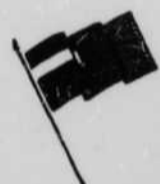




On the steps of Tbilisi's main university building, thousands listen to student leaders relaying messages from Moscow in June.

Tragedy overlooked Soviet Georgians remember those who died



TBILISI, U.S.S.R. -- On April 5th, they started gathering.

Thousands of Georgians filled the main square on Rustaveli Street in downtown Tbilisi, supporting a movement for Georgian independence.

Two men filmed the demonstration, keeping an account of 21 deaths and the Soviet military's use of violence against unarmed Georgian protestors. The videotapes of the assault told a story not printed in newspapers around the world.

This is their account. For four days, the Georgians kept their vigil. They sang songs and offered comfort to a group of hunger strikers who were protesting Soviet control. Speakers stood before the crowd often, telling the people about the problems of Soviet rule in their country.

Some were quiet, talking about the need for Georgians to band together. Others yelled into the microphones, furious at the government occupying their country. Georgian flags of independence waved above the crowd, anchored to statues that symbolized independence. The statues, on either end of Lenin Square, were of a man and woman with fists raised in defiance.

Someone raised an American flag. The people roared their approval. On the fourth day of the hunger strike, the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church stood before the people. They turned toward him, and silence replaced cheers and song.

Go home, he told them in Georgian. Go home. Georgians should have their independence, but he said he feared for his people. The government will not tolerate this movement, he said. Go home.

The people stayed, compelled by their nationalism and their fear for the hunger strikers. They continued their speeches and songs for Georgian independence. Shortly after 4 a.m., April 9, the Soviet government made good on its promise to end the demonstrations.

Tanks rolled down Rustaveli Street. A slim boy, about 9 years old, stepped in the path of the advancing tanks. The boy

was a Georgian, with the characteristic dark features of his people. He lay face down on the concrete in front of the tanks, defying the wheels that could crush his body, but not his spirit.

The tanks stopped. Soldiers stepped in front of them, and a man grabbed the boy by his arm, dragging him away from certain death.

At first the Georgians did not run. The soldiers formed a line across the street, walking toward the heart of the demonstration, firing what demonstrators claimed were smoke bombs and carbons of noxious gas into the crowd.

Chaos broke out in the crowd. People

reached out for each other, trying to make sure no one was left behind. Men grabbed their neighbors, women screamed for their children. An elderly woman fell in the rush, and several people made a circle around her, protecting her from demonstrators who might trample her in their hurry. Others formed a ring around the weakened hunger strikers, some of whom were unable to stand.

Georgian militia moved quickly to help the demonstrators, arresting the leaders of the movement and taking them away from the scene, to keep them from being killed by the soldiers. They protected the demonstrators, showing their support for Georgia over their support for the Soviet military.

Most of the Georgians who were not arrested fled.

Others were not so fortunate. Twenty-one Georgians were killed by the gas or Soviet soldiers, who broke through the rings of people, clubbing their way to the hunger strikers with spades.

The next day, the statues of the man and woman with raised fists were taken down. Bushes and flowers which had lined Rustaveli Street were dead or dying, killed by the noxious gas.

Georgians again gathered at the square. They brought fresh cut flowers and tears to mourn the dead. The flowers filled the block-long area on Rustaveli Street where the demonstration had taken place.

Where bodies were found, flowers were piled higher. Two months later, signs of the tragedy still could be found on Rustaveli Street.

Outside a store in old Tbilisi, a glass case held the history of the day when Russian soldiers stormed the independence demonstration. Pictures of the dead, their faces bloody, their bodies battered, were posted in the case, and people stopped frequently to remind themselves of the horror of that April 9 morning.

One image in particular provoked the Georgians.

The photograph showed a pregnant woman, lying on her back, her head crushed by a soldier's spade.

Blood splattered her clothes. The Georgians, faces stony and fists clenched, pointed out the differences be-

tween the Russian and Georgian newspaper accounts of the event to those who had not witnessed the demonstration.

Tbilisi University's student press ran stories of people being gassed and beaten, and was closed down by Soviet authorities. Pravda, the government-controlled paper, called the Georgians radical dissidents.

Those gathered on Rustaveli Street did not cry.

A Georgian leader explained this as common for the people there.

"They will cry inside, but they will never show you their tears," she said.

Twenty one people are dead, but the Georgians have not surrendered their fight for secession. The Soviet assault April 9 did not stop the demonstrations, or convince the Georgians to give up their struggle.

If anything, the attack united most Georgians, bringing together different factions of a common movement with a clear goal -- complete political and economic independence.

In June, more than 3,000 people gathered nightly in front of Tbilisi University. They listened intently, shouting comments, as secession leaders spoke about the Soviet Congress and the progression of the independence movement.

A man from the village Kuareli stepped to the microphone and the crowd grew quiet, waiting for him to speak. The man had just been released from the hospital, where he was under care for injuries he received in the April 9 demonstration. He told the crowd he had just received a telephone call from Georgian representatives in Moscow.

The representatives said the Russian soldiers were not harsh enough with dissenters, he yelled into the microphone.

People raised their fists, demanding the name of the Soviet general who ordered the soldiers into Tbilisi.

He offered a name, Rodionov, and the crowd roared. But it does not matter who gave the order, he told them, the Soviet government is behind everything.

The crowd quieted, and people lit candles in memory of those who died April 9. They waved their flags of independence, and waited for news from Moscow.

-- Amy Edwards



A young girl holds Georgia's black, red and white flag during a June meeting in Tbilisi. Crowds of 3,000 to 6,000 men, women and children attended the nightly meetings while the Soviet Congress was in session.