

Bondo Kapatadze

“Guys from the Airplane” (The Soviet Myth and Reality)*

This story has been one of the bloody pages of Soviet totalitarianism. It spoiled the lives of a number of people. What happened on November 18, 1983, was one of the most outspoken cases of hijacks in the Soviet Union.

In 1954-1970, there were six failed attempts of fleeing the Soviet Union by means of hijack. The seventh case appeared to be successful. On October 15, 1970, the father and son Pranas and Algirdas Brazinskas made the plane, en route from Batumi to Sokhumi, divert to Turkey and land in the Trabzon airport. In the shootout, three crew members were wounded and the air-hostess N. Kurchenko was killed. Turkey refused to extradite the father and son Brazinskas and tried them. In May, 1974, the Brazinskas were amnestied and released from prison. In September, 1974, the Soviet court convicted them in absentia and sentenced the father to capital punishment and handed down a sentence of a ten-month imprisonment for the son.

Following that, hijacking incidents became more frequent. In 1970-1983, there were 32 cases of hijacking of passenger airliners; of them, seven cases successful for hijackers.¹

In 1973, the Civil Aviation of the USSR toughened security rules and implemented the inspection of luggage and passengers. Joint anti-terrorist trainings of Aeroflot staff and the special force were held regularly. In 1983, with the collaboration of state security bodies and Aeroflot, the fiction-documentary film *Nabat* (‘Tocsin’) was made which dealt with hijacking.² The plot of the film – an attempt of a newly-wed couple to flee the Soviet Union by means of hijack-

* The paper was presented at the International Conference “In the shadow of the cold war” (Domestic and international terrorism in the former communist countries) held in Warsaw, Poland on October 8-9, 2015.

¹ <http://hijacking.far.ru/2.html>.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CleDqILS7M4>

ing – resembled greatly that of the November 18; therefore, the KGB banned it and retained it only for authorized use.

How did the story start? On November 18, 1983, the TU-134A airliner (Board No 65870) was to operate a flight (No 6833) en route Tbilisi-Batumi-Kiev-Leningrad.

On board of the plane, there were 58 passengers (among them, there was A. M. Plotka, navigator of the Tbilisi Squadron) and 7 crew members. The crew: the captain Akhmatger Gardapkhadze, the intern Slavik Gabaraev, the co-pilot Vladimir Gasoyan, the airplane mechanic Anzor Chedia, the inspector Zaven Sharbatyan, the chief flight attendant Irina Khimich, the flight attendant Valentina Krutikova.³

Through the international service gate (the duty officer Ana Varsimashvili) and without the luggage control, the following passengers boarded the plane: the newly-wed couple going for a honeymoon trip Gega Kobakhidze and Tina Petviashvili, their groomsmen and bridesmaids Soso Tsereteli, Davit Mikaberidze, Anano Meliva, Eka Shalutashvili (the latter two were not group members). They thus brought on board two TT pistols, two Nagant revolvers, and two training grenades: F1 and RGD-5. Other hijackers – brothers Kakha and Paata Ivereli and Gia Tabidze boarded the plane through the regular gate.

The plane took off from Tbilisi en route to Batumi at 15:42. Owing to bad weather conditions, the flight was delayed for an hour and twenty minutes. The weather worsened and the captain decided to return to Tbilisi. At 16:12, as soon as the airliner turned back, the crew was attacked. Davit Mikaberidze and Paata Ivereli declared to the passengers about the hijack, while Kakha Ivereli, Gia Tabidze and Soso Tsereteli took the flight attendant Krutikova a hostage and, by means of her, penetrated into the cockpit.

Kakha Ivereli aimed his gun at Captain Gardapkhadze's head and order to fly the plane to the NATO base in Turkey. The co-pilot Gasoyan, who was sitting unnoticed by the hijackers, opened fire killing Gia Tabidze and wounding Soso Tsereteli (who later died on the way to hospital).

The hijackers fired back. Of the crew members, the mechanic Chedia was killed and the inspector Sharbatyan was heavily wounded who died later. Two passengers (Solomonias and Aboyan) were killed. The hijackers left the cockpit.

The crew received the command to return to Tbilisi. According to the memories of the captain, on their way to Tbilisi, the airliner was accompanied by

³ Archive of the President of Georgia. F. 14, Desc. 124, C. 196, Box 15, Sheets 1-3.

two military aircrafts in order to down them in case they diverted to Turkey. At 16:42, the airliner landed in the Tbilisi airport. As soon as it landed, the Spetsnaz (8th Regiment) opened fire in order to prevent its take-off. As a result of the external shooting, one passenger was killed and eleven passengers were wounded. The body of the plane had 108 bullet holes... The flight attendant Valentina Krutikova, who managed to escape through the emergence hatch, was killed by a stray bullet.

Only following the captain's hysteric shout in the radio "Cease fire! You will kill all of us!", the traffic controller ordered to cease fire. One of the hijackers Davit Mikaberidze committed suicide as soon as the plane landed.

At 11 p. m., 38 members of the USSR KGB special unit Alpha, led by Major-General Genady Zaitsev, arrived from Moscow. Initially, they had a training exercise with a duplicate aircraft. The operation plan *Nabat* ('Tocsin') was designed. The Spetsnaz began to control of the airliner, having been taken to a remote parking of the airport.

At 2 a.m., negotiations started. The negotiations were conducted by Kadzanaia, Head of the Agency of the Civil Aviation of Georgia. The hijackers were offered to fly either to Iran or to Israel because Turkey allegedly did not want to receive them. They did their best to protract negotiations, lighted powerful spotlights in order to make them get exhausted, to ease their attention and make them fall asleep. The hijackers demanded to fill the plane and to allow them to fly to Turkey unimpededly. Otherwise, they threatened to explode the airliner. The First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze, the Chairman of the State Security Committee of the Georgian SSR Alexi Inauri, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and the General Prosecutor came to the airport. Parents of the hijackers were taken to the airport in order to persuade them to surrender. The hijackers did not want to listen to them and announces on the radio that if anyone approached the airliner, they would explode it together with the passengers.

The pilots escaped the plane through the emergency hatch; however, they failed to take wounded Sharbatyan who died several hours later. Under the pretext of technical maintenance, the flight mechanic Gevorkyan got on board of the plane and prepared the airliner for fuel dumping. Following that, they started getting ready for storming. The assault groups were led by Mikhail Golovatov, Vladimir Zabrovski, and Vladimir Zaitsev.⁴

⁴ <http://hijacking.far.ru/tbilisi.html>. Boltunov Mikhail. "Alpha" – *Super-secret Unit of KGB*. Moscow: Kedr, 1992.

On November 19, at 06:55, following the unsuccessful negotiations, the Spetsnaz stormed the airliner. By that time, only wounded passengers and the hijackers were on board. The rest of the passengers managed to gradually escape the plane before.

The operation ended in four minutes leaving no casualties. The Spetsnaz arrested Soso Tsereteli, Kakha Iverieli, Paata Iverieli, Gega Kobakhidze, and Tinatin Petviashvili.

The investigation lasted for a long period of time. Eduard Shevardnadze was personally interested in the process. He had difficult relationships with Yuri Andropov who favored Alexi Inauri, Chairman of the Security Committee of Georgia. The Communist Part élite, led by Eduard Shevardnadze, celebrated pompously the 60th anniversary of establishing of the Soviet rule in Georgia (1981), the 60th anniversary of the creation of the Soviet Union (1982), and the 200th anniversary of the Treaty of Georgievsk, the bilateral Georgian-Russian agreement (1983). With respect to those, the hijacking attempt was very badly perceived. The party leadership of Georgia and Shevardnadze had to necessarily demonstrate to the Kremlin their loyalty to the Communist ideals and firmness of the Communist ideology in the Georgian SSR in order to avoid his dismissal and termination of his political career. Thus, the hijackers were to be treated in the strictest way. A demand for a strict punishment should have been initiated by working people of the republic.

For the sake of that, *A Letter of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia to Members of the Communist Party and of the Young Communist League* was composed. This 12-page, A-5 format brochure was instantly published by the Central Committee. Local Communist Party and Young Communist League organizations were to familiarize themselves with its content and to discuss it at open party meetings. Outcomes of discussions were to be reported to the Bureau of the Central Committee.⁵

The brochure provided the official version of the hijacking. According to the author of the brochure, the fact that the young people became criminals was to a large extent due to the circumstances that their parents (Kobakhidze's, Petviashvili's) were divorced. Tabidze and Chikhladze had abandoned their wives and children. Besides, most of them (brothers Iverieli, Tabidze, Mikaberidze, Tsereteli) were from well-known and well-to-do families where principles of Communist education were deteriorated. As a result, the young

⁵ Archive of the President of Georgia. F. 14, Desc. 124, C. 197, Sheet 12.

people embarked on the anti-Soviet and immoral way of life; they were drug addicts. It was the fault of their parents, school, public. Therefore, they too were to bear responsibility.⁶

The brochure was aimed at preparing the campaign for their public accusation and at creating the negative public opinion by the beginning of the court procession. Besides, it was necessary to demonstrate Communist sobriety. The November 22 Resolution of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party stipulated: "A series of TV programs and publications should be prepared in the mass media in order to mould the public opinion. They have to unmask pseudo-patriotism of the members of the group, their anti-human essence, cynicism, total ideological depletion, and societal danger. They have to familiarize the republic with the reasons and conditions having facilitated formation of bandits, the issue of responsibility of their parents, milieu, leaderships of educational institutions, and organizations."⁷

The operational resolutions of the Bureau of the Central Committee were the demonstration of the party discipline. In accordance with the November 29 Resolution, the Institute of the History of the Communist Party was to prepare Georgian publications of Marx and Engels' works in nine volumes and Lenin's selected works in 10 volumes; besides, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Resolutions* (fifteen volumes), *The Communist Party of Georgia in Resolutions, Essays in the History of the Communist Party of Georgia*.⁸

The December 13, 1983, Resolution of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia to nominate the pilots Gardapkhadze and Gasoyan for the title of the Hero of the Soviet Union, other pilots for the Order of Lenin and various medals⁹ was the immediate direction to the investigation and the court to disregard the mistakes and risky steps made by the crew members, having threatened the passengers' lives. Particular attention is to be paid to the activities of the soldiers of the 8th Regiment who seriously jeopardized the passengers' lives.

On February 27, 1984, a separate case was opened on firing the airliner by the military claiming a life of one and wounding eleven passengers; as a result of the damage of the airliner, the detriment of the Georgian Agency of the Civil Aviation totaled 650 000 Rubles.

⁶ Archive of the President of Georgia. F. 14, Desc. 124, C. 197, Sheets 36-42.

⁷ Archive of the President of Georgia. F. 14, Desc. 124, C. 195, Sheets 3-4.

⁸ Archive of the President of Georgia. F. 14, Desc. 124, C. 197, Sheet 17.

⁹ Archive of the President of Georgia. F. 14, Desc. 124, C. 205, Sheets 2-3.

Two months later after the start of the investigation, on February 2, 1984, Orthodox priest Theodore (Temur Chikhladze) was arrested. He was a confessor of the hijackers. He knew that they were going to hijack an airliner in order to flee the Soviet Union; he resisted that idea. That was why the young people distanced themselves from him. In fact, the monk was accused of not disclosing the Seal of Confession and not reporting to the Security Committee. He also knew about the weapons. Generally, he was under surveillance by the State Security.

In accordance with the then ideological cliché, the investigation was to detect and submit to the court a leader of the group of criminals. If a crime was committed by members of the Young Communist League, that would mean that Communist and YCL bodies performed badly in the republic. However, if a clergy was declared an organizer of the gang, having involved young people, that would change the picture. A clergy, as an organizer of terrorists, would be an ideal version for the Soviet authorities. The Soviet atheist ideology would thus be able to demonstrate “harmfulness of religion,” how badly Christianity influence the Soviet youth.

Monk Theodore was not on board of the airliner and had nothing to do with hijacking. During the trial, monk Theodore took a lot upon himself. His aim, as he told his daughter, was to reduce guilt for the rest, because, to his naïve opinion, he, as the person who had not been on board, would be charged less strictly.¹⁰

Monk Theodore had close links with dissidents from Moscow and Leningrad. He disseminated their ideas among the Tbilisi youth. He was their confessor and enjoyed a great influence on them. For those young people, church was a means to escape Soviet reality. Monk Theodore was well-known with his obvious anti-Soviet views. He said: “The evil power of the Soviet Union is strange. Even the members of the Politburo no longer believe in Communism and live the western way of life, they send their children to study at the Universities of Cambridge and Yale, they wear clothes produced in western countries; and yet, whenever they need, they can sacrifice the lives of millions of people for the idea of Communism.”¹¹

In Monk Theodore’s conversation with his family, we see that he was well aware of his situation; he knew well that they would organize a show trial. In court, the reason for declaring him a leader of the gang was detected in his

¹⁰ Chikhladze Eka. *The Case for Capital Punishment*. Tbilisi. 2001, p. 76.

¹¹ *ibid.*

biography. In his young years, he was a president of the hippies in Tbilisi. Once, in Tbilisi, at the statue of Griboyedov, they organized a pacifist rally demanding the put an end to US military activities in Vietnam. Father Theodore recollected that story during the procession; he told how he was arrested and beaten by security officers. "Mr. Judge, so many years have passed since then and I still do not understand why they beat me so cruelly. It was remained in my heart as a great moral injury," he said at the process.

The large-scale discrediting campaign was launched before the start of the trial. The guys were portrayed as killers, drug addicts, sexual maniacs. Workers of factories and plants wrote collective letters demanding their adequate punishment.

The archival case about the hijackers reads: Iverieli, Paata (b. 1957; intern at the Department of Surgery, Tbilisi State Medical Institute), Iverieli, Kakha (b. 1955; head of the ambulant clinic, Village of Akhalsopeli, Gardabani District), Tsereteli, Ioseb (b. 1961; teacher of drawing, boarding school in the Village of Martkopi), Kobakhidze, Germane (b. 1961; actor at the film studio "Kartuli Filmi" ('Georgian Film')), Mikaberidze, Davit (b. 1962; 4th-year student at Tbilisi Academy of Arts), Tabidze, Grigol (b. 1951; unemployed, twice convicted for hooliganism and drug addiction), Petviashvili, Tinatin (b. 1962; 3rd-year student at Tbilisi Academy of Arts).¹²

All of them were from famous families. Some of them were from rich families; others were famous representatives of the Georgian intelligentsia. Their parents were: Kote Tsereteli – Corresponding Member of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Head of the Department of Assyriology at Tbilisi State University; Vazha Iverieli – Head of the Department at the Institute of Physicians' Professional Development at the Ministry of Healthcare; Razhden Mikaberidze – manager of the trust "Inturistspetsremstroy" of the State Committee for International Tourism; Teimuraz Tabidze – director of the design bureau of the State Committee for Vocational Education; Mikheil Kobakhidze – film director at the film studio "Kartuli Filmi"; Natela Machavariani – actress at Tbilisi Youth Theatre. Tina Petviashvili's father was a Doctor of Sciences, and her mother was employed at Tbilisi State University.¹³

Members of the group were quite different from each other. Gia Tabidze was a criminal. Brothers Iverieli were generally unhappy with the Soviet re-

¹² Archive of the President of Georgia. F. 14, Desc. 124, C. 196, Box 15, Sheets 1-3.

¹³ Archive of the President of Georgia. F. 17, Desc. 56, C. 271, Sheets 2-9.

gime. Kobakhidze, Mikaberidze, Tsereteli were educated young people, engaged in arts; they were interested in the Christian religion.

Gega Kobakhidze was only 21; however, he was already considered a rather popular actor; he had starred in several films: *Hurley-burley in Salkhineti*; *Lazare*; *Four Trousers and One Cotton Dress*. Since 1981, in Batumi Tengiz Abuladze filmed his *Repentance* (famous Soviet film about totalitarianism), in which Gega played one of the main roles. Later, the KGB destroyed scenes in which Gega Kobakhidze appeared. He was substituted by Merab Ninidze. The films with Gega Kobakhidze starring were banned.

Gega changed radically after he got acquainted with Tina; he became more optimistic. In their testimonies, Gega and Tina wrote that they finally decided to go abroad after having seen Robert Benton's film *Kramer vs. Kramer*.

According to the memories of his mother Natela Machavariani, "Gega used to say, how can it be, that a human being is born once, and he is born in the Soviet Union, the country of lies." In Gega Kobakhidze's words, "we wished we could get to a foreign country to eventually see what we had heard about a lot."

Members of the group gathered in Mikaberidze's summer cottage in Tskneti and later in Tbilisi, in a rented studio in Lvov Street where they talked a lot about going abroad. Tsereteli spoke about politics as well; he praised Reagan's course.

They had several plan to flee the Soviet Union. It was known that Soso Tsereteli and Davit Mikaberidze visited Tallinn where they tried to find opportunities to flee by a ship in the Baltic Sea. In spring, 1983, they had contacts with American Baptists and tried to find opportunities to go to US. Due to that, they were summoned for an interview to the KGB office in Batumi.

Finally, they agreed that to hijack an airliner would be the most secure. During questioning, Kakha Iverieli brought three arguments why they chose that way in order to flee the Soviet Union: 1. They would cross the state border quickly; authorities would have to time to down the airliner; 2. Owing to the presence of other passengers, and they would not be doomed to be killed; 3. With a status of hijackers, Turkey would by all means grant them a political asylum and would not hand them back, as far as that would lead to their likely execution.

Ideological leaders of the group were Davit Mikaberidze and Soso Tsereteli. Tabidze and brothers Iverieli were to take care of technical matters (weapons, activities). Kobakhidze and his wife were familiarized with the plan several days before. They were involved in the scheme in order to use their "honeymoon trip" as a cover story to carry weapons on board. Gega and his wife should behave on board as if they were unaware of anything.

The group members did not know well methods of the Soviet authorities. They believed that the government would care for the passengers' lives and would not make risky decisions, and thus would allow them to land the airliner in a Turkish airport. It seems that they viewed the Brazinskis case as a model; however, they were unaware that, for the thirteen years since then, security rules on board became much stricter; crew members were armed; a security officer accompanied them.

The hijacking plan was designed on November 7-8, 1983. They decided to invite Soso Tsereteli's acquaintance Ana Varsimashvili, an airport employee, to Gega Kobakhidze and Tina Petviashvili's wedding party. They intended to gain her confidence and, with her help, carry weapons on board. They were well aware that on November 18 Ana Varsimashvili was an officer on duty at the international gate.

On November 15-16, the guys gathered at Davit Mikaberidze's parents' summer cottage in Tskneti and agreed on final details. On November 17, Gega Kobakhidze and Tina Petviashvili's wedding party took place in Restaurant Duruji. The day after, the newly-wed couple and their groomsmen and bridesmaids gathered and made their way to the airport at 14:30.¹⁴

The trial was held on August 1-13, 1984. The process was broadcast by the Georgian television which was unprecedented. The defendants under arrest saw each other for the first time during the last nine months.

The prosecutor's claim was unchangeably reflected in the court verdict. Capital punishment and confiscation of property: Monk Theodore (Teimuraz Chikhladze), Gega Kobakhidze, Kakha Iverieli, Paata Iverieli. Tina Petviashvili was sentenced to fourteen years to be served in the corrective labor colony of the ordinary regimen. Besides, pregnant Petviashvili was forced to take potent drugs and underwent abortion in order not to allow her pregnancy to influence the verdict. She was sentenced without the right to appeal against the court decisions.

When the court sentenced them to the death penalty, representatives of the Georgian intelligentsia collected signatures requesting not to execute the hijackers. Following the direction by the Communist leadership and personally by E. Shevardnadze, some of them revoked their signatures, and others joined opposite claims.

They were executed very soon. The nine-month term, stipulated by the law, was not kept. On October 3, 1984, they were executed in Tbilisi prison.

¹⁴ Chikhladze Eka. *The Case for Capital Punishment*. Tbilisi, 2001, pp. 32-33.

Within thirty-minute intervals, initially Kakha and Paata Ivereli were shot, followed by Gega Kobakhidze, and, finally, Priest Theodore.

The parents and families of the executed people knew about it. Similarly to the 1930s, the fact that they were executed was concealed. Their families were told that they were banished.

Tina Petviashvili was released from prison due to the public protest movement during the period of Perestroika in spring, 1989. However, neither she nor other knew that the guys had long been executed. In 1989, Gega's father, Mikheil Kobakhidze met with Jumber Patiashvili, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, to discuss things with his films. During their conversation, Kobakhidze asked him to let know where they were banished. It was then when it became known that Gega was executed. They had sent a letter to Moscow appealing for clemency. Following that, they started looking for their graves. Only years later, the grave of Soso Tsereteli was discovered on a vast field, thirty kilometers away from Tbilisi. The rest four dead had no graves. Sulfuric acid might have been poured on their bodies.

Both earlier and in our days, there have been discussions among Georgian public: Were the hijackers heroes, fighters for liberty or terrorists and criminals? In contemporary Georgian culture, the story found various reflections. The Georgian writer Dato Turashvili wrote the novel and the play *Jeans Generation* (2001). Based on the book, Davit Doiashvili staged the play *Jeans Generation* at Liberty Theatre. In 2003, Zaza Rukhadze directed a documentary film *Bandits* (German version) or *Guys from the Airplane* (Georgian version). The Georgian rock singer Irakli Charkviani dedicated the song *I will Swim across the Sea* to the memory of his friend Gega Kobakhidze.