

# Private Letters as Visual Evidence for Disclosure of the Totalitarian Regime

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## Abstract

*The paper aims to prove the impact of the totalitarian regime on individuals, society and interpersonal relationships, reflected in personal letters, as well as the consequences of this impact. The research object includes the epistolary legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian poet and public figure, the General of the Russian Army, Grigol Orbeliani, and that of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian historian, founder and Rector of Tbilisi State University, Ioane Javakhishvili. They both were members of the Georgian society, on extremely different sides, owing to their beliefs and worldviews: the former was an active participant in the creation of the totalitarian regime and represented the foothold of Russian authority in fulfilling the forcible policy in the Caucasus, and the latter was a victim of the totalitarian regime; by keeping the national values, worldviews, and personal freedom, he opposed authority. As a result, he became an object of persecution and insult. The comparative analysis of the two different epochs has once again revealed that Bolshevism was a logical extension of Tsarist Russia's imperial policy: in both epochs, the Russian sovereignty used similar methods to implement and maintain a totalitarian regime: obtaining the public confidence, dividing the society, encouraging people to denounce and doom each other in order to create successful careers and so on. By bringing the examples from modern life, the work shows that, despite the fact that communism has fallen, its influence on society is still evident.*

**Key words:** *totalitarian regime, private letters, Grigol Orbeliani, Ioane Javakhishvili, Russian authority*

## Introduction

There are different opinions in the scientific literature on the genesis of totalitarianism and on its research methodology, which were discussed in a number of works by scientists, among whom Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956), Popper (1945), Bonelli (1997).

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We consider wrong the opinion of some scholars, conditioned by subjective or objective factors (for example, the use of the adjective “totalitarian” in negative contexts to describe the one-party system formed in Italy in the early 1920s, and its establishment in the political lexicon by Benito Mussolini), that totalitarianism is an exclusively 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon. Even without the in-depth analysis of the issue, it becomes clear as soon as we understand the basic essence of totalitarianism.

These scholars deem totalitarianism as authority, based on power, terror, a one-party system, and a comprehensive state ideology that controls the spheres of economic, social, cultural, and personal life (Khonelidze 1996: 3). To illustrate their points of view, slogans were presented by Benito Mussolini and Vladimir Lenin – “Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state” (Conquest 1990: 249) and “The party is the mind, *honour and* conscience of our epoch” (Epstein 1994: 19); these clearly show the nature of totalitarianism, but we may add sayings belonging to other eras, for example, the famous words that Louis XIV said in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: “I am the State”, which is also considered to be a signpost of totalitarianism, which identifies the State with the government.

English historian Eduard Carr views totalitarianism as a time-honoured experience of the universe. One group of Georgian historians rightly notes:

There is nothing strange in totalitarianism that was not known to the historical development of mankind in various forms in the early eras. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought all this together and developed into a form in countries where historical conditions were better prepared. Totalitarianism has preserved from all eras: a bit of slavery, a bit of absolutism, a bit of the Inquisition, a little bit of enthusiasm, a bit of fanaticism, and the synthesis of all these in different countries had gained the forms of either Stalinism, or Fascism, or Maoism, and sometimes even the form of Saddam Hussein's mediocre regime (Natmeladze et al, 2008: 3).

This is not surprising, since the figure establishing a totalitarian regime is always a human being. That is why, while discussing the causes of totalitarianism, one cannot avoid the psychoanalytic underpinnings of this event, which proves that man is authoritarian by his nature, and that the passion for conquest and violence is universal and has its biological basis (Gakharia 2008: 102). A famous Roman writer and public figure, Pliny the Younger, the founder of the epistolary genre, said: “Human nature is

falsified because it combines extreme spiritual misery with immense arrogance” (qtd. in Balanchivadze 2010: 29). A prominent physicist and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, uses two words to describe a person: a cane and thinking. The first one refers to the mankind’s fluctuant nature. It is worth remembering here a well-known representative of ancient Georgian literature, Ioane Sabanisdze, who describes the behaviour of some of the nobles under the Arab reign as follows: “They were shaking like reeds by strong winds.” According to Pascal (1981), the man’s strength lies in his thinking. “It is just the thought that elevates us, and not time and space. So let us try to think with dignity. This is the cornerstone of morality”, – he concludes.

The creators of the totalitarian systems of all times, first and foremost, were attacking human thinking for the sake of its complete subjugation, extinguishing individuality and personal origin. In addition, the main tool for solving this problem was coercion, terror.

Tsarist Russia, completing the process of conquest of the Caucasus in the 1860s, was such a state for centuries. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ivan IV created the Kingdom of Russia through terror and mass-murder, based on despotism and unconditional obedience to the Head of State. The whole social vertical axis of the country was based on the principle of considering the inferior property of the superior. The same thing happened later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the governmental form created by Ivan IV became even worse. No other ideology and no other dictator except Stalin was welcomed by people. The social violence characteristic for Russia was the initial stage that prepared the ground for the political violence that the whole society was to experience in the following years.

## **Theory**

When we examine the totalitarian regime of any state, one should consider that totalitarianism is not an absolute, but a relative category, which means that one should not speak of an ideal model of totalitarianism, but of totalitarian tendencies, signs, methods and forms, which more or less exist in these states and approach the ideal type of totalitarianism by their essence. What unifies them is the fact that the system is based on power, fear, obedience and the social background as the basis of its existence. It is within this framework that we shall further examine the research issue.

## Method

We have studied some personal letters of Grigol Orbeliani and Ivane Javakhishvili, which allowed us to see clearly the role of the human being in the establishment and functioning of the totalitarian regime, as well as its brutality and injustice against humanity. The purpose of our research is to examine their personal letters in this context.

## Discussion

Arsen Amartol (1897: 109), a well-known figure of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, wrote: “Every written monument speaks of its writer, to praise him or to condemn him forever”. The same can be said about the private letters of both figures.

Grigol Orbeliani, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian nobleman, famous poet and prominent representative of Russia’s army, was an active participant in the creation of the totalitarian regime, and represented the foothold of Russian authority in fulfilling the forcible policy in the Caucasus. We find a lot of information about these facts and events in his epistles addressing high or low-ranking officials of the Russian Empire, as well as his relatives and acquaintances.

Relying on his epistolary legacy, we see how this person serves the despotic regime that erased the freedom-loving peoples of the hyper-ethnic Caucasus from the face of the earth, depriving them of the right to live, turned independent states and political entities into the ordinal, underprivileged provinces of the Empire, changed the social structures and systems of these countries, the behaviour of people and interpersonal relations, replaced the national values by the imperial ones. In one of our previous articles, we note:

In the process of wartime operations, immoral methods of the struggle always take place, but in state settings and bureaucracy of Russian empire, this is extremely fiercely revealed. They didn’t avoid mass extermination of peaceful population or their exile, village destruction and their burning, making population quarrel among each other, mass deforestation (Gotsiridze and Gigashvili 2017: 342).

Russia’s despotism and tyranny are perfectly characterized by the words of the commander-in-chief of the Russian troops in the Caucasus, Pavle Tsitsianov, who addressed the population of the Caucasus with: “I will

destroy all of you from the face of the earth, I will come with the flame and burn everything that I will not take up by the troops; I will cover the land of your region with your blood and it will turn red..." (Gotsiridze et al 2018: 34).

A letter sent to Mikhail Vorontsov on December 16, 1852, from Temirkhanshura, sets out the views and clarifies that Grigol Orbeliani is not only a mere supporter of this policy, but also a devotee of the system:

The general benefit and glory of our weapons should be ahead of all other things, and in this respect, in my opinion, there is neither Dagestan nor Chechnya; there is only the enemy and the army of the Great Empire, by the force of which the great, bloody issue of the fate of the Caucasus should be decided. (Gigashvili and Ninidze 2013: 169).

In another letter, Gr. Orbeliani, right after the words "military cliques can still be heard from Abazehov, like the last moans of a dying giant of the Caucasus", one reads: "But with the help of God, peace will be established there" (Gigashvili and Ninidze 2017: 125). *God's help*, in this context, and in the language of the authors of this article, is nothing more than the annihilation, extermination, genocide of a whole ethnos, which is also characteristic for totalitarian regimes. As an example, suffice it to remember the tragic outcome of the Ubykhs, who were totally destroyed and annihilated by Tsarist Russia.

To the imperial thinking, it was completely unintelligible that someone else, except Russians, could live in the margins of the Caucasian Eden. General N. P. Slepsov writes about the mountaineers:

What a right do these savages have to live in such a beautiful land... Our Emperor ordered us to destroy their villages, all men capable of carrying weapons, destroy, burn crops, cut the bellies to pregnant women in order not to give birth to bandits (Gigashvili and Ninidze 2018: 35).

The practice of eviction of the population, characteristic of totalitarian regimes, was also actively used by Tsarism. In a letter sent to Mikhail Vorontsov on March 16, 1851, from Zakatala, Grigol Orbeliani urged the King's successor to evict peaceful civilians of Chari from the village of Tanachi and burn the village: "At the end of this month, the peaceful migration of the Charian people from Tanachi to their former residence takes place; Tanach will definitely be burned" (Gigashvili and Ninidze 2013: 7). Russian Tsarism defended the concept of settling the territory of the traditional residence of the highlanders by Cossack villages, while the indigenous mountaineers were evicted to the graves, or in the best case, to

Turkey. So, the genocide of the Caucasians and Mukhadzhirstvo – the mass migration of mountain people to Turkey, was pursued by the Russians almost as a sign of Russian philanthropy. The chief of the General Staff of the Caucasian Army, A. P. Kartsov (Ubysh), writes:

The mountaineers who are confined in a narrow coastal strip will be put in the desperate position ... therefore, in the forms of philanthropy ... it is necessary to open them another way: resettlement to Turkey (Gigashvili and Ninidze 2018: 55).

In the arsenal of the struggle, the totalitarian system included incitement, denunciation, grassing on someone, and rewarding obedient ones with medals, money, support and promotion on the ladder of the hierarchy along with physical extermination of population.

All of these methods were successfully used by the Russian tsarism and its officials, including Grigol Orbeliani. "The Russians ... did not stop to encourage them (the Caucasians) to quarrel against each other to sow envy and enmity in them", – eyewitness – contemporary of that time, Bukurauli, writes (Gotsiridze et al 2018: 36). Grigol Orbeliani's letters show the author's complacency and sense of pride of that he had accomplished: the implementation of Russia's intentions and his active involvement in strengthening the totalitarian regime (Gigashvili and Ninidze 2018: 6).

The letters of Gr. Orbeliani, as literal reports of a high official, represent an archival diary of the one part of the totalitarian regime of the Tsarist Russia. If one Georgian – namely Grigol Orbeliani – was involved in strengthening the totalitarian regime, the other, Ivane Javakhishvili, was a victim of this system.

After the collapse of Tsarism and, afterwards, the forcible involvement of the independent states created on its ruins into the orbit of the new, modernized, Communist empire, nothing changed in the attitude of the government towards its population. Only Russian totalitarianism changed its form. It spread its wings and came even closer to its ideal look.

In this context, the opinion of Grigol Lortkipanidze – former member of independent Georgian government (1918-1921) – is very important. He compares Tsarist and Bolshevik Russia, and concludes that "Russian red imperialism served the same goals everywhere and in everything in Georgia and the Caucasus which were ruled by monarchic Russia" (1995: 242).

The 1920-1930s is one of the hardest periods in the history of Georgia. The country, which was violently reunited within the modernized

empire of the Soviet Union, suffered a number of hardships, including a campaign of moral and physical extermination of the most prominent part of the Georgian intelligentsia, which remains a shameful page in the history of the country.

It is known that the fight against thinkers, faithful professionals is characteristic of any totalitarian government, as such people always pose a serious threat to it. It is the historian's duty to reveal and evaluate these facts. A famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century American historian, Santayana, wrote: "Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it." (in Clairmont, 2013, internet) Thus, unveiling the campaign against the well-known representatives of the Georgian intellectuals in the 1920-1930s is not a mere statement of facts, but an attempt to warn the society not to repeat such events.

In this regard, it is important to study the epistolary legacy of prominent Georgian public figures, which enables us to better see the problem, its causes, to understand the essence of the socio-political life of the time, to deeply examine the author's personality, interests or psychological portrait. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became clear that the confrontation between the highest political leadership of the Soviet Union was ending with Stalin's victory. It was well understood by university-educated intelligentsia that the goal of both camps was to establish a totalitarian political regime after defeating the rival. Under these conditions, the intelligentsia would have to subdue to the new government and be physically rescued, or start fighting against it, which would most likely result in their physical destruction. Some opted for values. They could not tolerate the government whose motto was: "Who that is not with us is against us" (Javakhishvili 2004: 12).

So, the Soviet authorities began to persecute and harass Ivane Javakhishvili and many other Georgian intellectuals during the struggle against Kontratyevchina, which sought to expel "disobedient" scholars from educational institutions and isolate them from society.

The totalitarian regime mainly relies on hesitant, unprincipled, and most importantly, unprofessional people at all times and space. Their guilt may be far greater in the creation of such a system than that of the officials in the higher echelons of the system itself.

This was the case in the 1920-1930s, when Ivane Javakhishvili was forced to resign from the position of Rector of Tbilisi State University, founded by him. However, according to the leaders of the totalitarian regime, this was not enough: Ivane Javakhishvili had also to be confronted

with his colleagues and students, and his expulsion from the university had to be demanded.

It is difficult to disagree with Nino Kakulia, who writes:

The facts of persecution of the Founder of the first Georgian University, and the ideologist of that time – Ivane Javakhishvili in 1930-1936s, are amazing, not only illogical... and we find logic in the political system of that period, during the reign of which the structure distorted people so that they could sacrifice others' talent, morality and high values to the slavish subordination to the authorities (2011: 3).

Of course, the government supported the people fighting against Ivane Javakhishvili in every way: Luka Tsikhistavi received the position of the Deputy Head of the Department of the History of Georgia, at Tbilisi State University "in exchange for a selfless battle" against Ivane Javakhishvili (Javakhishvili 2004: 10).

In 1928, the rector of the university, Ghlonti, stated that Ivane Javakhishvili and his associates had perished the Tbilisi University and now they had to recover their spoils (2004: 10).

Professors Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli give the following assessment to the discussion against Ivane Javakhishvili at the State Pedagogical Institute of Georgia in December 1930:

The discussion was disgusting in terms of the perception of our Georgian society, physiognomy. Even ten years have not passed since the establishment of the Bolshevik tyranny, but in this period the spiritual degradation of society has reached unimaginable levels (Vachnadze and Guruli 2004: 14).

Ivane Javakhishvili's personal letters have preserved many facts reflecting the totalitarian system. The letters to Simon Janashia and Varlam Topuria illustrate the complexity of the author's scientific work and how severely the current news affected him.

In the letter of April 12, 1936, sent to Varlam Topuria, Ivane Javakhishvili writes:

The Rector K. Oragvelidze read a 3-hour report at the university, in which he tried to prove the impropriety of all my papers because they were not Marxist, which was not a new discovery for anyone. This fact was followed by a quarrel for four days, during which the Pro-rector Gr. Janelidze said many poisonous words, either ... And some of my former

disciples also showed themselves. ... I decided that it was no longer possible to stay at the university, as it amounted to a complete disruption of my self-esteem, so I submitted a statement to the Education Commissioner that I stepped down TSU, I stopped publishing my papers and I was going to work on issues of a completely different specialty. Our folks are all well. But you will easily imagine my condition (in Dondua 1987: 168).

Ivane Javakhishvili's serious mental and physical condition is best conveyed by another letter sent to Varlam Topuria dated May 7, 1936:

I was sick and it is two days since I have got up. I still feel very weak and I find it difficult to work, write. As expected, from this never-ending thrill (this year exactly ten years have passed since I resigned from the rector's position and this ruthless battle is being conducted), I had the strongest attack of heart disease with terrible dizziness and weakness. At present, I have survived death, but if it repeats, it is doubtful whether I will be able to survive (in Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996: 42-43).

The letter dated January 23, 1937 is not of less importance. Ivane Javakhishvili shares his emotions with Varlam Topuria:

I could not imagine that it would be possible to abuse a man's selfless activity in such a way... It is easy to imagine how a person might feel after reading such an assessment of his work after 39-year scientific activity, furthermore, from the head of that organization, creation of which he has devoted all his energy and health! I immediately made a statement that I would give up delivering the lectures at the university from the next semester... It was difficult for me to write about this, but I could not stop saying anything, either. Even now, I forced myself to say a few words about it. Just to make my silence understandable to you, I have written this, otherwise, I do not talk about it to anyone here, and I silently suppress in my heart this hideous attempt to discredit my work (in Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996: 50-51).

It is clear from the letters that Ivane Javakhishvili practically did not talk to anyone about the campaign against him. He did not even pay attention to the authors of the infamous pasquinades and did not attend these meetings. He knew that the leaders of this disgraceful movement were beyond Tbilisi State University made the people, being inside the University, talk against him, slavishly obeying their orders. It is characteristic for the totalitarian regime to sow hatred, loathing and intolerance in society, which helps the government maintain its power.

On January 8, 1937, the scholar writes to Varlam Topuria:

The fate has brought me many disappointments and, particularly, in the last ten years. The only consolation for me was the scientific research; in such cases, the anxiety would gradually subside and I would forget the bitterness of injustice towards me (in Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996: 55).

One interesting fact is noted in the epistolary legacy of Ivane Javakhishvili - the change of attitude towards him by the person standing at the top of the pyramid that completely changes the society's attitude towards him. Such feature is characteristic of a totalitarian state. In June 1941, George Orwell wrote:

A totalitarian state creates dogmas that are not subject to discussion but are often changed according to the state's needs and expediency - totalitarianism requires dogmas for the absolute obedience of its subjects, though changes dictated by the necessity of violent policies are unavoidable and deliberate. The totalitarian state has completely rejected objective morality (Orwell 2016: 323).

In our view, the campaign launched against Javakhishvili by some governmental officials gained fierce support from careerists, from people of low-intellect seeking to win the authorities' benevolence by kicking Ivane Javakhishvili. As soon as the dictator's attitude towards him changed due to Stalin's position willing to show the world that he was not the son of a wild country but the son of a country with a rich history and culture, the attitude towards Javakhishvili changed completely. This is also a shameful character for a totalitarian system, when a large part of society is ready to give up their independence, self-respect and human dignity in order to simplify their life. Conformism as a characteristic phenomenon of public life manifesting in different forms in different eras, contributed a great deal to the strengthening of the totalitarian regime. Despite the change in attitude, the repressions against Ivane Javakhishvili left a huge impact on his health, which in fact led to his death (a heart attack).

Edward Carr writes in his famous book, *What is History?*:

It is a presupposition of history that man is capable of profiting (not that he necessarily profits) by the experience of his predecessors, and that progress in history, unlike evolution in nature, rests on the transmission of acquired assets. These assets include both material possessions and the capacity to master, transform, and utilize one's environment (2001: 107).

Based on experience, society should be able to change the current environment to the best. In this context, the epistolary legacy of Grigol Orbeliani and Ivane Javakhishvili is still relevant nowadays, with a view to avoiding the mistakes and crimes of the past. Revealing progressive and reactionary events, evaluating and allocating them a place in the process of historical development is necessary for the present-day generation, because totalitarianism has not died out around us. It still exists as it existed centuries ago and represents, at least in our region, the continuation of Ivan the Terrible's "Russian way". The reason is that the essence of totalitarianism is in the manner of thinking which feeds it within eternity. We see its reflections in particular facts, like the events going on in Tbilisi on 20-21 June 2019, as well as in systemic events, like the slavish obedience to the boss (patron), which is exactly what has been for centuries, including the era of Grigol Orbeliani and Ivane Javakhishvil.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the opinion of Merab Mamardashvili, a well-known Georgian philosopher, who views totalitarianism as a problem of consciousness, when the debauchery of thought and consciousness comes from inside – "The mental forces that made the 30s (The Great Terror- G.G.) are still working latently in our souls" – he said (in Gakharia 2008: 104). His statement testifies that, for example, Stalinism, as one form of totalitarianism, did not begin with Stalin, nor did it end after his death. More or less the same can be said of other types of totalitarian system. All our attempts to view totalitarianism as a problem born in one particular era will end in failure – as a "tale of an evil king", as the cinematographer George Gakharia has figuratively pointed out (2008: 104).

## **Conclusions**

The comparative analysis of the three eras has once again shown that the essential sign of totalitarianism is violence on a person: beginning from physical violence, which certainly includes the terror, using weapons as the main instrument for influence, and ending with psychological violence, reflecting in different ways in different structural units, the state institutions or spheres of social life.

Grigol Orbeliani himself was a representative of that social layer the Russian Tsarist violent policy relied on while establishing the totalitarian regime, while Ivane Javakhishvili and other intelligent people of his time

fell victim of bolshevism with the help of said social layer. This layer still exists and serves the regime. Thus, the persons and their names change but totalitarian regime or its tendencies remain the same in many countries, especially in the post-soviet area. Bolshevism is an eternal problem not restricted to a concrete epoch. It only changes its name and performs in different forms in different epochs.

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