[p. 7]

And not to forget, even the cruellest of all Soviets, Stalin, was a native of Georgia. So Nasmyth embarked on his journey to discover this small and special country.

The Massacre



Shrine for the killed protestors in front of Sioni Church 1989. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

The year 1989 saw international relations go through one of their most profound transformations in modern history. Georgia played its part. While Georgians shouted louder with their desire to secede from Russia, so some other nationalities living in Georgia (i.e. Abkhazians, living on the western region of Georgia) did the same in their demand to secede from Georgia.

Strikes were taking place in the streets of Tbilisi. Georgians believed the Abkhazians had been put up to it by Moscow. Moscow replied to these protests by sending troops and tanks. When the Soviet Army's 'special Forces' arrived on the Tbilisi streets to restrain this protest, it became another cause for protest.

The British Press reports spoke of demonstrations calling for independence, unleashed by the arrival of glasnost. A gradual escalation of marches, strikes and various non-co-operations with the Soviet system, all climaxing on April 9th when 16 Georgian women and four men on hunger strike on Government Building steps had been butchered by an angry Soviet Army militia.

[p. 15]

Nasmyth quotes his Georgian friend Marika, who was commenting on the tragic events of the 9th of April:

They [the Special Forces] advanced in through the crowd and surrounded the hunger strikers on the Government Building steps with a cordon. Then all of a sudden they threw gas in the air, and began attacking the protestors – most of whom were young women – and beating them with spades."

[p. 16]

This marked the beginning of the end of the Georgia-Russia union. The killing of the protestors and the subsequent attempts of the government to cover it up galvanized support for the protestors.

Tbilisi: The Resistance



Demonstration in front of the government building. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

Most protests took place in the capital of Georgia: Tbilisi. It has been the capital of Georgia for over 1.400 years. When Nasmyth arrived in 1989 for the first time, he stands on the balcony of his hotel overlooking the city. (This hotel will be a refugee shelter for displaced people from the civil wars of the 90s for the next 15 years):

I looked out over the city of one and a quarter million. A metropolis razed to the ground, its identity plundered so often, its survival seemed miraculous. Bar its rebuilt churches, old town fortress and wall, almost no building prior to 1795 stands in Tbilisi due to the ferocity of the final Persian invasion.

[p. 55]

Meanwhile the streets of Tbilisi flicked by a terrible speed... Occasionally drivers would stop in the middle of the road, swing open their doors and gesticulate angrily about each other's driving, swing their doors shut and continue on just terribly themselves.

[p. 62]

Walking through the streets of Tbilisi Nasmyth explores the many facets of Georgian history:

Thickets of tall, white tower-blocks – the proud spires of Socialism... graceful pastel-painted buildings and avenues date back to 1801 when Georgia officially joined the Russian Empire and Tbilisi's Old Town, a maze of higgledy-piggledy homes, wooden back alleys and Persian balconies crashing into each other beneath a fourth century cliff-top fortification – the Narikala fortress.

[p. 57]

But in 1989 the new yearning for independence began and Tbilisi became the centre stage of these events. Nasmyth witnessed the huge street protest, when hundreds of thousand expressed their anger over the killings of innocent protestors on 9th of April to the streets:

To mark the occasion a sea of olive-skinned humanity had risen up from all corners of Georgia, to converge in Tbilisi and this Soviet building right before me – built, like many government buildings in Georgia, on the site of a former cathedral.

As the chants filled my ears, I realised these people emptied their lungs with a crucial declaration of separation from the culture they despised. They shouted to restore self-respect. Within these cries also stirred the determination to believe in what they euphemistically called a "free" future... As one Georgian friend said later of that time, "even if we didn't quite know the meaning of the word "free", we were calling for the freedom to make our own mistakes, not theirs."

[pp.66-69]

Religion: "Cathedral of Atheism"



The Palace of Rituals. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

Nearly all Georgians are Georgian Orthodox. Religion has played a crucial role in Georgian history - as one of the stable elements of culture that carried Georgian identity through the many foreign occupations. Russia tried to break this link by painting over the older Georgian church frescos - still visible in some Tbilisi churches. The Soviets went even further and built a Palace of Rituals, an alternative church which the BBC described during the '87 visit of Margaret Thatcher as a "Cathedral of Atheism".

Nasmyth has his own description for the building:

Arriving at its strange, semi-organic towers of tubular concrete, the architectural message seemed to defy all analysis. Reaching for my notebook, I scrawled the first words entering my head. I ended up with only two words: "blatantly phallic."

[p. 75]

The most Georgian part of Georgia



Mestia, capital of Svaneti, with its famous stone towers 1989. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

Upper Svaneti has impressive mountains which rise up to 5,000 meters – and is one of the highest inhabited places in Europe. The remoteness of the villages has preserved the local culture throughout Georgia's numerous occupations and conquests. Many Georgians described it to Nasmyth as 'the most Georgian part of Georgia'.

He found himself intrigued by the Svans – "a resiliently religious people" - their vendettas and their 12th century stone towers, some 20 to 25 meter high. These unique towers, some with bases predating Christianity, serve as a defence against avalanches, enemies, and each other.

Modernity had only just arrived in this remote corner of Georgia:

In this land where the wheel and the television arrived in the same lifespan (sledges were, and often still are, used instead of carts), its people had simply grabbed hold of the modern machinery and used it as an extension of their own primitive system. When the diesels broke down the Svans simply abandoned them right there in the field, like another old sledge.

[But] with the arrival of the road and the television, young Svans inevitably gathered a taste for the wider world beyond their valley, beautiful though it may be. Furthermore the severe winter of 1987 brought down a number of terrible avalanches, over 70 died, most of them children at a school high in the mountains. This left a bitter scar on this superstitious people, and helped invoke the largest exodus of young in the region's history.

[pp.154-156]

A problem known well in Georgia as a whole: since independence Georgia lost almost a fifth of its population.

Bordering Abkhazia, one of the break-away regions of Georgia, the conflicts arising after the independence of Georgia also left their mark on Svaneti:

[W]hen over 100.000 Georgian refugees fled from Abkhaz reprisal up the Kodori Valley and over the high passes to safety in Svaneti... After the high passes, they arrived in the Svan valleys, like many thousands of Georgians in the past fleeing prosecution in the lowlands. As before the Svans welcomed them.

[p. 169]

Sukhumi: Sliding into conflict



Sukhumi waterfront in 1989 and 1998. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

What had happened in Abkhazia? Nasmyth visited Sukhumi – the lush, sub-tropical black-sea holiday resort of the Soviet elite and capital of Abkhazia – for the first time in 1989. Abkhazia had just declared its independence from Georgia.

Some months had passed since April 9th, and Georgian (and Abkhazian) blood had flowed again that following July as the two sides fought over the territory's sovereignty. But to say Georgian had fought Georgian would now be unacceptable for the Abkhazians. They regarded this violence as an indigenous population resisting a colonial power (Georgia), since Abkhazia had spent many centuries fluctuating in and out of the Georgian federation. ... Yet statistics pointed to a serious problem here. The half million or so population of Abkhazia stood as 44 per cent Georgian and only 17 per cent Abkhazian.

[p. 173]

But in 1989 these "ethnic rumblings" hadn't yet evolved into a full-fledged war and Nasmyth left Sukhumi with memories of palms, beaches, fresh air and the sea.

Three years later, Tbilisi tried to take control of Abkhazia.

Young, undisciplined fighters, blazing with the myth of Caucasian-banditry, streaming across the bridge to "sort out" the Abkhazians – an attack that provoked a fierce Russian-backed counter-offensive a few month later that ethnically cleansed nigh on the entire Georgian population (44% of the total), some 250,000 people, leaving Abkhazia a ghost region.

[p. 246]

Neither side in the conflict had a regular army at that time. The fighting took place between different armed paramilitary formations and militias. Both sides committed numerous atrocities. When Nasmyth arrived in Abkhazia for the second time in 1997 he witnessed the terrible destruction generated by the conflict.

It felt we'd arrived in a completely different territory to the one I'd known eight years earlier. As if someone had swapped the real Abkhazia with a beaten-up, second-hand replacement.

The lavish European/Caucasian villas climbing the flanks of Sukhumi Mountain, lay battered and dying. Their cupolas, balconies, art-deco reliefs, were flaking, cracking, tracked with bullet-holes. Garden doors stood open, plants and shrubs sprawled unkempt over walls as the

properties changed with the Georgian exodus... Unique creations of the 19th-early 20th century now sagging like sad, old animals abandoned by the herd.

[pp.250 – 253]

The Independence: Freedom, Chaos and Civil War



Member of the infamous Mkhedrioni 1997. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

At the brink of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia declared its independence and shortly after this Zviad Gamaskhurdia was elected president. But the inexperienced leader was not able to manage the transition. Internal tensions in Georgia proper developed:

The hard rock of united hostility against the Soviets had begun to split into competing factions, with the long-established scapegoat of blaming 'the Kremlin' as the source of all Georgia's problems, failing. Moves towards political pluralism were establishing a deep split in the population, that by the end of 1991 would create a crude government censorship and running street battles.

[p. 193]

Nasmyth describes Gamaskhurdia later:

He meant well but he was a poet.

[Interview with Peter Nasmyth, Tbilisi, October 2008]

Gamaskhurdia's growing nationalism, paranoia and alleged support of the authoritarian putsch in Moscow lead to the 1991 bloody coup.

And then Georgia turned on in itself... A civil war followed.

[Interview with Peter Nasmyth, Tbilisi, October 2008]

While Georgia was splitting itself in half, with one side supporting Gamaskhurdia and the other the opposition, the tensions with the two separatist regions - Abkhazia and South Ossetia - escalated. Just before the start of the civil war, the conflict with South Ossetia turned violent.

Nasmyth returns to Tbilisi and describes the city after the worst violence ceased:

I stood there feeling a city around me gritting its teeth. Its tone was acid-grey, the same colour as the cartridge smoke clinging to its walls; or the memories in the faces behind the windows. Most families were touched personally, some marriages split down the middle, one side (often women) siding with Gamsakhurdia, the other with the Opposition. Georgian young men, steeped in Caucasian romanticism, had taken weapons to 'defend their country' more eagerly than any youth culture I'd seen.

[p. 197]

Many buildings on the glorious late 19th and 20th century Rustaveli Avenue lay roofless and smouldering.

But there were other gaps too. The Avenue itself was virtually empty and a petrol shortage had reduced traffic by two thirds. Many citizens now locked away their cars as too much trouble, no petrol, street theft, hijacking, vandalism. Guns were now everyday objects and prices kept falling.

[p. 198]

Tbilisi by day was a depressing sight at this time, but the night revealed a yet more worrisome residue from the war. Many ordinary people were now armed and gunfire was common. Militia's, like the infamous Mkhedrioni ("horsemen"), who helped to bring down the Gamaskhurdia government, ruled the streets and proved powerful political actors. Nasmyth had the chance to interview a militia member and former university lecturer:

Our first group formed very quickly in late 1991 to help fight Gamaskhurdia. It had about 100 members, mostly students, academics, artists, writers. The oldest was 43, the youngest 16. The average age was 20. Then, there were many other groups like ours. After Gamaskhurdia left, it half-disbanded, some joined the National Guard, some the Mkhedrioni.

[p. 202]

A "third world" country



The Iveria hotel inhabited by refugees 1997. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

While the security situation gradually improved, the Georgian economy collapsed completely. It was the most dramatic economic collapse of all former Soviet republics: in 1992 GDP fell in real terms by 40.3% and in 1994 by 35%. Gas and electricity shortages were commonplace.

The treasury was overwhelmed by the burden of 250,000 refugees – most now crammed into Georgia's empty tourist hotels. The middle-class intelligentsia suffered terribly as academies and institutions were closed. Professors could be found driving buses, architects labourers, oncologists hustling in cross-border trading, if they were lucky – unemployment or a token state salary (USD 10 a month) more common.

The United Nations, Oxfam, Médecins sans Frontières, the Red Cross and a clutch of others set up their offices to begin employing local staff, ironically becoming the first major foreign investors in Georgia's new economy.

[pp.206-207]

Batumi: Football and the New Economy



Batumi, a bank building with its Art Nouveau facade. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

Until the Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's government came to power, the western region of Adjara was not under the control of Tbilisi. There was a border dividing Adjara from the rest of Georgia. Nasmyth quotes a variety of voices on this.

The Ajaran border... [is] not a real border, it's to keep the Georgian mafia out... away from theirs... Aslan Abashidze, the ruler [of Adjara], is a clever man... He made this check-point to keep the Mkhedrioni [from] coming in. It made Ajara the safest place in Georgia. Here all the guns belong to one man.

[p. 210]

Batumi's history is closely linked to the oil fields of Azerbaijan. After being part of Turkey for 300 years (between the 16th and 19th centuries) it came under Russian control (as the rest of Georgia):

[At this time] the Baku oil fields were being developed... and a period of strong Europeanization and investment began almost immediately. By 1888, 21 per cent of the cent of the world's entire oil production passed through Batumi – then the railhead of the new Caspian-Black Sea rail link. A few years later a pipeline terminus and large refinery (funded by the Rothschild family) were added. But not only oil investment. By 1892 Georgia produced 38 per cent of the world's manganese – passing through Batumi and its sister Black sea port, Poti, 100 kilometres to the north. The trade expanded and by 1917 it was said that Baku had more millionaires than Paris or London – most had villas in Batumi.

[p. 212]

But even here Nasmyth can't escape the economic downturn and war:

My walk to the sea-front took me past elegant turn-of-the-century mansions displaying a fascinating blend of Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Neo Classical, Italian baroque, mingled with the Caucasian balcony... Very quickly Batumi lived up to its reputation for varied architecture –

in every way except one. For virtually all its fine old buildings... were neglected. Four years of war and poverty had shut down all maintenance.

[p. 212-213]

But there between all the decay and remains of economic success and poverty, Nasmyth stumbles upon a sign of hope, an emblem of the new Georgian economy:

Browsing through a stall in the square something called my attention; a pair of shoes with the words MADE IN GEORGIA printed on the sole. I experienced a little thrill. The first product manufactured by independent Georgia...? Certainly I wouldn't see another clearly indigenous product for a year – then a carton of tangerine juice stamped PRODUCED BY LILO COMPANY TBILISI, GEORGIA... Slowly, a few daring businessmen were starting to fill the gaping hole left by the Soviet system.

[p. 215-216]

Back in Tbilisi Nasmyth witnessed another sign of hope for the newly independent nation: Georgia had entered the European Cup and for the first time in its history would play Wales at home.

The game was like few I'd ever seen. Not only did Georgia win 5-0, Temur Ketsbaia (since taken by Newcastle United) scored Georgia's first ever goal as a nation in a major competition (until then the Georgians had to play as Dynamo Tbilisi in the Soviet League).

[p. 221]

New Georgia: Modernisation Georgian style



Tbilisi, modern street art 1997. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

By the end of 1990s, Georgia was slowly rising from the ashes. Being back in Tbilisi Nasmyth experiences another time-change in the city:

Although mentally prepared for modernisation, I still found myself shocked at the number of new, marble-fronted stores and restaurants, shining out onto the run-down pavements.

I glanced around the new Rustaveli Avenue, displaying at least two dozen new shops and businesses. Besides me Kodak, Fanta, Coca-Cola, Samsung, 'salon' blazed out of the walls. McDonald's was on its way. But New Georgia had started to pick up its own distinctive style. Many of the restaurants and cafés had been created in a very personal style, as if by artists (very often they were). Names like "Nicola" (filled with Pirosmeni copies), the "Café Vincent" (after Van Gogh), "Maly" with its richly lugubrious romantic murals, welcomed Georgian visitors with menus written in English and Georgian (the Russian language had almost disappeared from the city centre, right down to the street signs).

[pp. 285 – 290]

How to make a revolution?



Members of the Kmara! youth movement protesting 2003. Photo: © Peter Nasmyth

In 2003 Nasmyth visited the newly renovated Marriott Tbilisi Hotel. It had been destroyed during the civil war and stood as a burnt out shell for 8 years. Parliamentary elections were just ahead and eleven years of free-market economy and the economic growth of the last years had not translated into development for all:

During these years the country had polarised to create a few very rich and many more poor than before. Villas sprouted from the ground in Tskneti – Tbilisi's Beverly Hills – like gaudy mushrooms, while beggars and street children appeared on Rustaveli Avenue. Corruption blossomed again like a huge fungus within institutions... How much longer would the emotion-charged Georgian personality tolerate it? Because with every loudly proclaimed step of public progress – like the new Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline; an adjustment in the legislature; a restored building – came an invisible backwards step behind the scenes. *Still* the power-cuts regularly blackened sections of the city in winter; *still* Georgian custom and tax department extorted money from businesses; *still* pensions and state salaries weren't paid. People's patience was running low.

[p. 297-299]

Eduard Shevardnadze, elected president since 1995 was losing his grip on the country's territory and economy. A strong opposition was being formed and was receiving help from the NGO-community and the USA based donors. A friend of Nasmyth explains:

[T]he Liberty Institute (a democracy-promoting NGO), the Open Society (George Soros's foundation in Georgia) and the NDI (an American NGO with connections to the Democratic Party) had between them sent a good number of Georgia's key strategists, including Zurab Zhvania and Mikhail Saakashvili, to Belgrade and Bratislava.

[p. 300]

The new Georgian opposition was trying to learn from the well-organised revolution in Serbia, which had removed Slobodan Milosovic from power. A Georgian youth organisation

called Kmara (Eng.: Enough), largely based on the model of the Serbian youth movement Otpor (Eng: Resistance), was already in action: leafleting, spray painting and recruiting.

And one person, Mikhail Saakashvili, the leader of the opposition party National Movement, was able to seize the moment:

By making loud and charismatic speeches, dramatic gestures against the backdrop of stagnation and corruption, Saakashvili captured the headlines and wooed the cameras and voters.

[p. 301]

The Rose Revolution



Election poster featuring Michael Saakashvili 2003.

Photo: © Jonathan Wheatley

Election day came and the western-trained Georgian civil society had arranged for two independent vote counts alongside the official electoral committee. They showed that Saakashvili was in the lead. The electoral committee didn't come up with the first official results until 4 days later and they were obviously manipulated.

The powder keg had received the spark it needed. The announcement was so blatantly rotten the smell rapidly spread across all Georgia, strongly promoted by the media.

[p. 302]

The election fraud united the opposition even more and now not only the young radicals but also the middle class supported the young firebrand Saakashvili. His calls for Shevardnaze's resignation grew louder. Mass demonstrations were held in front of the government building and the demonstrators were passing roses to the like the police: The Rose Revolution began.

Saakashvili toured the country "collecting numbers for a huge march on the capital to coincide with the final election results." The stage was set for the final act, but how would the police and the military react, or would they side with the opposition?

The final official election results announced that Shevardnaze had won. With this 100,000 people from all over Georgia converged on Tbilisi to gather in front of the parliament as Shevardnaze was about to give his opening speech.

As the huge crowd surged forward the police spontaneously withdrew their cordon and Saakashvili entered parliament by the rear door just as Shevardnaze began his speech opening the parliament. It would be his last as president... Thus for the third time in fifteen years the Georgian people had removed their own government, not by the ballot box, but by popular street protest... And Saakashvili? The 36-year-old former lawyer stood basking in the international spotlight; Prince Charming in a miraculous political fairy tale.

[p. 307]

With some irony Nasmyth quoted a friend, who after the demonstrations suddenly made the comment:

We were all standing there in Freedom Square shouting "Misha, Misha, Misha," and 'Shevardnaze out!' Then one of us suddenly turned and said, 'do you think that in eight years we'll be back here again shouting "Misha out!"?

[p. 308]