The Enguri River. The river functions as a de facto boundary between Georgia and Abkhazia. Photo by author.

Where the past crosses the river

Contested memory in the Georgian borderlands

DANIEL MOLTKE DØSSING – AARHUS UNIVERSITY

In the summer of 2025, I found myself in a Georgian town near the Enguri, a 213-km-long river that constitutes the administrative border of the de facto state of Abkhazia. A territory that is considered by the Georgian government to be under Russian occupation. The sun had been scorching all day, and watching it descend behind the mountains on the other side of the river now felt like a warm welcome.

I was sharing this long-awaited view with five young Georgians from a small balcony attached to the bar where I had been spending my evenings. Moments ago, the atmosphere had been lively, cigarettes and laughter were being passed around alongside cold bottles of Natakhtari beer. But now, something seemed to shift drastically as laughter gave way to shouts and sporadic whispers. Not knowing more Georgian than being able to order the aforementioned beer, I asked what had caused this sudden change.

"Today is the anniversary of the Russian invasion", one of them explained. It was the 7th of August. They told me how, in previous years, the Georgian flag would be flown on this day to commemorate those who lost their lives in the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. This year, however, no flags were to be seen. Instead, they would be raised the following day, on the 8th of August. At first glance, I interpreted this as the result of a minor administrative

"After returning to Denmark, I could not shake off this encounter. How could the government's narrative stand in such stark contrast to the memories and stories of those who had lived through the war?

change, but for the young people on the balcony, this change carried heavy political meaning. According to the Russian state narrative, the war began on the 8th of August, when Georgia allegedly initiated hostilities by bombing South Ossetia, thereby making Russian military intervention necessary (Barabanov 2008). The fact that the current Georgian government had chosen to commemorate the war on this date was then experienced as an alignment with the Russian narrative, and as such a negation of these young Georgians' lived experiences and local accounts from the war.

After returning to Denmark, I could not shake off this encounter. How could the government's narrative stand in such stark contrast to the memories and stories of those who had lived through the war? Three months later, I returned to the borderlands. I wanted to better understand what that moment had revealed to me, about how conflict is remembered, lived, and contested in everyday life. However, I soon realized that this encounter pointed to a deeper struggle over memory and power.

Listening to local youth, I encountered a sense of temporal tension structuring their everyday lives. Belonging to one of the first generations that grew up in post-Soviet Georgia, their memories of war are both embodied and mediated; shaped by circulating local accounts, but also by the memory of seeing fear in their parents' eyes as bombs fell. They live side by side with internally displaced people who fled across the Enguri River, yet they themselves have only known the river as a constant, impassable condition.

A pro-EU demonstration in the Georgian borderlands. Photo by author.

Many interlocutors initially claimed that they did not remember anything from the war, only to later recount vivid sensory scenes like the sound of helicopters flying low over rooftops, or the color draining from a sibling's face. Remembering the war, it seemed, was not associated with history in its formal sense. Rather, remembering is an embodied and spatial experience which emerges through places, routines, and everyday movements. In the borderlands, the legacies of Soviet rule, Russian imperialism, and more recent conflicts are inscribed in the land- and cityscape. One young woman told me how she thought of the war almost every time she passed through the courtyard of her parents' apartment complex – the place where she had stood seventeen years earlier as helicopters flew overhead, and explosions echoed in the distance.

These personal memories are rooted in a broader collective understanding of Russian imperialism. Experiences of occupation, displacement, and violence form the backdrop against which the present is interpreted. Against this lived and inherited knowledge, the government's reframing of the war feels like a direct contradiction of what is known to be true.

For the young, the 2008 war marks a line that should not be crossed again. In this context, remembering the war can function as a form of resistance, as it helps delineate the moral limits of what ought not be repeated and, consequently, which futures are considered acceptable. Yet remembering is not without cost. Several young Georgians described how they would avoid being critical in public of the government out of fear of arrest or repercussions. When remembering itself becomes dangerous, it shapes which stories are passed on to the next generation, and which ones are forgotten.

Commemorations signal whose experiences are recognized and whose are erased. In contexts marked by occupation and displacement, memory becomes a central arena of struggle (Trouillot 2015: 116-117). As the sun disappeared behind the mountains across the Enguri River that summer evening, the young Georgians on the balcony began sharing stories of fear, flight, and loss during the war. What surfaced in that moment was a confrontation with the power to define what counts as history. Remembering, for those standing there, was a way of holding the line against a version of the past that threatened to erase what they knew they lived through. As I'm writing this, young Georgians continue to fight to define their future. A struggle that remains inseparable from the fight for the past.

References

Barabanov, Mikhail. 2008. "The August war between Russia and Georgia." *Moscow Defense Brief*. https://web.archive.org/web/20080920040928/http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/32008/item3/article1/?form=print.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2015. *Silencing the past: power and the production of history*. Boston: Beacon Press.

About the author
Daniel Moltke Døssing is a bachelor's degree student in Anthropology at Aarhus University. With a particular interest in Georgia, his work centers on memory and post-imperial legacies, examining how imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism continue to shape everyday life and collective memory.

Email: au702405@uni.au.dk

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/daniel-moltke-doessing-jepsen/