

The Georgian Church: A Controversy

On 4 August, 1975 The Times printed a summary by Clifford Longley of Peter Reddaway's article "The Georgian Orthodox Church: Corruption and Renewal", which appeared in RCL Vol. 3, Nos. 4-5, pp. 14-23. In response to this article a number of letters were sent to the Editor of The Times. These are reprinted below with the kind permission of the signatories.

Professor David Marshall Lang (*The Times* 11 August) wrote :

Sir, As President of the Georgian Cultural Circle in London, I naturally read Mr. Clifford Longley's article (4 August) with more than usual interest and concern.

For several months past, I have been aware of a Kremlin-inspired campaign to discredit the Orthodox Church of Soviet Georgia, and silence its outspoken head, Catholicos-Patriarch David V, elected in 1972.

Following the Russian annexation of 1801, the independence of the Georgian Church was suppressed by Emperor Alexander I.

Of 2,500 churches functioning prior to 1917, only 40 operate today, and ten out of fifteen episcopal sees are vacant.

Mr. Longley's article, he states, is based on an advance copy of an essay by Mr. Peter Reddaway of Keston College, written for the journal *Religion in Communist Lands*. Mr. Reddaway's article in turn purports to be based on a "dossier" of "Samizdat" or Russian underground materials, which Keston College has been holding over a lengthy period. Unfortunately there has not been an opportunity for this material to be analysed at this Department of London University – the only academic centre of Georgian studies in Great Britain, nor at the Georgian Orthodox Church in Paris, which is well-informed on current developments in the Soviet Georgian mother Church.

Among the mildest accusations made against the Georgian Church hierarchy is the claim that Patriarch David V's election in 1972 was an illegal piece of "fixing"; also that His Holiness, and here I quote Mr. Reddaway's elegant prose, "has no educational qualifications from either the State or the Church; until he entered the Church, he used to sell meat-pies in the Khashuri railway station". David's alleged rival was not, in fact, eligible because he was under the age limit.

Not all your readership may be familiar with Soviet Georgia, so I would like to give a few examples of misconceptions.

To take Mr. Reddaway's draft article, he claims on page two that "on 9 May, 1973, the Opera House in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, was burnt to the ground by arsonists". In common with a million citizens of Georgia and hundreds of foreign tourists, I visited the main street of Tbilisi a few months later, and found the Opera House standing as usual in the main boulevard, in all its

Casablanca Moorish splendour. It was simply being rewired, following a small dressing room fire due to an electrical fault. This Opera House is as prominent a landmark in Tbilisi as Charing Cross Station or Buckingham Palace in the London scene!

The article cited by Mr. Longley seems fantastic. For some obscure reason, Patriarch David is accused of ordering the liturgy in Georgian churches to be celebrated in Russian – “a fact which indicates an attempt to deprive the Georgian Church of its independence and to subordinate it once more to the Russian Orthodox Church”.

This topsy-turvy claim is entirely without basis. Naturally Russian language services are held in certain churches, specifically for the large Russian colony in Georgia. In January, 1974, in the main Georgian churches in Tbilisi and Mtskheta, I listened to the Georgian liturgy celebrated as usual in Georgian, entirely as was previously the custom.

The Georgians have always been in the forefront of the freedom movement in Tsarist Russia and in the Soviet Union. Why their hard-pressed and deeply patriotic national Church should have been singled out for this treatment – in the Western press, of all places – baffles me completely.

Peter Reddaway (*The Times* 16 August) replied :

Sir, In his lengthy attack on my article in Keston College’s *Religion in Communist Lands*, Nos. 4–5, summarized by Clifford Longley on 4 August, Professor David Lang implies (11 August) that the article is part of “a Kremlin-inspired campaign” to discredit the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Had he read the article carefully, though, and the many documents on which it is based, he would have realized that such a view is untenable. In reality, it shows in great detail (a) how a group of patriotic Georgian Christians (a score of them are named) has been striving to purify and thus revitalize their Church by combating the moral and criminal corruption of some of its leaders; (b) how this corruption has been vigorously promoted and participated in by Georgia’s communist authorities, notably the KGB; and (c) how the latter have been making desperate “cover-up” attempts to prevent the circulation of the documents, especially abroad, and to intimidate both the group of Christians and a senior Procuracy official (who conducted the very thorough criminal investigation), using arrest, threat of arrest, trumped-up charges and, even, it appears, murder.

Professor Lang’s attack is the more strange, as for nearly a year he has had the chance to study the documents, but has chosen, inexplicably, not to. Keston College’s Director, the Reverend Michael Bourdeaux, informally invited him to do so last September, and subsequently *Religion in Communist Lands* announced that photocopies were available on demand. Nor, equally inexplicably, has Professor Lang taken the precaution of asking about the many checks which Keston and I carried out, over a whole year, to make sure that the documents were authentic and reliable before publishing them.

Of the several hundred facts in my article Professor Lang selects three for criticism. While not denying the clear evidence that the election of Patriarch David V in 1972 was “fixed”, Professor Lang alleges that his rival, Metropolitan

Ilya Shiolashvili, "was under the age limit". As, however, both the previous Patriarch (in his mysteriously destroyed will) and many other Georgian Christians unreservedly favoured the Metropolitan's candidacy, it is hard to believe that the alleged age limit was really a critical factor.

Second, Professor Lang distorts my article by asserting that "Patriarch David is accused of ordering the liturgy in Georgian churches to be celebrated in Russian". In fact I quote an official document as saying only that "the services and singing in churches are mainly in Russian".

Third, Professor Lang ridicules my statement that in May, 1973, the Tbilisi Opera House "was burnt to the ground by arsonists", claiming that it suffered only "a small dressing-room fire due to an electrical fault". I gladly apologize: it was not burnt "to the ground". It was, however, according to detailed documentary evidence, burnt by arsonists, and the damage to it was so extensive that the authorities allocated 2½ million roubles (over £1,000,000) for its repair. The official announcement of this may have escaped Professor Lang's attention, but it appeared in Georgia's leading paper, *Zarya vostoka*, on 24 October, 1973.

Professor David Marshall Lang (*The Times* 21 August) replied:

Sir, Mr. Peter Reddaway has resumed his attack on the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate (16 August), and also implies that I myself am guilty of neglect of duty, and of distortion.

During the past fortnight I have been in close touch with the Georgian communities in London and Paris, also with the Fellowship of St. Alban and St Sergius. I have collected a great deal of documentation.

From Paris I learn that the so-called "Report of Procurator Koridze", which forms the nub of Mr. Reddaway's case against Patriarch David, is generally considered apocryphal. This document is no novelty, having been in circulation there for many months. The Paris Georgians regard it as a transparent forgery, written in a pastiche of Soviet bureaucratic prose. No-one has met or even heard of this "senior official" Koridze, whose very existence is discounted.

For the record, I have no connexion whatever with Keston College, nor have I any means of checking, let alone censoring, this body's publications in advance. I had never been invited to go there by Father Bourdeaux or anyone else.

Peter Reddaway (*The Times* 8 September) replied:

Sir, How Professor Lang (21 August) can continue to bluff and bluster, to attack my article in *Religion in Communist Lands* while not questioning my demonstration of his errors and distortions, and, in effect, to defend criminality and immorality in the leadership of the Georgian Orthodox Church while jeopardizing the brave but highly vulnerable forces in the Church for reform and renewal, must, Sir, astonish most of your readers.

In fact, though, the explanation is simple. Professor Lang has still not studied the evidence: neither the 20-odd documents written by various Georgians over two years and totalling more than 150 pages, nor the extensive additional evidence which shows them to be authentic. Instead, he relies on unnamed Georgians in Paris and London, whose opinions, as recounted by him, are either

uninformed or highly unreliable. Assistant Procurator Koridze's report on the Church-KGB corruption is most notably *not* (as alleged) "a pastiche of Soviet bureaucratic prose", but the opposite: a judicious and restrained summary of a very thorough investigation.

As for Mr. Koridze himself ("whose very existence is discounted"), among those who have met him are Mr. Alexei Inauri, the head of the Georgian KGB, who has bluffingly (thus far) threatened him with arrest; Mr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a member of the Writers' Union; and Mr. Nugzar Sharia, a prominent Georgian actor and singer who emigrated in 1970 and has provided additional confirmation of the documents' authenticity. As their authenticity has also been acknowledged recently by a well-known Georgian emigré publication, the *Tribune de la Liberté* edited in Paris by Mr. Georges Tsereteli, which published some of them in its issue No. 8, the identities of Professor Lang's Georgian sources in Paris become even more mysterious.

The Bishop of Fulham and Gibraltar (*The Times* 15 September) wrote :

Sir, Many of us who have followed Orthodox Church affairs closely in recent years have been more than surprised that *The Times* should have rushed into print so quickly with material of a scurrilous nature alleged to have been smuggled out of Georgia, and quoted by Mr. Clifford Longley on 4 August.

It was surprising to read Mr. Peter Reddaway's letter in yesterday's *Times* (8 September) accusing Professor David Lang of defending "criminality and immorality in the leadership of the Georgian Orthodox Church".

There are many like myself who have known of Professor Lang's profound regard for the Georgian people and Church, and who would find it hard to believe any such hysterical outburst against him, and allow him to be accused of jeopardizing the forces in the Georgian Church working for renewal.

Friends of the Orthodox Churches in Georgia and in other countries under a regime alien to religion are well aware of the difficulties facing many of our fellow Christians even at the present time. We would query, however, the wisdom of undue publicity being given to certain "news items" which may well have been fabricated, and which only bring further hardship and discredit to those Christian communities living under difficulties and deprived of their basic freedom.

Peter Reddaway on 20 September sent the following letter to the Editor of *The Times*. It was not printed.

Sir, I am sorry that the Bishop of Fulham and Gibraltar (15 September) has followed Professor Lang (11 and 21 August) into controversy about the Georgian Orthodox Church without, any more than he, studying the evidence first.

I also regret that he has misunderstood my criticism of Professor Lang, whose regard for the Georgian people and Church is, not in doubt. My letters (16 August and 8 September) criticized him for not studying the evidence, for relying instead on dubious, unnamed sources, and for, as a result, "*in effect* defending criminality and immorality in the leadership of the Georgian Orthodox Church while jeopardizing the brave but highly vulnerable forces . . . for reform and

renewal". The words "in effect", and the whole tenor of my letters, make clear my continuing belief that Professor Lang will change his position when he studies the documents and their provenance (which he has now taken steps to do), and that he will then regret his earlier stance.

The Bishop of Fulham and Gibraltar will, I believe, have similar regrets. He is rightly concerned about the severe difficulties of the Georgian Church under "a regime alien to religion", but, not having read the documents, he quite misunderstands the situation regarding publicity. To put it briefly, the forces of renewal in the Church ask for and need publicity, while the atheistic regime has been trying desperately to suppress any publicity at all. Could the message be any clearer than that?

Georges Tsereteli, Michel Kavtaradze and Georges Nosadze (editors of the *Tribune de la Liberté*) on 30 October wrote the following letter to the Editor of *The Times*:

Sir, In his letter to the Editor (11 September) Professor David Marshall Lang attacks an article by Mr. Clifford Longley, "Georgian Church and Corruption", published in *The Times* (4 August) which summarized an article of Mr. Peter Reddaway which appeared in the summer edition of *Religion in Communist Lands*.

Mr. Peter Reddaway who has a thorough knowledge of the question has replied to these attacks by Professor D. M. Lang. The intervention of the Bishop of Fulham and Gibraltar, choosing to defend the viewpoint of Professor D. M. Lang (letter in *The Times* of 15 September) seems to have ended the debate.

It would seem, however, that this exchange of letters has not clarified for the reader of *The Times* the crucial point at issue as exposed by Mr. Peter Reddaway and Mr. Clifford Longley.

Our name has been mentioned in the controversy. As Georgian political ex-patriates in France, we are deeply concerned with the fate of the Georgian Church and believe that it would be of some interest to readers of *The Times* to be aware of our opinion in this matter. We would be grateful if you would publish the following comments in your paper.

Last summer, when we heard of the document describing the present state of corruption in the Georgian Church (leaked out through the channel of *samizdat*), the facts revealed were so terribly distressing that it was difficult to believe them. It was indeed more comfortable to think that the whole story had been concocted by the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Georgia and the Police, directed against the ex-prime minister V. Mzhavanadze and other government members, and against the Church hierarchy. But since then, new information has leaked out and come to our knowledge, confirmed through the reliable evidence of visitors from behind the iron curtain, thus enabling us to state the following:

- (1) The senior Procuracy investigator, David Koridze, who wrote the report on the "Crimes committed in the Patriarchate of Georgia" was sanctioned for having disclosed the facts.
- (2) One of the key witnesses, Fr. V. Shalamberidze, did die with members of his family in a car crash which occurred in suspicious circumstances.

(3) Another witness, Valentina Pailodze, a woman conductor of church choirs, was arrested and tortured. She was jailed for 18 months after a trial based on entirely trumped up evidence. (See pp. 34-36. *Ed.*)

(4) The trial which was to be held to judge the reprehensible acts never took place because all those summoned to present their testimony were in fact strongly "discouraged" from appearing in court.

This shows that:

(a) The Soviet authorities employed all means not only to prevent the affair from being disclosed but, moreover, to cover it up.

(b) The documents accusing the present Church hierarchy were not made up by either the Moscow KGB or the Georgian KGB, but came from brave people who are eager to defend the Church which stands on the verge of degeneration owing to the strategy employed by the local communist authorities.

(c) The senior Procuracy Investigator D. Koridze (who really exists) appears as a "justice loving" man and his accusations are well founded. Of course we cannot vouch for the accuracy of all the facts contained in his report. It behoves Justice to verify . . .

As we have already indicated, all the witnesses summoned in this distressing affair and all the people who have contributed to its disclosure are threatened in their freedom and even their lives are endangered. Were it only for the sake of the safety of these people, we *must* appeal to public opinion in order to generate world-wide pressure on the Soviet State.

It is a well known fact that still water becomes more and more fetid, while spring water becomes purer. So too, the purification of the Georgian Church will not be possible if such facts remain "covered up". On the other hand, the process of purification may be accelerated and deepened depending on the degree of response from international public opinion.

On this point, the position adopted by Professor D. M. Lang is opposed to ours. He of course has the right to his own belief. But what he should not do is refute the real facts or distort them in order to support his thesis. To reinforce his statements, Professor D. M. Lang refers to testimonies obtained from members of the Paris and London Georgian communities, without, however, giving any names. As a matter of fact, in this very intricate matter, Professor Lang did not have any contact in Paris with the responsible members either of the Georgian Church, the Georgian Association of France, or of the various Georgian publications. Who are, then, these Georgians of Paris who endeavour to mislead Professor D. M. Lang?

Professor Lang tries to show that the facts mentioned by Mr. Clifford Longley and Mr. Peter Reddaway are untrue. But the examples he gives are not accurate:

(a) We cannot agree with him when he says that Metropolitan Ilya Shiolashvili was not eligible as Patriarch because he was under the age limit. In fact, no age limitation is imposed by the Church canons for the nomination of a Metropolitan to the Patriarchate. (Moreover Ilya Shiolashvili has held the rank of Metropolitan for about ten years.) The truth is that before the death of Patriarch Ephrem II the candidature of Metropolitan Ilya Shiolashvili had already been discussed, but although he certainly possessed the required qualifications, his nomination seemed very doubtful: he was considered to be a nationalist, the worst crime in the eyes of the Soviet State.

Professor D. M. Lang claims that "this campaign is intended to discredit the Orthodox Church of Soviet Georgia, and silence its outspoken head, Catholicos-Patriarch David V elected in 1972". We have indeed assessed this freedom of speech of the present Patriarch in the wishes he addressed to us, political Georgian expatriates, by the channel of *Samshvilo* (January 1975) – a KGB publication intended for us expatriates – when he concluded: "Our Georgia is a wonderful country which has grown stronger, greater and *free*. This word is written on the very leaves of the tree whose branches are the 15 sister republics. Our Georgia is among them."

(b) The matter of the fire at the Opera House in Tbilisi has of course no direct link with the question of corruption in the Georgian Church, but it is of interest to recall this event so as to appreciate the value of Professor D. M. Lang's information and opinion. The Opera House in Tbilisi was burnt during the spring of 1973. No official declaration offered any explanation as to the causes of this fire in a building so dear to the Tbilisi people. Various rumours circulated amongst the population of the city concerning the identity of the arsonists and the causes of this criminal fire. But everybody agreed that the fire had been extremely violent and that the damage had been extensive. Charred pieces of wall which remained standing were fenced off with high boards for the whole of the two and a half years during which the restoration work was carried out. Not only did the government allocate an important sum for its repair but all means were employed to ensure a prompt execution. The major part of the work has now been done and the first opera season since the fire was able to begin on 18 September 1975. But much repair work still remains to be done.

Professor Lang may find all this information and other details in the Tbilisi newspaper, *Drocha* (No. 8, August 1975). Perhaps after learning these facts, reported in the local press, he will be able to explain to the readers of *The Times* by what delusion, when visiting Tbilisi a few months after the fire, he, Professor D. M. Lang, "found the Opera House standing as usual in the main boulevard, in all its Casablanca Moorish splendour".

Memorandum

This memorandum is in summary form, so as not to be weighed down by detail. It cannot, unfortunately, name all the relevant names, as a leak could lead to persecution or even prosecution from the KGB. But with that proviso I would be happy to provide more detail on any point to those interested. (P.R.)

1. What are the Documents?

The documents so far available are about 20 in number, written over two years from March 1973 to early 1975, and totalling more than 150 pages. They began to reach the West in the summer of 1974 and have trickled out steadily ever since. All are in Russian translation (to facilitate publicity), except for one long one, of which both the Georgian original

and a translation have reached the West. The translations have been well and carefully done. Some of the Georgian items in the Moscow *samizdat* journal, *A Chronicle of Current Events* (Nos. 32, 34, 35, 36) are summaries of documents we already have, while a few are clearly based on documents which have not yet reached us.

2. Where are the Documents?

At present there are complete sets in the possession of Keston College, Khronika Press (New York), Anthony de Meeus (Brussels), and Peter Reddaway (London School of Economics). In addition, most of the documents have now been reproduced in the Munich "Samizdat Archive" series, and are therefore available in those libraries (mostly in universities) which subscribe to the series.

3. The Documents' Provenance

I have checked each time on the *channels* through which the documents have come out of the USSR from Moscow. The channels have always been safe (with no risk of KGB involvement). I have spoken at length with two close and reliable friends of mine, who know well the Georgian who brought most of the documents from Georgia to Moscow and gave copies to (among others) them. This person is a committed Christian, and is brave and honest. The person knows who has been translating the documents, and knows many of the people involved in the whole controversy. The channels from Georgia are fully trusted by the editors of the *Chronicle of Current Events*, who check carefully on the authenticity of the material they publish.

Separately from this, in the past year two members of Keston College have checked on the documents' authenticity with independent-minded Russian Orthodox friends, while on visits to the USSR, and have received affirmative replies.

In addition, I have spoken with Mr. Nugzar Sharia, a prominent Georgian actor and singer who emigrated in 1970 and currently lives in Germany. He met Assistant Procurator David Koridze briefly in 1967, on official business, and he was friendly with Merab Kostava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who in 1974, with others, formed in Tbilisi an Initiative Group for the Defence of Human Rights, a group which has taken up strongly the cause of the Georgian Orthodox reformers. Sharia has read the documents and has no doubts about their authenticity.

The Georgian emigration, after initial uncertainty probably caused,

at least in part, by KGB “disinformation” about them, has begun to recognize the documents’ authenticity and to publish them.

4. The Persistent Attempts by the KGB to Suppress the Documents

These attempts, and the ways in which they have been carried out, are powerful additional confirmation of the documents’ authenticity.

First, in 1973, the Georgian authorities evidently decided to suppress Koridze’s long report on his investigation by shelving it. Then, in February 1974, as the Church reformers began to organize themselves, one of them, the Rev. Victor Shalamberidze, a key witness, was killed in a car crash in circumstances which suggested murder by the KGB. The next month, apparently only partially intimidated, the reformers circulated Koridze’s report and other documents in *samizdat*. A week later, the KGB retaliated by arresting another key witness, Mrs. Pailodze (who was choir-mistress at three churches, including the Mtskheta Cathedral), and took various unpleasant steps to try to intimidate her co-reformers (including the Tbilisi-Moscow “courier”) into silence. Mrs. Pailodze was then charged *not* with circulating the documents on Church corruption (this would have drawn undesirable attention to them), but on various quite different and evidently trumped-up charges, and sentenced to 1½ years of forced labour (see this issue of *RCL* pp. 34–36).

Similarly, in October 1974, Koridze was threatened with arrest by the head of the Georgian KGB, Inauri, *not* for any inaccuracies or inventions in his report (none were alleged), but simply for having provided copies of it to various people. This had led to what agitated the KGB most, its translation and circulation, its transmission abroad, and its broadcasting back from the West. And it would lead, Inauri feared, to protests from the Pope. When Koridze stood his ground, and pointed out that he had done nothing illegal, Inauri’s threats turned to rebukes that he had become a believer (denied by Koridze). Ultimately he was forced into early retirement and barred from taking a new job as a barrister. The whole course of Koridze’s persecution by the KGB (October 1974 to early 1975) suggests clearly that the KGB (a) has no grounds for questioning the truth of his report, much as it would like to be able to discredit it; (b) regards his report as (most regrettably) furthering the Church’s true interests (by, *inter alia*, making a surreptitious “take-over” by the Russian Orthodox Church less possible); and (c) therefore has decided (so far at least) not to draw more attention to the whole affair by organizing any interventions from Georgia, in *The Times* controversy. It is always possible, though, even likely, that the KGB will eventually coerce a respected figure in the Church into issuing a denial of some sort.

5. The Contents of the Documents

I am confident for several reasons that the documents are accurate. First, it is not surprising that Koridze's report has apparently proved invulnerable to hostile KGB scrutiny, as it is carefully and judiciously written, with much detail, and is based on a thorough investigation. The latter involved the taking of evidence from dozens of witnesses and the assembling of documents.

Second, the other available documents offer hundreds of opportunities for cross-checking facts against Koridze's report, and against each other. These cross-checks have all been positive : I have found no inconsistencies of any consequence.

Third, the pattern of the whole affair fits in well with the confused and highly unusual legal and political situation which has existed in Georgia since 1972.

The above three points are all amply illustrated in my article in *RCL* Vol. 3, Nos. 4-5, so do not need further development here.

Finally a broad point. The Georgian Church situation illustrates, in an extreme form, the sort of methods used by the KGB against other Churches and religions in the USSR for over half a century : infiltrate KGB agents into the leadership so as to conduct policies in the Church which will discredit the leadership, and thus the Church too, and will perhaps weaken the Church irreparably by splitting it. And indoctrinate or blackmail those leaders who are not agents into believing that the regime will persecute the Church mercilessly unless they pretend – both to the faithful *and to the outside world* – that “everything in the garden is lovely”. (In fact, in my opinion, since 1953 the opposite has been true : to the extent that a Church's leadership, supported by its membership and international public opinion, has found the will to resist KGB pressures, it has largely succeeded in doing so.)

September, 1975

PETER REDDAWAY