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Abstract- This paper examines the role of memory in shaping ethnic identity among deported Meskhetians residing in Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Through interviews and analysis, it explores how personal, collective, and historical narratives of the 1944 deportation and origins impact contemporary identity formations. Differences emerge between scholarly perspectives attributing Meskhetian roots to ancient Georgian tribes versus Turkish peoples. Despite varied origin narratives, the shared trauma of deportation serves as a collective touchstone passed down through storytelling and post-memory. Collective trauma is transmitted across generations through stories and shapes the identity of those who did not directly live through the traumatic events themselves. It is an imaginative, creative memory defined by distance from the original events. The paper situates these multifaceted memories and identities within theoretical frameworks on cultural trauma, narrative construction of history, and the complexity of lived versus recorded pasts.

Keywords: *meskhetians, ethnic identity, memory, trauma, deportation, narratives, history, post-memory.*

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I. Introduction

The complex historical narratives and collective memories surrounding the ethnic origins and identity of the deported Meskhetian people have been a subject of scholarly debate. There are two primary perspectives on the Meskhetians' roots: one argues for their Georgian ethnic origins, while the other traces their lineage to Turkish tribes like the Kipchaks. The postmodern critique of historical objectivity emphasizes how diverse interpretations of the past are shaped by sociopolitical contexts and the subjectivity of historians. Drawing on theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, Lotman, and Halbwachs, it is visible how the shared trauma of deportation and its intergenerational transmission through post-memory have become integral to Meskhetian identity formation. The heterogeneity of Meskhetians' historical recollections and the role of individual and collective memory in shaping ethnic identity are also crucial aspects to consider. Accordingly, this is what the hypothesis looks like: The complex interplay between collective memory, historical narratives, and individual experiences shapes Meskhetian identity in a dynamic and multifaceted way. The shared trauma of deportation and its intergenerational transmission through various means serve as a unifying force, while the diversity of origin stories allows for personal adaptability in identity construction. Also, in this article I will try to answer the following questions:

How do the diverse historical narratives surrounding the origins of the deported Meskhetians influence their contemporary self-perceptions and ethnic identities?

To what extent do personal, familial, and collective memories of the 1944 deportation serve as a unifying cultural trauma that shapes Meskhetian identity across generations?

How do the processes of intergenerational transmission, such as post-memory and storytelling, enable younger generations of Meskhetians to internalize and perpetuate a sense of shared history and identity?

In what ways do the contested scholarly discourses attributing Meskhetian roots to either Georgian or Turkic peoples intersect with or diverge from the lived experiences and self-understandings of Meskhetians themselves?

Before delving into the provided research questions, it is tremendously important to refer to the historical background of the mentioned group also known as Meskhetian Turks having a complex history steeped in forced migration and displacement.

In 1944, during World War II, the Soviet regime under Joseph Stalin forcibly deported the entire Muslim Meskhetian population from their ancestral homeland in the Meskheti region of Georgia to remote areas of Central Asia, primarily Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. This mass deportation aligned with the Soviet government's broader policies of population transfers and coerced relocations.

As Martin explains, The Soviet leadership was already committed to ethnic resettlement in the 1920s to promote ethnic consolidation and the formation of national territories for each Soviet ethnic minority. There was a continuity between these earlier ethnic consolidation policies and the ethnic cleansing of the 1930s. Widespread ethnic hostility against certain diaspora nationalities, like Koreans, Germans, Finns, and Poles, led to harsh treatment of these groups during collectivization. This hostility from below contributed to the targeting of these ethnicities (Terry, 1998).

Most importantly, the Soviet belief in the political salience of ethnicity led to an attempt to exploit cross-border ethnic ties to project influence abroad (the

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"Piedmont Principle"- refers to the Soviet attempt to exploit cross-border ethnic ties to project influence abroad). However, Soviet ideological xenophobia also made these cross-border ties suspect. Once the Soviet leadership realized these ethnic ties could not be exploited to undermine neighboring countries, they turned to ethnic cleansing of the borderlands and ethnic terror against diaspora nationalities throughout the USSR. The Soviet xenophobia driving the cleansing was ideological rather than ethnic (Terry, 1998). Stalin's regime's ethnic cleansing was primarily motivated by extreme paranoia about the security and integrity of the Soviet Union, leading to the tragic mass deportation of entire nationalities deemed as potential threats. Economic exploitation of their labor was a secondary motivation (Pohl, 1999).

In their places of exile, the Meskhetian community faced adverse conditions and challenges in preserving their cultural and ethnic identities. After decades in diaspora, the estimated approximately 425,000 Meskhetians today reside globally in Russia, Central Asia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, the United States and beyond. This broad geographic dispersal, originating from the 1944 deportation, complicates quantifying total population size, but scholarly estimates reliably place numbers in the several hundred thousand ranges. Overall, the Meskhetian case represents a significant global diaspora shaped by a history of forced removal from their Caucasian homeland.

The matter of Meskhetian repatriation represented an official commitment and obligation on the part of the Georgian Government. This responsibility was entrusted to the Georgian Government in 1999, coinciding with the country's accession to the European Council. Deliberations centered on the return of the 425,000 Deported Meskhetians to their native land. By this commitment, Georgia was mandated to enact pertinent legislation within two years, initiate the repatriation process within three years, and ultimately conclude the program within a twelve-year timeframe. Regrettably, the Georgian government could not meet these stipulated deadlines (Trieri, Tarkhan-Mouravi, Kilimniki, 2011). It was not until September 12, 2014, that the Georgian government passed a new law on repatriation (Government of Georgia 2014). Despite this legislative development, the issue remains unresolved and continues to be a susceptible matter, with a significant challenge arising from the perception of Meskhetians.

The focal point of their history lies in the region of Meskheti. Historical Meskheti includes the southwestern part of Georgia, the territories located in the Mtkvari and Chorokhi basins. To be more specific, these territories include Samtskhe, Javakheti, Kola-Artaan, Shavsheti, Erusheti, Klarjeti, Adjara, Imerkhevi, Tao and Sper (Lomsadze, 2000). Nowadays, a significant part of these territories is part of Turkey. The modern Samtskhe-Javakheti region occupies 10.7% of the territory of Georgia and it has 213,700 inhabitants (https://grass.org.ge/). Borders with the republics of Armenia and Turkey in the south. As always, Samtskhe-Javakheti belongs to multi-ethnic and multi-religious regions. Currently, in this region along with Georgians (43.35%) live Armenians (54.6%), Greeks (0.36%), Ossetians, Ukrainians, Russians, deported Meskhetians, etc. (1.37%), ethnic minorities (https://grass.org.ge/), of which Orthodox Christians make up 45.6% of the population, 40.3% belong to the Armenian Apostolate; Muslims 3.8%, - Other 10.3% (https://www.citypopulation.de/).

II. Methodology

In this study, I used qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interview forms provided us with enough data on this subject. The initial phase involved the identification of markers and factors relevant to the research question, which were thoroughly validated throughout the research process. Among the identified markers and factors, the role of memory in shaping ethnic identity emerged as one of the most significant. These identified markers and factors were then subjected to rigorous examination and analysis within the framework of relevant theories.

To gather and analyze data, a triangulation approach was employed, enhancing the study's scientific rigor. This approach entails a comprehensive examination of the issue, utilizing multiple methods to gain a profound understanding of the experiences connected to the deportation event, with a specific emphasis on the older generation residing in the Samtskhe Javakheti region.

By employing the micro-history method, I explored the intricacies of the deportation event, striving to capture the firsthand accounts, recollections, and interpretations of this historical occurrence by the older people.

Conducting biographical-narrative interviews with second-generation participants enabled me to document and examine their experiences as displaced individuals, illuminating their challenges they encountered, such as discrimination and the intricacies of living without a homeland.

To comprehend the broader social dynamics and interactions between deported Meskhetians and local, embedded interviews were conducted in an immersive setting to investigate the community's lived experiences.

Moreover, a life history analysis was performed to track the life trajectory of the deported Meskhetians over time, portraying their experiences and intra-group personal challenges.

The research design integrated a comparative analysis of data acquired from different target groups, utilizing the comparative method. This approach

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facilitated the correlation of observed differences with varied experiences and historical memories, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the deportation act's impact on diverse generations and communities.

The study includes interviews with repatriated Meskhetians who returned to Georgia from the 1990s to the present and members of the local community living in these villages. Each village yielded an average of 6-7 interviews, with 44 respondents across all sites. Among the 44 interviewees, 14 were repatriated Meskhetians, and the remaining 30 were members of the local community (Gudushauri & Tsereteli, 2024).

"A total of 44 interviews were categorized as follows:

- Indigenous Local Population (18).
- Deported Meskhetians (14)
- A portion of the Local Population who settled in these areas during the 1950s (9).
- Local Ethnic Minorities - Armenians (3).

The respondents were stratified into three distinct age cohorts:

- Youth cohort (ages 13-30): n=14, comprising 50% female participants.
- Middle-aged adults (ages 31-60): n=20, with an equal representation of 50% female
- respondents.
- Elderly cohort (ages 61 and above): n=10, maintaining a balanced distribution of 50% female participants." (Gudushauri & Tsereteli, 2024).

The selection of villages and respondents was systematically aligned with the resettlement areas of the deported Meskhetians. The primary focus was investigating individuals living in villages that housed repatriated Meskhetians. Also, to understand the local population's perspectives, I recorded interviews in villages that did not host deported Meskhetians, such as Ude and Aral. This approach allowed us to compare and analyze empirical data collected from different village settings, facilitating a comparative study.

The recorded interviews ranged from half an hour to an extensive three hours, depending on the level of openness and trust demonstrated by each respondent. This allowed for a natural exploration of their experiences and perspectives. Following the interviews, content and thematic analyses were conducted as the final stage of the research methodology (Gudushauri & Tsereteli, 2024).

a) Origin of deported Meskhetians - scientific approaches

Scholarly debate persists regarding the origins of the deported Meskhetian people; however, two primary perspectives emerge from current academic literature. A cohort of scholars contends that the Meskhi constitute an ethnic Georgian population that adopted Islam over time due to historical exigencies associated with Ottoman military expansion into the region (Trier, 2011). Specifically, it is argued that after the Ottoman conquest of Georgia in 1578, systemic processes of Turkification and Islamization took hold, gradually transforming the Meskhetians into a Muslim minority within the empire (Trier, 2011).

In his 2013 work "Roots and the present-day existence of the Muslim Meskhetians," Georgian scholar Merab Beridze explores the complex history and identity of the Meskhetian people. He argues that "the issue of Meskhetians is more or less significant for all parts of Georgia", connecting them to ancient tribes like the Mushki and Moskhi as well as medieval Georgian cultural figures. After chronicling the Ottoman conquest of the Meskheti region in the late 16th century, Beridze asserts that "The population of Meskheti is entirely Georgian", emphasizing the Georgian ethnic roots of this group despite their later adoption of Islam. Through textual analysis of primary and secondary sources, Beridze situates the Meskhetians within a broader tradition of Georgian history and ethnography. His research illuminates questions of geography, religion, assimilation, and cultural hybridity concerning national identity (Beridze, 2013). In his 2013 article "Identity of Deported Meskhetians," Avtandil Jokhadze examines the resilience of Georgian identity among the Meskhetian people despite centuries under Ottoman rule. Through analysis of primary sources, Jokhadze argues that "On the path of Turkification the elite have not forgotten their Georgian origin and identity, nor they turned to Islam. From generation to generation, they kept the documents proving their noble and therefore Georgian origin". He contends that even after deportation from Georgia in 1944, "the ancient Meskhetian identity cannot organically merge with Turkish, American or any other identity. It can only coincide with the common Georgian political identity." Jokhadze's research provides an important perspective on the persistence of Georgian ethnic identity over time, even in the face of assimilation pressures. His work engages with themes of ethnicity, national identity, and the complex legacy of empires in the Caucasus region. Through close examination of Meskhetian social history, Jokhadze advances our understanding of how subjugated groups preserve cultural distinctiveness. In his scholarly publication titled "Meskhetians and Meskheti," Shota Lomsadze presents a comprehensive evaluation concerning the origins of the displaced Meskhetians. According to Lomsadze's analysis, he contends that the authentic Georgian population relocated from Southern Georgia in 1944. Furthermore, in the contemporary context, Lomsadze suggests that the dispossessed populace of Meskhetian Georgian Muslims has the potential to reestablish their customary way of life and rejuvenate their collective identity. This process, Lomsadze asserts, can exclusively transpire through a meticulously deliberated comprehension of national unity (Lomsadze, 2000).

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An alternative perspective posited by a different faction of scholars, exemplified by non-Georgian researchers Aydıngün and Mirkhanova, diverges from the Georgian scientific position. They propose that the inhabitants of Meskheti trace their lineage to the Huns (Mirkhanova, 2006) the Bun-Turks and Kipchaks, who manifested in the Caucasus during the 2nd century BC. According to this interpretation, the Kipchaks played a pivotal role in shaping the Turkish identity of the displaced Meskhetians, and the enduring presence of the Ottoman Empire in Meskhet-Javakheti amalgamated all Turkish components into a novel construct. Consequently, they regard the "Turkish Meskhetians" as an integral facet of this novel amalgamation (Aydıngün, 2010 / Çınar, 2020). In support of this perspective, it is contended that there exist no substantial ethno-cultural differences between the Muslim populace of Meskhetia and the Turks residing in Eastern Anatolia, Turkey (Trier, 2011). This standpoint has found concurrence and further elaboration from scholars such as Tomlinson and Osipov, who regard Georgia as a region characterized by the uninterrupted settlement of Turks (Janiashvili, 2013).

b) *Narratives regarding the ethnic origin of the deported Meskhetians (memory, perception and interpretation of history)*

The historical narratives about the deported Meskhetians have been subject to diverse interpretations within the scholarly discourse and among the community. Nevertheless, amid these multifaceted perspectives, certain elements and events persist as common threads that unify the deported Meskhetians. Consequently, individual, collective, and historical memory are pivotal factors in shaping and preserving their ethnic identity.

Postmodern perspectives on history contend that historical realities are socio-cultural "constructions" rather than truthful narratives (Postmodern History). Foucault acknowledged the fictional aspects of his writings yet maintained they could still function as truth by reflecting political realities (Foucault, 1980). In the case of the deported Meskhetians, certain events like their 1944 deportation, the 1989 Ferghana tragedy, and their 1999 consideration for repatriation by the Council of Europe constitute knowable historical realities. However, attempts to illustrate causes, motives, and non-implementation surrounding these events remain open to subjective interpretation rather than verifiable truthful narratives. Concerning all the facts mentioned above, there are different and often contradictory narratives created in different socio-cultural environments and historical periods. Consequently, these historical narratives are also differently understood by the deported Meskhetians themselves, which makes the basis for a specific historical event to serve as a unifier. However, the existing historical narrative about this event may determine different self-perceptions on the part of the group members. So, in my opinion, the act of deportation functioned as a unifying factor among the Meskhetians; however, the diversity of narratives about the origins of the deported Meskhetians contributed to the development of different self-perceptions within their community.

Michel Foucault contends that truth and knowledge are constructed representations that serve the purpose of convincing others, rather than necessarily corresponding to an objective reality. He posits that the production of knowledge and historical accounts can be seen as instruments of power, often tied to the formation of specific ideologies. From this perspective, knowledge is viewed as a exerting influence over various groups (Foucault, 1980).

In the context of the historical narratives regarding the origin of the Deported Meskhetians, these narratives can be seen as constructed representations, depending on the perspective from which they are examined. Scholars have presented varying theories about the Deported Meskhetians' origins, attributing their lineage to the Kipchags and Bun-Turks, as well as the “Mushks” and “Moskhes.” While these narratives may not entirely align with objective historical reality, they do encapsulate a form of knowledge and truth.

Furthermore, this knowledge has had a profound impact on those interested in the origin of the deported Meskhetians and exerted influence on them. It is worth noting that these historical narratives, often complex and nuanced, are typically not casually discussed by the general populace. Many may simply identify themselves as descendants of Turks or Georgians, simplifying the matter in their everyday conversations.

In the context mentioned above, the perspective of postmodernism (Postmodern History) presents an intriguing viewpoint worth considering. postmodernists (Postmodern History) contend that historians often serve as "activists" rather than impartial chroniclers of the past. They posit that historical research is not merely an endeavor to comprehend past, but a tool of propaganda wielded in the complex arena of contemporary political and social power struggles. This viewpoint underscores the inevitability of bias creeping into historical narratives, as historians may be driven to manipulate and modify facts to reinforce specific messages or agendas.

When investigating the history of the deported Meskhetians, it becomes evident that various authors and works have been instrumental in shaping and presenting the historical narrative. This is particularly conspicuous when considering the origin of the Meskhetians, as it is depicted from multiple perspectives, including that of a Georgian researcher, a Turkish researcher, and an ostensibly "impartial" foreign researcher. Each of these perspectives is logical.

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As a researcher, one may earnestly aspire to maintain objectivity and neutrality. Yet, how one formulates their opinion and constructs the narrative invariably reflects their position. For instance, from a Georgian researcher's standpoint, Samtskhe-Javakheti is portrayed as liberated from an invader. Conversely, the Turkish researcher's perspective emphasizes the territorial loss suffered by the Ottoman Empire, presenting a different facet of the same historical event. Meanwhile, a particular foreign researcher adopts a detached stance regarding the region as a border area that has intermittently come under the dominion of various nations. In this view, both Turks and Georgians are seen as integral to the historical fabric of the territory, transcending the binary notions of liberation or loss. The conscientious researcher must acknowledge that their most rigorous attempts at being objective will fail because of the inherent subjectivity. Regardless of the researcher's earnest endeavors to present a comprehensive and impartial overview of the positions found in the body of scientific literature, their perspective, as a specific researcher, inevitably exerts an influence on the text they produce.

On the one hand, this can be construed as an endeavor to offer a multi-perspective examination of the issue, but on the other hand, it may contain the danger of instrumentalizing history/the past for certain political purposes. However, it is essential to acknowledge that, given the particularities of the subject matter, this approach may carry the inherent risk of instrumentalizing history or the past for specific political objectives. In this way, it becomes evident that the researcher's role, while striving for objectivity, is not entirely divorced from the broader sociopolitical context in which they operate. This recognition underscores the need for critical self-awareness and ethical considerations in the pursuit of historical research and narrative construction. While engaging with multiple perspectives can enrich historical analysis, the inherent subjectivity of interpretation underscores the need for reflexivity in narrative construction as The French philosopher Jacques Derrida generally argued that texts are open to multiple interpretations and their meaning is never fully fixed or decidable. He challenges the idea of a single definitive meaning, seeing meaning as plural and shifting. Texts are too unstable and multi-determined to be decisively "concluded" through logical critique (Derrida, 1976).

Modern theories of time and cultural models acknowledge that interpretations of the past are shaped not only by examining different perspectives but also by recognizing that groups can have substantively different pasts. As Yuri Lotman argues, unified cultural groups still construct diverse "models of the past" based on their unique pre-histories (Lotman, 2019). This insight is relevant when analyzing the case of deported Meskhetians. While sharing the common trauma of forced removal, their pre-deportation histories were varied. For Lotman, future-oriented goals and plans are closely tied to one's formulated past. Thus, in the Meskhetian case, differing visions of the future likely contributed to the divergent narratives about the past that took hold. Situating the problem within this theoretical frame illuminates how teleology shaped the opposing interpretations of history among the deported population.

As Lotman theorizes, imagined future trajectories can shape constructed narratives of the past (Lotman, 2019). In the case of the deported Meskhetians, some scholars and politicians may have artificially projected a homogeneous group identity back in time to serve nationalist agendas, whether Georgian or Turkish. However, research confirms, that the actual pre-deportation histories and memories are heterogeneous. In my opinion, Individuals choose interpretations based on their individual and collective memories. Collective memory provides groups with orienting narratives and cognitive maps, allowing members to locate themselves in time and space (Eiermann, 2019). For the Deported Meskhetians, historical memory determined the individual memory, which allowed them to identify as either Turk or Georgian. However, the collective memory, which is based on the deportation act, unified them as Deported Meskhetians/Ahiska Turks.

Traumatic events can have a profound and lasting impact on individual and collective memory. As Jang Wang theorizes, when a group undergoes a terrible shared experience like deportation, it leaves an indelible imprint on their consciousness (Wang, 2018). The trauma fundamentally alters their ideology and identity in irreversible ways. Not every member needs to directly suffer the event for it to become seminal in the group's narrative and self-conception. At some point after the initial cultural trauma, knowledge of the precipitating injury spreads widely through the population. The painful event is enshrined as a pivotal touchstone in the collective memory. It comes to define the group and replace previous self-understandings. Though emerging initially from lived experience, the trauma memory takes on mythic significance over time. This describes how Meskhetian deportation became integral to divergent narratives of communal identity.

In the case of a heterogenous community of deported Meskhetians, the trauma served as a unifying force, bringing together all the Muslim Meskhetians who were exiled from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. The profound impact of the deportation trauma became such a powerful, cohesive element that it maintained its practical role as a group unifier, transcending generations. The shared experience of displacement and the collective memory of this traumatic event continued to shape the identity and solidarity of the Deported Meskhetian community. This enduring legacy of the deportation trauma highlights its significance as a

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defining moment in the history and social fabric of the Muslim Meskhetians in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

One of my respondents, a 35-year-old woman from Mugareti, provided an illustrative example of the thoroughness with which some Meskhetians recount their family and group history, despite having limited direct knowledge or memories of the details. The respondent sincerely tried to recount everything she knew about her family's experiences and her husband's family history, she spoke as if she had lived through it all herself. Yet in terms of factual details, she admitted having little memory, knowing only that they were deported under Stalin but believed to give me detailed information about suffering. According to Halbwachs, indirect stimulation, such as listening to others' stories, is often needed to shape historical memory (Halbwachs, 1992).

The respondent then shares the specific story of her husband's family's multiple migrations between Uzbekistan, their village in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and settling in Mugareti. She notes that her husband does not remember this history, but his older sister shared details that shaped the respondent's collective memory, such as locals shouting at them to leave. The respondent displays a tendency common among those traumatized - shaping a narrative in solely tragic terms, even when her actual experiences, such as arriving in Georgia, were more complex. She expresses pain at being labeled "Tatar,"(undeveloped ruthless Muslim) which demonstrates the lack of understanding of Meskhetian Turk identity among locals. With no information from elders in her family, her knowledge of her own history is limited, knowing only her ancestral village and origin like Meskhetian Turk. This exemplifies the importance of individual, collective, and historical memory in the process of shaping and protecting ethnic identity.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma through post-memory is exemplified in my second respondent's family history. Despite having limited direct knowledge of the events, my respondent, a 60-year-old Muslim Georgian man from Akhaltsikhe, feels deeply connected to his family's complex religious conversion and the deportation of Meskhetian Turks. As Marianne Hirsch notes, post-memory allows later generations to experience trauma they did not directly witness, often through stories, images, behaviors, and effects passed down within the family (Hirsch, 2008). While my respondent does not remember details, discussing identity was common in his family. He sees the deportation as a tragedy not just for his family but for all affected, calling it "an abnormal story" and Moscow's plan against Georgia's will. Yet he considers himself a "native Georgian," having learned the language upon returning to Georgia. His narrative illustrates how fragmented memories and emotions can powerfully shape post-memorial identities and connections to the past. Situating his story in Hirsch's theoretical framework illuminates how post-memory operates through transgenerational transmission of unspoken trauma. In contemporary times, we Meskhetians consider ourselves as Georgians, an identity we have held for an extended period. Our parents instilled in us our Georgian heritage; they conversed in Georgian at home, particularly when they wished to discussing matters discreetly. For instance, when I converse with my elders, especially my grandmother, she recounts stories of singing in Georgian or collective praying and incantations in Georgian when someone fell ill. During meals, she would request items in Georgian, saying “pass me the sour milk, pass me the water,” which is how we acquired knowledge of the Georgian language. My mother’s native tongue is Georgian, though I am not as proficient and only know some fundamental phrases, such as “How are you?” “Where are you from?,” and “Where are you going?” We continue to use the Georgian word “uime” today. When deciding what to prepare for a meal, we say “mchadi/tskali/ghomi (food names, such es water etc.)” in Georgian - to enunciate these words accurately requires a Georgian spirit, an inherent gene we have retained. There is an ancient Meskhetian word “anko” that Queen Tamar and Shota Rustaveli spoke. Through my reading of our history 30 years ago, I learned that 300 years ago, Turkey vanquished Meskheti and forced the conversion of people to Islam, after which we adopted the Turkish language. This background informs our present-day Georgian identity.

My next respondent (girl / 18 years old / Akhaltsikhe) is interested in a way that she is very young.

> “My grandparents were born here, but when they were ten years old, Stalin deported them to Azerbaijan. In 2009, my family and I moved back here, and I attended school starting in first grade. I do not possess a Georgian passport but rather hold Azerbaijani citizenship. Life is quite good, including relationships with neighbors; my Georgian neighbors are Aunt Nina and Leila, and I have Armenian friends as well. Attending university has proven challenging without Georgian citizenship, as I cannot obtain a school-leaving certificate. For this reason, I left school after ninth grade when I was 18 years old and unmarried.”

From these interviews we can see how historical narratives, collective memories, and intergenerational transmission shape the ethnic identities and self-perceptions of deported Meskhetians. The diverse origins of the Meskhetians, which are subject to scholarly debate, influence their contemporary identities in complex ways. Some emphasize their Turkish roots, while others identify strongly as Georgian Muslims. These competing historical narratives provide different identity frameworks that Meskhetians navigate.

However, despite these diverse origin stories, the collective trauma of the 1944 deportation serves as

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a unifying experience that profoundly shapes Meskhetian identity across generations. The interviews demonstrate how even those with limited direct memories of the deportation internalize it as a defining collective tragedy. Recounting family histories of suffering and migration is a common way Meskhetians assert their identity and connect to a shared past.

Significantly, younger generations of Meskhetians, who did not directly experience the deportation, still strongly identify with this historical trauma through processes of intergenerational transmission such as post-memory and storytelling within families. The interviews show how traumatic memories, and a sense of lost homeland are passed down, even when details are fragmented or vague. Older relatives' stories, told in both Georgian and Turkish, become embedded in younger Meskhetians' identity formation.

The concept of post-memory (Hirsch, 2008) is particularly relevant here, as later generations internalize the traumatic experiences of their elders almost as personal memories, powerfully shaping their sense of history and identity. Retelling stories of deportation within families, even when details are lost, perpetuates Meskhetian identity. This is exemplified by the 18-year-old respondent, whose grandparents' experiences define her sense of Meskhetian heritage.

In summary, while diverse origin narratives complicate Meskhetian identity, the 1944 deportation serves as a profound unifying cultural trauma. Collective memories of this tragedy, transmitted intergenerationally through stories and post-memory, are central to perpetuating a sense of distinctive Meskhetian identity and connection to a lost homeland. Oral history and storytelling become keyways Meskhetians assert their identity across generations.

III. Conclusion

This research has delved into the intricate interplay between personal and collective memory in shaping the ethnic identity constructions of deported Meskhetians living in Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti region. By analyzing in-depth biographical interviews through key theoretical lenses, the study illuminates the complex role of narrative, post-memory, and cultural trauma in transmitting historical imaginaries across generations.

The findings underscore several critical points. Firstly, the repeated evictions and resettlements experienced by the Meskhetian population have created a "mythical-real" history that permeates their collective consciousness. Secondly, the diverse self-perceptions among deported/repatriated Meskhs lead to different interpretations of the past, which are reflected in their narratives and, consequently, shape their future aspirations. Thirdly, these varying interpretations are perceived differently by academic and political circles, the local population, and the repatriates themselves. Finally, the choice to believe in any of these interpretations is influenced by both individual and collective memory.

The ethnographic findings highlight the heterogeneity of historical recollections among Meskhetians, revealing the constructed and fluid nature of their past. The research also elucidates how the indirect transmission of trauma memory through familial storytelling and commemoration enables a form of post-memory, allowing younger generations to internalize cultural trauma. Moreover, the juxtaposition of narrative typologies provides theoretical insight into the interrelationship between recorded history and lived recollection in producing of ethnic imaginaries.

Despite its contributions, the study has some limitations. The tight geographic focus on a specific region in Georgia precludes capturing diversity across the global Meskhetian diaspora. Further research among Meskhetian communities in Central Asia, Russia, and beyond could reveal divergences and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of memory and identity formation within this diasporic community.

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