# When Violence Becomes Entertainment: Soviet Georgian Caricature

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines Soviet Georgian political caricature with a focus on the normalization and aestheticization of violence. The study argues that caricature functioned as a mechanism for transforming violence into spectacle and entertainment, contributing to the erosion of empathy. Using art-historical and semiotic analysis, the research explores satirical journals such as Niangi and Tartarozi. It demonstrates that visual strategies including grotesque exaggeration, symbolic contrast, and dehumanization were used to legitimize aggression and shape ideological perception.

The article concludes that caricature played a central role in constructing emotional responses aligned with Soviet propaganda. The case of Georgia is particularly insightful. Situated between Eastern Europe and Western Asia, the country developed an active satirical press during the late imperial and early Soviet periods. By the beginning of the twentieth century, caricature had become an important tool for discussing social inequality, local political issues, cultural tensions, and international relations. However, after Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet system, the role of satire changed. The new political regime did not remove humorous imagery but reshaped its purpose. Satire turned into a medium for spreading official ideology in a form that was understandable to the local population.

**Keywords:** Political caricature; Soviet propaganda; violence; Georgian satire; ideology.

## INTRODUCTION

This study examines how political caricature in Soviet Georgia contributed to the normalization of violence and its transformation into spectacle. It explores how satire shaped perception and emotional response, encouraging detachment and acceptance of aggression within ideological frameworks. Soviet propaganda had many directions. One important line was to spread aggression in society and justify it in the name of a better Soviet future. Georgian satirical magazines are filled with caricatures depicting physical violence and threats. We will examine in detail how violence in the Soviet Union was transformed into a kind of entertainment.

Another way to spread calls for violence was through the education system. School textbooks glorified the revolution. From an early age, children were taught that this kind of violence was heroic and formed the foundation of preserving the state. Public rallies and demonstrations, with grand displays of military power, served not only as entertainment but also as a demonstration of the strength of the state. The state's encouragement of violence gradually made such spectacles less shocking. This process was crucial in reducing emotional reactions to violence.

After the consolidation of Soviet power, the themes and visual language of caricature gradually became fully controlled by the principles of Socialist Realism. This meant that caricature was no longer a form of personal artistic expression. Instead, its style was used to serve the propagandistic goals of the state. The visual composition and line work became sharper and more clearly defined. During this same period, the use of color became more common in Georgian caricature, whereas earlier it had been used less frequently. Red, as a symbol of Soviet ideology, became a dominant color, while strong black-and-white contrasts were often used to portray the enemy in a negative and exaggerated way.

Under the conditions of Soviet terror, it was clear that no Georgian artist or intellectual could avoid participating in the spread of propaganda. Art was strictly controlled by the state, and any disagreement with official structures could lead to serious consequences. Even a passive attitude toward the regime could be seen as suspicious and lead to punishment. Those who refused to support Soviet propaganda were automatically treated as enemies and could be labeled as "enemies of the people."

In such circumstances, artists were forced to follow the ideological narratives imposed by the regime, even if their personal views were very different. As a result, the works of caricaturists often became well-executed examples of propaganda that supported state goals, such as criticizing the West, exposing so-called "enemies of the people," and strengthening Soviet ideology.

Although this material is important, Georgian political caricature has not been widely studied in international academic research. Most existing studies approach it from literary or journalistic perspectives rather than from an art historical point of view. This article aims to contribute to the field by combining detailed visual analysis with historical context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Serious academic interest in Georgian satirical graphics has developed only in recent years, and the field is still not fully explored. Caricature has usually been studied as part of satirical literature, rather than as an independent visual genre with its own artistic rules. Because of this, many earlier studies are not strictly art-historical, but they still offer important bibliographic, journalistic, and historical information.

For instance, Revaz Mishveladze provides extensive material on Georgian print culture in the twenty-fourth volume of his collected works. He examines newspapers and magazines, editorial practices, and publication timelines. His research is especially helpful for understanding when specific journals appeared, who established them, and how their editorial leadership evolved. However, as a philologist, his focus is mainly on literary aspects rather than on the visual analysis of caricature (Mishveladze, 2013).

Gizo Nishnianidze's study of satire in relation to the revolution is important for understanding how humor functioned within Soviet ideology. His work explains the political context in which satire operated and shows how public ridicule could be used as a tool of the state (Nishnianidze, 1971). In addition, journalistic writings by Mark Kipnisi, Otar Chkhartishvili, Otar Sepiashvili, and others are valuable because they document observations about magazines, artists, and the social role of humor, even if they do not provide detailed visual analysis.

From an art-historical point of view, the work of Mary Karbelashvili is particularly important. She places caricature within the broader development of Georgian graphic art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her discussion of Oskar Schmerling is especially relevant. Schmerling, whose works appeared in magazines such as "Tartarozi" and "Eshmakis Matrakhi," was one of the key figures in Georgian visual satire and played a major role in shaping the expressive possibilities of caricature. His work shows that Georgian caricature had already developed strong visual qualities before the Cold War era.

More recent studies, supported by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation, have begun to organize the history of Georgian caricature as a long-term artistic phenomenon. Scholars such as N. Chogoshvili, I. Abesadze, K. Darchia, and S. Chanturidze have contributed to uncovering archival materials and recognizing caricature as an important visual source. In particular, Irine Abesadze's research on the origins of Georgian caricature highlights the early development of satirical visual language in local print culture.

International research provides a broader theoretical background. Eric Hobsbawm's The Age of Extremes helps place the first half of the twentieth century within a global context of ideological struggle, mass politics, and state power (Hobsbawm, 1994). Margaret MacMillan's The War That Ended Peace offers insight into the political tensions and diplomatic systems that led to the First World War (MacMillan, 2014). Piers Brendon's The Dark Valley presents a wide overview of the global crises of the 1930s and the political cultures that influenced later propaganda (Brendon, 2008).

For the study of political caricature itself, works such as Halloran's research on Thomas Nast and Victor Navasky's The Art of Controversy are especially valuable. These authors demonstrate that caricature is not a minor or purely humorous form, but a powerful medium with strong emotional and political impact. Navasky argues that political cartoons can provoke strong reactions, such as anger or confusion, and can influence public opinion more deeply than is often assumed (Navasky, 2013). Similarly, Richard Scully points out that political cartoons should be understood both as historical sources and as complex forms that combine ideology, visual language, and public communication (Scully, 2025).

Overall, this research shows that Georgian political caricature should not be seen simply as illustration. Instead, it should be studied as a field where artistic form, ideology, humor, and historical understanding come together. Building on this idea, the present article analyzes selected caricatures from "Niangi" as visual arguments shaped by the Soviet propaganda system.

# METHODOLOGY

To build a strong methodological foundation, this study combines archival research with a close analysis of political caricatures published in Georgian periodicals. Its main goal is to reconstruct the historical and political environment in which social and political caricatures appeared in Georgian humorous print media during the first half of the twentieth century. To examine not only the images themselves but also the wider textual and historical context that originally gave them meaning. For this purpose, I used a wide range of historical sources, including Soviet, foreign, and modern texts, as well as historiographical studies that explain the key events, political developments, and social changes of the period. The aim was to understand why specific caricatures were created and how their visual form related to the changing political and social situation in Georgia.

A stylistic and comparative analysis was carried out on caricatures published in selected Georgian journals between 1900 and 1950. Most of the research material was collected from the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia. From the large number of illustrated humorous and satirical magazines published between 1900 and 1950, only those caricatures were chosen that were especially important in terms of theme, political or social content, and artistic individuality. Comparative analysis was also used to identify similarities and differences between Georgian caricatures and those published in socialist and capitalist countries abroad. This comparison was not intended to remove local specificity, but rather to highlight shared visual elements, common satirical techniques, and ideological differences. The study is based on the idea that caricature should be understood as a combination of visual and textual elements, especially within politically controlled media systems.

### Violence as Entertainment

Along with many false narratives, one of the most dangerous aspects of this direction of the propaganda machine was the encouragement of cruelty and its transformation into a form of entertainment. When cruelty is combined with sarcastic or humorous elements in caricatures, the brain does not perceive it as a tragedy, but rather as something amusing. This method reduces moral responsibility and frees the audience from feelings of empathy.

Caricatures that regularly depict the humiliation, torture, or destruction of the enemy gradually create a new framework of perception in which such actions are seen as normal. The more often society is exposed to these images, the less it reacts to similar violence in real life. Caricatures often present violence as a necessary act of justice.

A striking example is a caricature published in 1925 in the magazine "Tartarozi" (Tartarozi, 01.01.1925), which is likely attributed to Oskar Schmerling. On a New Year tree, instead of decorations, human corpses are hanging. The dead human body is treated like a toy. The overall mood of the caricature is cheerful. If the enemy is presented as a threat in such images, cruelty is no longer seen as a crime, but as the only way to ensure society's survival.

When cruelty is equated with heroism, people begin to feel a desire to imitate it. This has a particularly strong effect on young people, who are in the process of forming their moral and social values. Such caricatures weaken empathy and create an environment in which violence becomes acceptable, desirable, and sometimes even necessary.

Oskar Schmerling (1863–1938) was a German-born graphic artist who made a significant contribution to the development of Georgian political caricature and illustration. He received his artistic education first at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts and later in Munich (1891–1892). In 1893, he returned to Tbilisi and became actively involved in artistic and publishing activities.

He led the Tbilisi Art School and later the School of Painting and Sculpture (1902–1918). From 1922, he taught at the Tbilisi Academy of Arts. Schmerling showed exceptional talent in the genre of caricature. He collaborated with several well-known Georgian satirical magazines, including "Bziki," "Eshmakis Matrakhi," "Tartarozi," "Shurduli," and "Soplis Aliakoti," among others. His caricatures are characterized by light, flexible lines and a precise understanding of social and political events. Through humor and grotesque elements, he presented important issues for society, which gave his works originality and relevance. His caricatures remain relevant even today. He had a major influence on the development of Georgian satirical art.

Of course, the Soviet authorities did not only oppose artists and ordinary people who supported the idea of restoring Georgia's independence. They also relentlessly fought against poets, writers, and representatives of various cultural fields who tried to express free and independent ideas.

The Soviet government maintained strict control over all forms of expression—literature, visual art, theatre, and music. This control was enforced through censorship, which evaluated every work based on its loyalty to the principles of Socialist Realism.

As is well known, decorating a Christmas tree with ornaments has long been a tradition. However, in a caricature (*Figure 1)* published on January 1, 1925, in Tartarozi, we see an image that can be described as reaching the 'extremes' of propaganda.

At the center of the composition stands a Christmas tree placed on the ruins of a church. Instead of traditional holiday decorations, human corpses are hanging from its branches. Among them are a clergyman, a man dressed in Caucasian clothing, and others. At the top of the tree, instead of a star, the number "1925," representing the year of Soviet rule, is shining. In the lower right corner, two men are standing and laughing at this horrifying scene. The replacement of ornaments with corpses reflects the regime's brutality toward dissent. The variety of bodies used as decoration clearly demonstrates how Soviet propaganda used art as a tool to demoralize its „enemies".


Figure 1, Tartarozi 01.01.1925.

The idea that Georgia was no longer an independent political entity had to be expressed everywhere, and it is clear that a propaganda magazine published in Georgia also had to take part in this general 'celebration.' The depiction of numerous human skulls was a common practice in propaganda caricatures.

As in the previously discussed image, the same idea appears in another work by the same artist (Fig. 2 – O. Schmerling, Niangi, 04.11.1923, No. 16), showing how the Soviet regime destroyed its enemies. At the center of the composition stands a large Soviet flag raised above a pile of skulls. Human bodies are thrown into the air, illuminated by red rays. In the lower right corner, a worker is shown with a joyful expression, holding a flame and a hammer. The caricature clearly represents the triumph of the brutal Soviet regime. Red rays extend from the flag, creating a strong contrast between the vivid red elements and the monochrome background.

Fig. 2 – Oscar Schmerling, Niangi, 04.11.1923, No. 16

A caricature published on the front page in 1926 reflects one of the most tragic moments in Georgian history (Fig. 3 – O. Schmerling, Tartarozi, 28.02.1926, No. 38). In the composition, a man proudly walks forward against a mountainous background, holding a large red communist flag. Behind him is a tragic scene: a pile of dead Georgians. Above this heavy image appears the final inscription: 'Long live Soviet Georgia! 1921–1926.' The mountains are shown in dark tones. The red flag, traditionally a symbol of communism, here represents the spread of Soviet ideology in Georgia. The human bodies are depicted in a somewhat realistic manner, and the dramatic pile of corpses increases the emotional impact. The work follows the stylistic principles of Socialist Realism. The composition, body forms, and facial expressions fully reflect the characteristics of this style. Instead of celebration, the image presents death and defeat, creating a strong sense of bitter irony.

This caricature by Oskar Schmerling represents a tragic historical moment. On February 11, 1921, the Red Army invaded Georgia. The poorly equipped Georgian army resisted as much as it could, but was soon defeated. The capital fell on February 25, 1921. Shortly after the fall of Tbilisi, the Bolsheviks declared the establishment of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Existing democratic institutions were dismantled, and all opposition parties were banned. Menshevik leaders, who had governed Georgia, were arrested, executed, or exiled. A

campaign of terror began in order to consolidate power. This caricature is deeply offensive to those who sacrificed their lives for Georgia's independence.


Fig. 3 – Oscar Schmerling, Tartarozi, 28.02.1926, No. 38

An interesting comparison can be made between the transformation of this theme in Schmerling's earlier works from 1920 and the caricature published in Tartarozi in 1926. In his works and public writings created during the period of independence, he expressed clear enthusiasm for this important historical moment. However, only six years later, his work is filled with elements of Soviet celebration and glorification. Even today, questions remain about where we can see the artist's true position. During the period of independence, it is unlikely that he worked under direct commissions, and therefore his earlier writings and works can be considered sincere. As for this later transformation, artists living under constant fear and pressure were often forced to follow official demands. It is difficult to determine the artist's personal views, but this satirical work undoubtedly evokes strong and troubling emotions.

## DISCUSSION

During this period, the scale and size of caricatures varied, and a fully grotesque style began to dominate. This was evident not only in the content and the introduction of fantastical characters, but also in stylistic terms. The use of color also increased significantly. From the 1920s onward, the number of colored graphic works grew noticeably. Only a few caricatures are presented in this article, in order to give the reader an idea of the Soviet propagandistic line that was specifically designed to manipulate public opinion. However, such caricatures are widely found in Georgian Soviet satirical periodicals from the period between 1900 and 1950.

In this period, red and its pink variations remained the dominant colors in the palette. Red became an inseparable symbol of power, struggle, and Soviet ideology. Blue-grey tones were often used to darken the context or create a background that, in contrast with red, appeared more vivid and dramatic. Mustard tones were used more rarely, mainly to add small accents. Despite this, black-and-white works still dominated, as ink technique allowed for faster and more economical production suitable for mass printing.

At the same time, the artistic form of caricature was strongly influenced by avant-garde movements, especially Constructivism. Lines became stricter and more geometric, while the arrangement of figures often followed an architectural and symmetrical compositional logic, creating a dynamic and tense atmosphere. Expressiveness increased, but lines and forms lost their natural movement and freedom. This transformation also reflects a broader shift from individual artistic expression toward a system of visual communication shaped by ideological demands and collective messaging.

As noted in studies of Soviet visual culture, caricature functioned not only as a satirical genre but also as an instrument of political education, reinforcing simplified and easily recognizable visual codes.

The increasing standardization of form and imagery suggests that artistic diversity was gradually replaced by a controlled visual language aligned with state expectations.

At the same time, the integration of avant-garde elements into official art demonstrates how experimental styles were adapted and repurposed to serve ideological narratives rather than purely aesthetic goals.

## CONCLUSION

The tone of political caricatures not only maintained its ideological intensity but became even stronger, reflecting the growing efforts of the regime's propaganda. This tendency increased further in the following decades, alongside rising political tensions.

From the 1920s onward, Georgian caricature developed into a more directive form of art, in which form, color, and composition were fully subordinated to ideological purposes. This change was not only thematic but also stylistic: expressive line work and the symbolic use of color created a visual language that shaped the development of caricature in the 1930s. During this period, the picture surface became more detailed, refined, and visually dense, with color playing an increasingly important role.

Until the 1930s, most of the caricatures published in the magazines Tartarozi and Niangi were created by Oskar Schmerling, but this trend later changed. It is also important to note that, during this time, Georgian caricature increasingly engaged with themes borrowed from the European context. In particular, it adopted symbolic and grotesque elements similar to those found in the German satirical magazine Simplicissimus. Another notable feature was the open depiction of erotic themes within Georgian satirical graphics. However, this level of freedom disappeared after 1921, when Georgia lost its independence. It was replaced by themes allowed by Soviet censorship and defined within the framework of Socialist Realism.

The visual language of caricature also changed significantly under these new conditions. Grotesque elements became sharper, the size of caricatures increased, and scale was more strongly emphasized. The expressiveness of compositions increasingly relied on strong contrasts between visual elements. The red color of the revolution was especially dominant, while the "decaying" capitalist world was often represented in dark, black tones. Artists also more frequently used anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, so-called hybrid images to strengthen the impact of propaganda messages on society.

These works reveal the difficult position of artists working under constant pressure. While serving the demands of the regime, they produced images that are visually powerful but ethically unsettling. This tension between artistic expression and ideological control remains one of the most important aspects of Soviet-era caricature.

Ultimately, Soviet Georgian caricature demonstrates how easily violence can be normalized when it is presented through familiar and entertaining forms. It reminds us that visual culture has the ability not only to reflect reality, but also to reshape it—sometimes in ways that make cruelty easier to accept.

This artistic heritage is important not only within the history of Georgian art but also for understanding visual propaganda in the twentieth century. The material preserved in satirical journals clearly demonstrates the lasting influence of art and its ability to shape perception—an influence that remains relevant even today.

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**Data Availability**

The archival and periodical materials used in this study are available in the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia.