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Becoming a Memory Activist: The Encounters with the Documents at the KGB MIA Archive in Tbilisi, Georgia[1]

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Abstract. This article explores the transformative process of becoming a memory activist in Tbilisi, Georgia, through the case of Ms. Nestan, who first encountered archival documents related to her great-uncle's arrest and death during the so-called "Great Terror" (1936–38) in 2018. Her engagement with these formerly classified KGB records emerged amidst the authoritarian turn of the Georgian Dream government, prompting a profound shift in her perception of the past and its implications for the future. This article examines how reading these documents through a post-socialist lens generated an urgent need for action, as Ms. Nestan sought to prevent a return to a coercive and violent past akin to what her family endured. Building on this individual trajectory, the paper further investigates how archival materials serve as catalysts for memory activism, shaping both personal and collective engagements with the past and the future. By tracing Ms. Nestan's journey from archival discovery to activism, this study sheds light on the broader implications of memory activism in post-Soviet Georgia, contributing to ongoing discussions on the role of memory activism in shaping collective remembrance and political agency in contexts of authoritarian resurgence.

Keywords: Epistemic anxiety, memory activism, archival research, Georgia.

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Introduction

Ms. Nestan's eyes were wide open as she went through the documents regarding the arrest and death of her great-uncle, Vladimir, at the former KGB archive - now the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) archive – at the State Police in Tbilisi.[2]

> My family was told by members of the Soviet secret police that Vladimir had died of liver inflammation in 1943 in the place where he was deported. And instead, he was not deported at all! He was shot in Tbilisi on the 26th of December 1937, only five months after his arrest! Look at how they used to lie to everybody!

She whispered to me in an indignant and surprised tone. That day, we were at the KGB archive together after she had learned just a few days earlier that she could access Vladimir's file for the first time.

For many families in Georgia and other post-Soviet countries, discovering KGB documents about relatives decades after their arrests and executions is not uncommon (Javakhishvili 2016). In the specific Georgian case, archival policies have shifted over the years, and access to certain documents has only become available in the past decades. Ms. Nestan was one of many interlocutors who recently uncovered files detailing the arrests and deaths of their relatives during the so-called "Great Terror" in Georgia (1936–1938). Vladimir was arrested in Tbilisi on 17 July 1937, accused of being a member of a secret German organisation. He was sentenced under Articles 58-a, 10, and 11, which was the worst possible combination at the time, as it signalled an immediate death sentence: enemy of the people (58-a), anti-Soviet agitation (10), and counter-revolutionary activities (11).

For the first time, Ms. Nestan was able to piece together the fragmented knowledge she had carried throughout her life about Vladimir and fill some gaps in her family history. Realising that her great-uncle had not died in 1943 from liver inflammation and actually had been executed the same year he was arrested had a profound impact on her understanding

[2] It is important to note that the KGB (Russian: *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*), or Committee for State Security, operated from 1954 until 1991 and was the successor to the Cheka and the NKVD. The Cheka (Russian: *Chrezvychainaia Komissiia*) was the Soviet secret police, established shortly after the October 1917 Revolution. It functioned until 1922, when it was succeeded by the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU, 1923–1934), which later became a section of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). The NKVD (Russian: *Narodny Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del*), or People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, served as both the Soviet police and secret police. It was established in 1934 and lasted until 1943, after which its functions were gradually transferred to the KGB.

of the Soviet state's repressive system. It also prompted her to respond to decades of silence. She wanted to copy all the documents, not only as evidence of Vladimir's fate but also as proof of the deception that had shaped her family's past. During our day at the archive, she meticulously transcribed every page of the documents that revealed fragments of Vladimir's story and personality. At the end of the day, exhausted in the car, she whispered that she did not know how she would afford to obtain copies of all the documents we had listed. The file contained more than 200 pages, with a copy of each page costing between 3 and 5 lari – approximately 1.5 euros per page. The total cost would be 800 lari, nearly an entire month's salary. When I asked when she planned to collect the documents, she replied that she wanted to do so as soon as possible, even if it was expensive, fearing that archive policies might change and she would lose access to the materials again.

This article examines how an "ordinary person", under specific circumstances and historical contingencies, becomes a memory activist. By exploring how encounters with archival documents shape this transformation, the article situates itself at the intersection of anthropology and memory activism. Sociological and anthropological approaches to activism have significantly contributed to classical studies on social movements and social change by framing activists as subjects with distinct political agency, whose praxis aims to reshape the world (Berger et al. 2021). In post-socialist contexts, activism can be understood as a historically situated practice (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019) that seeks to redefine political identities (Channel-Justice 2018). Similarly, within memory studies, activism has received increasing scholarly attention, moving beyond the well-established idea that memory is contested (Assmann 2023) to examine the role of memory activists in shaping the public sphere beyond mnemonic change (Gutman and Wüsternberg 2021). This also includes a focus on activists' memory work and memory as a form of activism (Merril and Rigney 2024).

Arguably, memory activism is precarious (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023), and the political and historical contingencies empower the activists' activities and trainings, reminding them of their role in society and orienting them towards the past and the future (Lee 2016, 29). Yet, understanding the interplay of the political, historical, and social processes that shape "ordinary people" and turn them into memory activists is equally important to understanding the intensity of their work and the strategies they use to commemorate the past and intervene in the public sphere. Weld (2014), for instance, explores the process of becoming an activist amongst a youth group in post-war Guatemala. Only a few of these young people had direct experience of the conflict - the majority had no

direct knowledge of the war nor of family members who were *desaparecidos* (English: forcefully disappeared), or they had grown up in exile. Weld describes beautifully how, for the young activists, the reading of the documents in the archive was transformative in the sense that "the archives exposed them to new knowledge … providing them with new perspectives on political engagement and the responsibility of truth-telling" (193).

Unlike Weld's interlocutors, whose reflections were reconstructed after the fact, I witnessed Ms. Nestan's transformation firsthand. Her encounters with the KGB documents revealed her political subjectivity and positioning, shaped by epistemic anxieties: simultaneously a desire to uncover Soviet-era fabrications, a curiosity about Vladimir's past, and a fear of Georgia's political future.

In this context, activism becomes not only morally charged but also an act of cultivating democracy and political subjectivity (Kunreuther 2013). Ms. Nestan not only gained a sense of coherence regarding her family history but also found her voice, an authority that is the foundation of liberal democracy as well as a medium of political representation. Her commitment to memory activism, rooted in her engagement with the archive, takes on even greater significance in light of recent political developments in Georgia, where state restrictions on archival access have intensified.

At the end of November 2023, both the MIA-KGB and the National Archives were closed, and they have remained inaccessible to the public. The official explanation has been vague: initially, authorities cited issues with the internal computer system, claiming it was vulnerable and required reconstruction. Subsequently, they attributed the closure to an inventory process, though the exact nature of this process remains unclear. However, no official explanation has been provided for why the archives remain closed or when they are expected to reopen (Civil.ge 2024). Initially, this appeared to be a temporary measure, yet as of the time of writing this article, there are no indications of reopening (Blauvelt 2025). Looking back, the concerns that Ms. Nestan shared with me in 2018 – that the archive might once again be closed – have now materialised. At the time, her fears also spoke to a broader anxiety about a state that would gradually strip its citizens of access to the historical truth.

This article argues that understanding Ms. Nestan's transformation requires situating it in two overlapping contexts. The first is theoretical: I bring into dialogue scholarship on the affective materialities of archives and objects (Stoler 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2007) with work on memory activism and the emergence of new political subjectivities (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2022). By tracing how Nestan's archival encounter catalysed her activism, I demonstrate how affective engagements with documents can carry transformative political potential. The second context is politi-

cal: Nestan's archival discovery unfolded against Georgia's recent autocratic resurgence under the Georgian Dream government (GD hereafter), when archival closures and authoritarian policies intensified. Bringing this context forward illustrates her epistemic anxieties not only as personal but also as historically and politically situated, linking her experience to broader struggles over memory, statecraft, and democracy in post-Soviet Georgia.

I first examine the complex history of the MIA-KGB archive and post-socialist archival policies. I then present Ms. Nestan's story, tracing the key moments that led to her transformation into a memory activist. Finally, I show how the Georgian Soviet and post-Soviet states materialise in the interplay between uncovering information secreted in the archival documents and epistemic anxieties.

The MIA-KGB Archive: A Brief History

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, anti-Soviet demonstrations erupted in Tbilisi, and some demonstrators entered the KGB archive to get hold of the secret police documents without much success. The explanation I obtained, through rumours and unofficial sources, was that right after the fall of state socialism, some Georgian KGB members took the documents regarding the agency operations, destroying some and sending others to the KGB archive in Smolensk, Russia. The amount and type of this disappeared material is still unknown and attempts to recover these documents have failed over time. Moreover, in 1991, during the civil war that led to Gamsakhurdia's defeat, the KGB building caught on fire.[3] The building was damaged, and the thousands of files kept there were either burnt or compromised by the water used to extinguish the fire. According to official sources (cf. Khvadagiani 2017; Vacharadze 2018), 210 000 of 230 000 files were destroyed.

In the newly independent Georgia, what was left of the KGB archive was moved to the National Archives of Georgia and then to the Ministry of State Security in 1995. During Shevardnadze's rule (1992–2003), the archives were largely inaccessible due to economic and political constraints. It was only after the 2003 Rose Revolution, under Saakashvili's new political agenda that promoted democratic values, Europeanization policies, and anti-Soviet, anti-Russian narratives, that the archive's structure changed. Transparency and access were officially promoted, though these changes were neither widely known nor publicly announced

[3] Zviad Gamsakhurdia was the first President of the newly independent Georgia. His mandate lasted only one year as, after the civil war, Eduard Shevardnadze became President.

(Khvadagiani 2017, 30).[4] In 2005, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) established an office encompassing both the KGB archives and the MELI archives (Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute). However, as Georgian politics shifted once again, so did the status of the archives.

The billionaire and oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili founded the GD party in 2011, entering politics in response to his disillusionment with Saakashvili's increasingly autocratic governance. His stated goal was to prevent constitutional and electoral manipulation by Saakashvili's regime (Aprasidze and Siroky 2020, 582). Upon GD's rise to power, alongside its "pragmatic" politics that aimed to moderate Georgia's relationship with Russia while still advocating for NATO and EU integration, the administration also altered archival policies. In 2017, most documents were relocated to the MIA Archives, although some files remained under the jurisdiction of the National Archives, where separate legislation and restricted access made it unclear how much material was available to researchers.

The paradox is that the MIA granted access to the KGB and the CP (Communist Party) archives, whereas the National Archives do not allow researchers to access determined files, even if the government officially guarantees transparency and access to the KGB and CP's documents from 1921–1991.[5] The MIA Archives are located in two separate buildings that are 1 km apart from each other. The state security files are stored in the first building, which is also home to the Police Academy. The CP file records are stored in the second building. The MIA is responsible for access to and the openness and transparency of the KGB and the CP archives, while the National Archives have their own legislation and separate charters.[6]

The lack of a single set of regulations for the archival institutions consequently causes problems of access and transparency as well as problems in consultation, since the documents are scattered in different institutions that do not communicate with each other – something which also slows down the research process (cf. Corrigan 2019). The death of the former KGB archive became a rebirth for a new post-socialist archive, with the documents stored in the MIA and the National Archives. The dismantling, dispersing, rebuilding and reassembling of the former KGB archive in post-socialist Georgia shows that archival power does not evade historical and political conjunctures and that the archive is a "lively" institution:

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[4] Mikheil Saakashvili was the third President of Georgia. He assumed office after the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003, and his mandate marked a clear break from the policies of his predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze. Saakashvili promoted a pro-European and pro-Western narrative and policies that set the country on a path toward Europeanisation.

[5] Parliament of Georgia (2011). Law of Personal Data Protection. https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1561437?publication=33.

[6] For more information about the Georgian Democratic Republic, see Lee (2017).

it dies and is reborn. It changes and therefore is incomplete and imperfect (Basu and De Jong 2016, 6).

The fragmentation of these documents, scattered between different archives, mirrors the fragmented memory of the Great Terror period, also encapsulated in Ms. Nestan's family history: scattered, fragmented, and at times inaccessible. In Georgia, the Great Terror is known mostly by the name of "Shinsakhkomi's mass operations": punitive "classified" operations carried out between 1936–1938 that remained a hidden phenomenon until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Junge and Bonwetsch (2015) divided these operations into three types: the "Kulakur operation", the "National operation", and the "Militia operation". The most extensive of these mass operations was the so-called "Kulakur operation", which was carried out on the basis of operational order No. 000447 of the Internal Affairs Committee of the USSR: the Soviet state took repressive action against former 'kulaks' (Russian: healthy peasants), criminals and other "anti-Soviet elements" (former political opponents of the Bolsheviks: Mensheviks, socialist revolutionaries, anarchists, priests, officers and soldiers of the White Army, employees of the royal administration). Despite the ending of the Great Terror, repressions continued in the Soviet Union, including the November 14th, 1944, deportation of approximately 100,000 Meskhetian Turks from Georgia to Central Asia under the order of Lavrenty Beria (Swerdlow 2006, 1834). Hundreds died during the journey, and the operation served as part of the Soviet Union's national policies for ethno-consolidation (Kaiser 2023, 87–89).

After Stalin's death, Khrushchev initiated de-stalinisation and the rehabilitation of those who were killed, deported, or imprisoned during the Great Terror. Although families of the victims of Soviet repression received letters of rehabilitation, the criteria for rehabilitation were unclear and arbitrary. The lack of transparency and understanding of the truth behind these rehabilitations creates additional suspicion in post-socialist societies and their histories as it is unclear whether those rehabilitated were guilty or whether it was just another manipulation of truth that characterised the Soviet state's logic of condemning and redeeming (Barnes 2011). Moreover, the paradox outlined above whereby, despite the transparency and the openness of the archives, not all the documents are accessible to researchers and the rest of society, shows how the post-socialist archive becomes both a technology of neoliberal governmentality (Kurtović 2019, 21) and a new political site for negotiating historical narratives of the Soviet period.[7]

[7] See Karaia (2023) for a detailed account on the different phases the archive went through since its creation in the 1920s.

Becoming a Memory Activist

Ms. Nestan is a calm, well-educated woman in her 60s. She is an architect and lives in Saburtalo, one of the largest commercial and residential districts in central Tbilisi. Her family history is like that of many middle-class Georgian families who were part of the First Democratic Republic (1918–1921) and later persecuted during the Great Terror as part of Stalin's campaign to exterminate the "petty bourgeoisie". Ms. Nestan not only lost her great-uncle Vladimir but also her grandfather Konstantine, Vladimir's brother, who was arrested and killed in 1937. Ms. Nestan's grandmother (Konstantine's wife), Elene, was sentenced to 10 years in the ALZHIR (Kazakhstan) corrective colony in October 1937. The children (Ms. Nestan's mother and uncle) were left with their grandmother, and only their father's sisters had the courage to maintain contact with them. The rest of the family cut all contact, and they grew up isolated as the children of the "enemy of the people". Ms. Nestan repeatedly told me that her mother, who was 84 years old during my fieldwork, does not remember a lot about that period and, out of fear, did not talk about her experience, nor did her grandmother when she finally came back from the ALZHIR colony.

When Ms. Nestan was younger, she did not ask many questions about her family's story. She only became interested in it after her grandmother had passed away, and she regretted not being more curious at the time. Ms. Nestan recalled that her grandmother used to meet with other Georgian women who had been imprisoned in ALZHIR, and she wished that she had listened to their stories and asked questions about their experiences. Because of the changes to the archive and the lack of communication regarding access, Ms. Nestan only discovered that the archives were open after talking with members of the local NGO Sovlab in 2017, which was when she started research to find out more information about her grandfather's life and her family history.[8] It was there, when she was searching for some material about her grandfather Konstantine, that she realised that there was a file full of documents about Vladimir, her great-uncle who she thought had died in a labour camp of liver inflammation and whose life she did not know much about.

That morning in December 2018, Ms. Nestan came to pick me up in her car, excited and anxious. She was anxious because she did not know

[8] Sovlab (Soviet Past Research Laboratory) is a Georgian NGO founded in 2010. It is the main NGO in Georgia which deals with the Soviet past. Alongside Sovlab, it is important to notice that other organisations have also been working on the history and memory of the Soviet repressions. For example, the IDFI (Institute for the Development of Freedom and Information) developed the project "Stalin's Lists on Georgia" (https://idfi.ge/en/stalins-lists-on-georgia). See also: https://ge.boell.org/en/2014/01/16/rethinking-soviet-past.

if the archival staff would allow us access to Vladimir's file. She was also excited about discovering what information the documents might contain while at the same time curious about what she would find. These affective dimensions arose from her desire and impulse to know her family's past, a dynamic that mirrors the affective dimensions described by Stoler (2009) in her work on the Dutch colonial archive. Stoler (2009) reveals how epistemic anxieties are psychic and affective spaces that combine "both ways of not knowing and obliquely knowing" (253) at once. Stoler's analysis highlights how such anxieties are not just intellectual but also tied to emotional and social power structures, where the desire for knowledge is simultaneously coupled with anxiety about what can or should be known. In this way, Ms. Nestan's simultaneous fear and desire to know, expressed in her anticipation of what could happen (the archival staff avoiding access to the file), mirror this epistemic anxiety. This tension is not just personal but also deeply tied to historical power dynamics, like the colonial context Stoler (2009) explores. The KGB documents Ms. Nestan was about to engage with were far from obsolete or abandoned; they held agentive power to sharpen future stories and narratives by carrying, charting, and containing affective energies when "put to use in specific webs of social relations" (Navaro-Yashin 2007, 81). The encounter with the files also had a social effect on Ms. Nestan's life trajectory, ultimately leading her to become a memory activist.

From Ordinary People to Memory Activists

The day in the secret police archive was very emotional on many levels for both of us. While Ms. Nestan got the chance to finally see her great-uncle's file and gain a sense of intimacy with her family's past, I was witnessing the process of Ms. Nestan's making sense of Soviet state terror through her reading of the dry logic of the former secret police, concealed in documents that, according to the national narrative, were filed by the enemy (the Soviet regime) of the post-socialist Georgian state. The knowledge she had about her family history was fragmented, incomplete, and filled with silences - made up of unspoken words and tacit memories from her childhood. For Ms. Nestan, the documents served as a lens to help see through this fragmentation and clearly identify the (il)logic of Soviet state terror. Reading the documents filed by the institutional perpetrators (Weld 2014) of the past has arguably unexpected effects that span from fragmented identities, new desires, and hopes to revisionist projects. In Ms. Nestan's case, the reading of the documents empowered her understanding of the Soviet state as evil:

> For me, each document was important, to look at and to read, what, why, how, what for, and what guilt they had. I knew that these people were killed for nothing, I knew they were not guilty. I knew this from my family. However, to see this information in the documents, showed me what it really was like. How aggressive and brutal this regime was. These documents helped me to make more sense of the communist regime; I acknowledged this brutality. I was looking at the list of the people who were shot, and it was so powerful and breath-taking. All these people were killed for nothing.

The peculiarities of accessing the secret police archives in post-socialist Georgia unfold in the tension between concealing and revealing historical truths and in subverting categories of enemy/perpetrators and victims of the former Soviet state in the post-socialist state. On one hand, the meticulous work of the secret police in Soviet times was to craft the category of the enemy, and the documents they compiled and stored in the archives served to validate their accusations (Verdery 2014, 2018). This archive, in the logic of its makers, should have never been discovered. On the other hand, in present-day Georgia, Ms. Nestan was looking at the documents through the lens of the Georgian post-socialist state and therefore engaged with them from a different perspective - one which corresponded to her present reality.

Gutman and Wüstenberg (2022) define memory activists as non-state actors that work as individuals or within organisations. This premise opens space to address one aspect of memory activism (and activism more broadly) that has not been explored by anthropologists and memory scholars consistently: namely, how a person *becomes* a (memory) activist. The vast literature on memory activists and activism has focused on the people activists choose to become the subject of their praxis. Nonetheless, if the literature on memory activism and activism in general agrees on the special intensity of the activists' political agency in shaping political imaginaries, looking at the process of *becoming* an activist becomes imperative to understand the logics through which activists intervene and try to shape people's horizons. Ms. Nestan's process of becoming a memory activist in Tbilisi was affectively charged by moments of revelation and intentionality.

When Ms. Nestan opened the file on her great-uncle's confiscated objects, she experienced moments of surprise that were followed by expressions of joy, excitement, and sadness as well as anger. She read through the 500 documents, sometimes speaking up loudly and sometimes whispering. Ms. Nestan would look at me with sparkling eyes when she discovered that Vladimir had almost 2000 books, an excitement that would soon be stifled from the realisation that these books had vanished after his arrest. She smiled when reading about the cigarettes

Vladimir used to smoke, and her eyes sweetly caressed the archives' computer screen, filling a void that had been kept silent for so many years. In that small room, the consistent yet cold and formal language of the KGB archives transported us into a warm domestic sphere: a record of Vladimir's last day in his house right before his arrest. Ms. Nestan was in the process of discovering some of her great-uncle's habits, and I accompanied her in witnessing and trying to make sense of the violence deployed by the secret police as Vladimir was branded an enemy of the people. In reading the documents, it felt as if the punitive Soviet state apparatus made itself "evident to the persons who inhabit [its] domains in the form of materialities" (Navaro-Yashin 2007, 82). The affective re-enactment of the past through reading the documents became the driving force for Ms. Nestan's self-reflexion (Lee 2016), which led to her becoming a memory activist. These moments of revelation of Soviet state repressive practices were important as they were not only part of Ms. Nestan's process of knowledge production, but also part of her self-training in becoming an activist (Houston 2020).

Lectures, tours, walking, books, long talks, and conferences were only some of the multiple ways that memory activists have engaged with the public and helped encourage some of the people they engage with to become fellow activists (Burchianti 2004; Bonilla 2011). All of these public engagements have some sort of material evidence in common, be it documents, books, or audio-visual materials. In the literature listed above, how activists' praxis is incommensurably linked with evidence to generate an epistemological shift is often taken for granted - that is, that (historic) materials become central to the recognition and the legitimacy of the activist as a social actor and not only for their validation of the past. Without evidence their claims would be considered suspicious. Hence, Ms. Nestan's encounter with the hundreds of documents she analysed and selected also became a self-training practice. Ms. Nestan was able to educate herself and fill in the gaps of her fragmented knowledge of the past through the documents that brought forth self-evident truths (Lee 2016, 30). Once she found coherence in the story she was producing, Ms. Nestan was ready to share it actively.

Ms. Nestan's self-awareness went hand in hand with a feeling of liberation, of breathing out a past that she felt was not only hidden but also not really shared. After our day in the MIA archive, she told me:

> I want people from my circle, my friends, to know about my story and ask me all about it. I will tell them what happened, how everything started, the material I gathered. Generally, they are interested. But the problem is that only people who had families who experienced this suffering really understand. I

> have friends who had *repressirebuli* grandmothers,[9] for them this is a known topic, and they understand more. They themselves try to speak about their own family histories and share their stories. You know, it was difficult to keep everything inside, it was boiling inside me, I needed to share and talk about it with other people.

She shows how the embodied memory of the violent past she shared with other families who had similar experiences did not necessarily need articulating because there was a tacit understanding of what those experiences entailed. Nonetheless, when Ms. Nestan found evidence of and coherence in her family's past, she was able to produce a story that she wanted to share with people who had not experienced repression so that they might learn and understand about why the past was so important for the present and the future. Ms. Nestan's encounter with the documents showed how the archive is not only a subject and site of knowledge production but also a generator of social relationships (Verdery 2014, 5). In fact, the agentive power of the documents concerning Vladimir's life, combined with Ms. Nestan's post-socialist awareness of their makers and their use in Soviet times, shaped her political subjectivity and prompted Ms. Nestan to take action not only for her family, but also for society at large, by becoming a memory activist:

> I was thinking about some publication, for instance, now that I know all the dates, how it was... At a societal level, I could make a sort of publication that everyone could see. Their remembrance has not to be lost. I think it is important because there are many people that are waiting for their stories to be shared.

Knowing the State(s)

Ms. Nestan's encounter with Soviet-era deception reveals both an engagement with discomfort and a way of knowing the Georgian Soviet and post-Soviet state. The Soviet state created and rehabilitated enemies according to undisclosed rules; the post-Soviet state, meanwhile, limits access to certain documents through contentious laws that create unease about what can be known, how it can be repeated, and how it can be shared. These epistemic formations - ways of knowing the world - shape what people assume to know and how they contest knowledge through emotions (Stoler 2009). Through the KGB documents, Ms. Nestan

[9] *Repressirebuli* in Georgian language means "repressed". In this case, it can be translated as deported, arrested, or executed.

engaged in a mode of knowing both the Georgian Soviet and post-Soviet state. Determined to share her story, she began speaking about her family's past on local TV, radio, and a podcast. I suspect our frequent meetings were also part of her activist commitment to making history public. She once told me:

> It's our debt [as descendants] to push this knowledge to the front line. The state will always try to hide its crimes. Maybe this government won't, but in general, the state was criminal for killing these people, right? The state will always try to push this topic back.

This claim is significant on multiple levels. Ms. Nestan's act of revealing her family's history aligns with a "fantasy" (Aretxaga 2003) of a state that would acknowledge its crimes. Yet Ms. Nestan also recognises that the state, in the past, was criminal, and even if the current government is not, the state as an entity "will always try to hide its crimes". Her fear that the state will always try to hide its crimes brings into focus Jansen's (2015) distinction between statehood and statecraft: statehood foregrounds questions of "what the state is, claims to be, and should be", whereas statecraft foregrounded questions of "what the state does, claims to do, and should do" (12). The former foregrounds questions of essence; the latter foregrounds questions of practice.

Of course, epistemologically these two reasonings are closely related, but this analytical distinction makes it useful to further our focus on practices to understand our interlocutors' investments and engagements with the state. Using this analytical distinction, Ms. Nestan's statements become very clear: the state was a criminal (reasoning of statehood) and will always hide its secrets (reasoning of statecraft). Thus, focussing our attention on the question of what the state does for Ms. Nestan, namely that it always tries to hide its secrets, we get hints of a reasoning of what the state could be again in the future: a criminal. Thus, Ms. Nestan sees her present morally charged: her debt to the memory of her ancestors demands active engagement in the present because the memory of the future is still uncertain. For Ms. Nestan, the secret police archive documents become a technology (Lee 2016) that enables a way of knowing the Soviet and post-Soviet states, unfolding in epistemic anxieties and prompting her to become a memory activist to intervene in collective memory. The fear of a future deceptive state became particularly salient during my fieldwork in 2018, which coincided with a moment of political crisis.

This crisis unfolded against the backdrop of Bidzina Ivanishvili's so-called "pragmatic" politics, which, in practice, clashed with the sentiments of many in Georgia. When I first visited the country in 2013, there

was widespread optimism about the new government. However, by 2018, most people I talked to were very disappointed. These "pragmatic" politics towards Russia had, over the years, softened the relationship with the Federation. At the same time, they fostered anti-European and anti-Western sentiments and paved the way for a major resurgence of Russian propaganda in Georgian society. From 2012, any state-led orientation toward the Soviet past has been completely absent. Likewise, the GD does not take any position on how to commemorate or remember the repressions of the Great Terror. There is a great degree of indifference towards the Soviet past that is used by the different political elites just to shame the political opposition. The GD party officially calls itself centre-left, but it is in fact made up of a mixture of differing ideologies, and it has been ruling alone without a coalition since the 2016 elections. Ivanishvili personally chose and nominated political candidates without consulting his colleagues and has accused his political allies of cooperating with the opposition (UNM), consequently creating negative images of potential political adversaries.

Following GD's re-election in 2016, political tensions escalated. Frustration mounted as GD's ambiguous stance on Russia and its failure to deliver on EU membership promises alienated a growing portion of the population. This discontent culminated in the fiercely contested 2018 presidential elections between Salome Zurabishvili (GD-backed) and Grigol Vashadze (UNM-backed). In the first round, Zurabishvili secured 38.6 percent of the vote, while Vashadze won 37.7 percent. However, in the second round, Zurabishvili's sudden victory with 60 percent of the vote fuelled allegations of electoral fraud from the UNM, further deepening political polarisation. It was in the aftermath of these elections that Ms. Nestan and I went to the former KGB archive. Her epistemic anxieties - the desire to know the past while simultaneously grasping, in an oblique yet certain way, what the state could do in the future –, were informed by the unfolding political crisis.

Conclusion

Although memory activism is precarious, its praxis of intervening in the public sphere and shaping political subjectivities and collective remembrance continues to be important in reasserting agency in the present. Following Gutman and Wüstenberg's (2022) definition of a memory activist, I analysed Ms. Nestan's story as a case study to examine what leads an ordinary person to become a memory activist, thus reinstating political subjectivity within the resurgence of an authoritarian government. Her experience highlights how archives are not neutral repositories

of the past but contested sites where power, knowledge, and political agency are negotiated.

The epistemic anxieties that emerged from her reading of KGB documents, her simultaneous desire to know the past and her fear of what the state might do with it in the future, illustrate the logic of her activism: uncovering state secrets. These concerns were especially pronounced during my fieldwork in 2018, a period marked by political crisis and growing disillusionment with the ruling GD party. Their consequences are evident today in the GD government's repressive and illiberal policies following the contested elections of October 2024 (Schiffers 2024). Restrictions on archival access, described by many of my interlocutors as "Soviet" and regressive, reinforce parallels between contemporary actions and past authoritarian practices. Meanwhile, contemporary protests explicitly invoke the Soviet/Russian legacy of repression and totalitarianism, situating it within the broader context of the oligarchic, illiberal democratic turn that is unfolding globally.

This article has thus shown how Nestan's transformation was prompted by affective encounters with archival documents that materialised both Soviet and post-Soviet state practices. By situating her experience within broader political developments, it becomes clear that her epistemic anxieties were not only personal but historically and politically grounded. While her trajectory is distinctive, it resonates with wider practices of memory activism in Georgia, where families, NGOs, and individuals mobilise family histories to challenge silences and resist revisionist state narratives. Ms. Nestan's story therefore exemplifies both the urgency and fragility of memory activism in post-Soviet contexts, demonstrating its role in shaping collective memory and sustaining political subjectivity in times of authoritarian resurgence.

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