

Fractured Lives

*Trauma Across War-Torn Nations - Tales
of Loss and Survival in Georgia and
Ukraine*

By

Nino Tabeshadze

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and Survival in Georgia and Ukraine**

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1. Introduction

War is not just a series of battles or political decisions, it is a deeply human experience that leaves lasting scars on bodies, minds, and communities. Its effects ripple across generations, shaping identities through trauma, displacement, and the stories we carry forward. To truly understand the legacy of war, we must look beyond military strategies and into the lives of those who live with their aftermath.

Georgia and Ukraine hold a special place in this exploration. Though shaped by different histories, both nations have walked the difficult path of conflict and resilience. From Georgia's post-Soviet wars to Ukraine's ongoing struggle for sovereignty, their stories are marked by loss, resistance, and the ongoing effort to rebuild. These wars are not just national events, they are deeply personal experiences for millions, and their impact stretches from local communities to the global stage, influencing international politics and security.

In trying to understand the long shadow that war casts, the fields of trauma and collective memory offer valuable insights. Research has long shown how psychological wounds—such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety—can affect those directly and indirectly involved in conflict (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). On a broader level, nations grapple with how to remember and narrate their pasts, shaping identity and possibilities for healing (Assmann, 2010; Kansteiner, 2006).

This book is both an inquiry and a reflection—on the human cost of conflict, on memory, and on the resilience found in both Georgia and Ukraine. By weaving together psychological, social, and geopolitical perspectives, it invites readers to better understand how war imprints itself not only on landscapes, but on hearts, minds, and generations to come. The book opens by grounding the reader in the theoretical foundations needed to understand war trauma, collective memory, and the psychology of conflict. Through definitions, explanations and examples, the first part of the book lays out how trauma is formed, transmitted, remembered, and embedded into national identity. These chapters introduce the frameworks—psychological, sociological, cultural, and historical—that help explain why war leaves marks not only on individuals, but on generations and entire societies.

Building on this theoretical base, the book then turns to the concrete human stories of two nations scarred by war: Georgia and Ukraine. It traces Georgia’s conflicts of the 1990s and the 2008 war, examining their social, psychological, and cultural impacts. It then explores Ukraine’s long struggle for sovereignty—from the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan to the war in Donbas and the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022.

These case studies are not presented in isolation. Instead, the book places Georgia and Ukraine side by side, highlighting shared patterns of trauma, parallel histories of occupation and resistance, and similar challenges in healing, memorialization, and national identity-building. Through comparative analysis, the book uncovers how both societies navigate displacement, generational trauma, geopolitical pressures, and the long-term struggle for dignity and self-determination.

1.1 Universal Wounds of War

War leaves behind more than just physical devastation; it fractures lives, displaces communities, and embeds deep psychological wounds that transcend borders and generations. Across Georgia and Ukraine, two nations shaped by histories of conflict, the scars of war manifest in persistent trauma, affecting soldiers, civilians, and displaced populations alike. The universal nature of war's psychological effect suggests that while the geopolitical contexts of these nations differ, the emotional and cognitive repercussions of conflict bear striking similarities.

The study of war trauma has long highlighted the pervasive effects of conflict on mental health. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety remain among the most documented consequences of war, influencing not only direct combatants but also non-combatant populations who endure the indirect effects of violence (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). In Georgia, the conflicts of the early 1990s and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war have left a lasting psychological impact on individuals and communities, with studies indicating that internally displaced persons (IDPs) experience heightened rates of PTSD and prolonged grief (Makhashvili et al., 2014). Similarly, in Ukraine, the ongoing conflict since 2014 and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 have resulted in widespread trauma, particularly among civilians subjected to occupation, bombardment, and forced migration (Kuznetsova & Mikheieva, 2020).

Trauma is not only an individual affliction but also a collective phenomenon. Collective trauma, as an integral part of collective memory, intertwines individual experiences with shared

narratives of suffering. Memory itself functions as a bridge between past and present, shaping identities through the interpretation of history, reflection on communal experiences, and documentation of significant events (Lebow, Kansteiner, & Fogu, 2006, p. 8). Scholars examine memory on three distinct levels: individual, collective, and institutional—to understand its multifaceted impact (*ibid*, 9). In both Georgia and Ukraine, war narratives and memories shape societal perceptions and reinforce cycles of historical grievance and resilience. Additionally, the disruption of social structures, economic hardship, and forced displacement exacerbate psychological distress, complicating recovery efforts (Kolk, 2014).

As one of the most prominent figures in memory studies, French scholar Pierre Nora, observed in 2002, "We are living in an era of the universal celebration of memory. Over the past twenty or thirty years, across all nations, social groups, and ethnic communities, the relationship with the past has fundamentally shifted: critique of official versions of history, uncovering previously marginalized or suppressed narratives, the revival of the 'successful past,' the 'cult of roots,' an intensified focus on commemorative events, and the reckoning with the past... A flood of memory has swept over the world, binding real or imagined pasts tightly to collective consciousness, memory, and identity" (Nora, 2005, p. 391).

Understanding the past not only helps us interpret the present but also tells us who we are. Shared experiences, memories, and values shape the identities of individuals and societies alike. A common past, rooted in shared territory, religion, language, history, or their combination, serves as the foundation of a nation. As Kansteiner argues, the use of the past as a framework for the present is a long-

standing cultural practice (Lebow et al., 2006). In this context, memory plays a crucial role in shaping both personal and collective identity. "Historians, politicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists agree that both collective and individual memories are socially constructed" (Kansteiner, 2006, p. 32). Building on this, the concept of "collective memory" can be understood as the accumulation of information about a society over time, forming a kind of social reservoir (Hunt, 2012). This reservoir does not remain static; it is continuously reshaped by historical experiences and events, particularly those marked by suffering or trauma.

In this regard, collective trauma emerges as a critical phenomenon, deeply intertwined with events such as slavery, fascism, World War II, genocide, and the Holocaust. These traumas leave lasting imprints on collective memory, often resulting in significant shifts in how societies remember and interpret their pasts. The widely accepted definitions state that the Collective trauma is the psychological effect shared by members of a group or an entire community. It may involve a group consisting of a few individuals or an entire society (Hirschberger, 2018). Yet, while this definition captures the broad scope of the phenomenon, it does not fully convey its depth. In reality, the impact of collective trauma extends much further, leaving profound marks on societal structures, intergenerational narratives, and the trajectory of a community's development. The depth of trauma and its transmission across generations is a painful reality in both Georgia and Ukraine. One particularly poignant example comes from Georgia, where the 1993 fall of Sukhumi forced thousands to flee their homes overnight. Survivors of this tragic event often recount how their parents, clutching nothing but a handful of soil from their homeland, carried their grief into exile. Even decades later,

displaced families preserve these remnants of their lost homes as symbols of identity and belonging, passing the trauma—and the resilience—down to their children. Such stories highlight how war reshapes not only physical landscapes but also the psychological terrain of entire generations (Phkakadze, 2010).

Collective trauma also highlights the interplay between identity and memory, particularly in nations where conflict has left enduring scars. In the context of Georgia and Ukraine, both countries grapple with how their histories of war are memorialized and passed down. Monuments, literature, and public commemorations serve as platforms for articulating collective grief and resistance. These shared practices, while fostering unity, can also deepen divisions by perpetuating narratives of "us versus them." The selective nature of memory, what is remembered and what is forgotten—plays a crucial role in shaping collective identities and determining how societies process trauma (Assmann, 2010). Understanding these dynamics is essential to addressing the long-term consequences of war trauma and promoting reconciliation.

Despite the profound challenges posed by war trauma, resilience and healing emerge as critical aspects of post-war recovery. Studies on trauma recovery emphasize the role of community support, cultural practices, and institutional efforts in fostering resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2007). In both Georgia and Ukraine, grassroots organizations and mental health initiatives have sought to address war-induced psychological distress through therapy, social reintegration programs, and public awareness campaigns. However, healing is not a linear process; it requires time, patience, and an acknowledgment of both individual and collective pain.

By examining the lived experiences of war survivors in Georgia and Ukraine, *Fractured Lives: Trauma Across War-Torn Nations of Georgia and Ukraine* seeks to unravel the complex interplay between war, trauma, and healing. Through interdisciplinary analysis, this book aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how nations struggle to heal—in the aftermath of war.

1.2 Relevance of Georgia and Ukraine in the Global Context

The geopolitical significance of Georgia and Ukraine extends beyond regional affairs, shaping global security, economic strategies, and democratic resilience. The wars of 2008 and 2022 have demonstrated the broader implications of conflicts in these nations, influencing international policies and alliances.

Georgia and Ukraine occupy strategic positions at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, serving as key transit points for energy resources and trade routes. Ukraine, often described as the "breadbasket of Europe," is one of the world's largest grain exporters, impacting global food security. Georgia, situated along the Black Sea and the Caucasus, is integral to the Middle Corridor, a trade route connecting Europe and Central Asia (Chang, 2023). These positions make both nations critical in global economic and security frameworks.

Beyond economic considerations, both Georgia and Ukraine serve as key buffers between Russia and Western Europe, influencing NATO and EU security policies. Their geopolitical positioning means that stability or conflict in these nations directly affects regional security dynamics. The Black Sea, a vital maritime

domain, is crucial for NATO's strategic positioning and energy security, with Russia's militarization of Crimea significantly altering the regional balance (Feltman, 2023). Additionally, the control of key energy transit corridors, such as pipelines transporting oil and gas from the Caspian region to Europe, makes Georgia and Ukraine vital to European energy independence from Russian supply dominance (Helm, 2009).

Furthermore, both countries play a symbolic and practical role in the contest between democratic governance and authoritarian influence. Their Euro-Atlantic aspirations have put them at the center of ideological confrontations, where Western support and Russian opposition define broader global trends in governance, diplomacy, and security (Foa & Romero-Vidal, 2025).

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War marked major military aggression by Russia in the post-Soviet era, setting a precedent for future conflicts. The international response was largely diplomatic, with limited consequences for Russia, which emboldened future assertive actions (Asmus, 2010). This war underscored vulnerabilities in international security structures and highlighted the limitations of Western deterrence. Additionally, it led to the prolonged occupation of Georgia's territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which continues to serve as a point of geopolitical tension and a limitation to Georgia's integration into Western alliances.

The 2022 full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine further intensified global tensions, triggering unprecedented sanctions on Russia, reshaping NATO strategies, and strengthening European energy diversification efforts. The invasion also prompted renewed discussions on sovereignty, self-determination, and the

risks of revisionist state behaviour in international relations (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024; Ash et al., 2023). The resilience of Ukraine and its resistance efforts have been seen as a symbol of democratic survival against authoritarian expansion. The war has also resulted in one of the largest refugee crises in modern history, with millions displaced across Europe and beyond, straining humanitarian aid systems and redefining immigration policies (Time, 2024). Additionally, the prolonged conflict has led to global economic disruptions, including spikes in energy prices and food shortages, particularly in developing nations dependent on Ukrainian grain exports (Filho et al., 2023).

Militarily, the war in Ukraine has led to a significant transformation of Western defence policies, prompting increased military spending among NATO members and accelerated efforts to modernize armed forces (NATO, 2023). The conflict has also driven a reassessment of security strategies in Eastern Europe, leading to the expansion of NATO with new member states like Finland and Sweden seeking potential allies against Russian aggression (NATO, 2023).

Both conflicts have had significant implications for global security alliances. NATO's role in Eastern Europe has been redefined, with increased military deployments and enhanced security commitments in member states neighboring Russia (NATO, 2023). The European Union has also accelerated efforts to integrate Ukraine and Georgia into its economic and political structures, demonstrating a shift toward deeper strategic engagement with the region (European Council, 2023).

The war in Ukraine has also reinforced the importance of strategic alliances outside of Europe. The United States has played a pivotal role in providing military aid and intelligence support (White House, 2024). Furthermore, the war has strengthened cooperation between the European Union and NATO, solidifying a more unified Western response to security threats (European Council, 2023).

The role of non-aligned countries has also been significant, as nations such as China, India, and Turkey have positioned themselves strategically to maximize economic and diplomatic advantages while maintaining neutral or ambiguous stances on direct intervention (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023; BBC News, 2023; Üstün, 2022). The global security order is shifting as a result, with many nations reassessing their defence postures and military preparedness in response to Russia's aggressive actions (SIPRI, 2024; NATO, 2023).

The psychological and emotional toll of war on the populations of Georgia and Ukraine has been profound. The 2008 and 2022 conflicts have left deep scars, affecting generations through trauma, displacement, and the loss of loved ones. In both countries, war has reshaped national identities, fostered a sense of resilience but also left a legacy of collective grief and psychological distress (Makhashvili et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2019).

Children and civilians who have experienced bombings, forced displacement, and prolonged instability often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Mental health services in both countries have been overwhelmed by the increasing demand for psychological support, especially among

war veterans and displaced populations (Roberts et al., 2019; Makhashvili et al., 2014; Betancourt et al., 2013). Additionally, the destruction of homes, schools, and cultural heritage sites has contributed to a sense of loss and uncertainty about the future, exacerbating emotional distress (UNESCO, 2023; UNHCR, 2024).

The wars have also affected social cohesion, as families are separated and communities struggle to rebuild in the aftermath of destruction. Ukrainian and Georgian diasporas have played a crucial role in supporting war-affected populations, providing financial aid, shelter, and psychological assistance to those in need (Fihel, 2025, International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023). The long-term impact of war-related trauma will require sustained efforts in mental health support, reconciliation initiatives, and policies aimed at rebuilding lives and communities affected by conflict.

The relevance of Georgia and Ukraine extends beyond their immediate borders. Their geopolitical positioning, economic importance, and role in shaping global security responses make them crucial actors in international relations. The wars of 2008 and 2022 underscored the necessity for cohesive global policies in addressing aggression and safeguarding democratic resilience. Additionally, the human cost of these conflicts highlights the need for long-term psychological support, reconstruction efforts, and policies aimed at mitigating the lasting trauma inflicted upon affected populations.

2.

Understanding War Trauma

War trauma is a multifaceted psychological and physiological response to the extreme stressors associated with armed conflict. It encompasses a range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions that affect individuals and societies long after the cessation of violence. War trauma is not limited to direct exposure to combat but extends to forced displacement, loss of loved ones, destruction of communities, and prolonged uncertainty (Herman, 1997). Understanding war trauma requires an exploration of its conceptual foundations, theoretical frameworks, and psychological mechanisms.

Several theoretical models have been proposed to explain war trauma and its long-term consequences. One of the most widely recognized is the trauma model, which suggests that exposure to life-threatening events disrupts the normal processing of experiences, leading to emotional dysregulation and intrusive memories (Van der Kolk, 2014). The stress-response theory posits that war trauma triggers an intense physiological reaction, activating the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and leading to chronic hyperarousal and heightened vigilance (Yehuda et al., 2015).

Additionally, the social-ecological model emphasizes the role of social, cultural, and environmental factors in shaping trauma responses. This perspective highlights how war-induced displacement, loss of social networks, and economic instability

contribute to prolonged psychological distress (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Individuals exposed to war often experience chronic stress reactions, including hyperarousal, intrusive memories, and emotional numbing. PTSD, one of the most researched outcomes of war trauma, affects combatants and civilians alike. Studies on veterans and war survivors indicate that prolonged exposure to violent conflict disrupts neurobiological processes, leading to alterations in brain structures such as the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex (Pitman et al., 2012). Moreover, the physiological stress response, including dysregulation of the HPA axis, contributes to long-term health complications such as cardiovascular disease and immune dysfunction (Sherin & Nemeroff, 2011).

War trauma also has profound societal and cultural implications. Collective trauma shapes national identity, political stability, and reconciliation efforts. Communities that endure prolonged conflict may struggle with collective memory and historical narratives, influencing reconciliation processes and post-war recovery (Hamber, 2009). Additionally, cultural interpretations of trauma affect how individuals seek support and treatment. In some societies, stigma surrounding mental health can hinder access to psychological services, exacerbating the long-term effects of war-related trauma (Summerfield, 1999).

War trauma influences social structures by fostering cycles of violence and instability. Unresolved trauma can lead to aggression, radicalization, and further conflict, perpetuating war's devastating effects for decades (Hassan et al., 2015). In post-

conflict societies, truth and reconciliation commissions have been used as mechanisms to address collective trauma, promote healing, and prevent future violence (Hamber, 2009).

Understanding war trauma requires a multidimensional approach that considers psychological, physiological, intergenerational, and societal factors. The effects of war extend far beyond the battlefield, impacting individuals, families, and entire communities for generations. Addressing war trauma necessitates comprehensive mental health interventions, policy initiatives, and social support systems to foster resilience and recovery in post-conflict societies. Further chapters explore culturally sensitive trauma interventions that account for the diverse experiences of war-affected populations in Georgia and Ukraine.

2.1 The Psychology of War and Conflict

War and conflict have been persistent features of human history, shaping societies, cultures, and individual psyches. The psychology of war seeks to understand the cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms that drive conflict, influence group behaviour, and shape post-war experiences. Theoretical frameworks from psychology, sociology, and cultural studies provide valuable insights into the motivations behind warfare, the impact of war on mental health, and the intergenerational consequences of conflict.

Several psychological theories help explain the underlying mechanisms of war and conflict. One of the foundational theories is Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT), which posits that intergroup conflicts arise from competition over scarce resources (Sherif,

1966). RCT suggests that war can emerge when groups perceive their survival or prosperity as dependent on the exclusion or subjugation of others.

Building on this understanding of group dynamics, Social Identity Theory (SIT) offers a complementary perspective by explaining how individuals derive a sense of self from group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT suggests that in-group favoritism and out-group hostility can escalate tensions, fostering divisions that lead to violent conflict. This theory highlights how political leaders and war propaganda exploit group identities to justify aggression.

Taking a more intrapsychic approach, the psychoanalytic perspective—specifically Freud's Death Drive Theory—proposes that humans possess an unconscious drive toward aggression and destruction, which can manifest in large-scale conflicts (Freud, 1920). This theory offers insight into the seemingly irrational and cyclical nature of warfare, contrasting with the more externally focused explanations of RCT and SIT.

In addition to psychological and psychoanalytic lenses, cultural studies contribute to the understanding of war by examining how narratives, symbols, and collective memory shape perceptions of conflict. For example, Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) argues that cultural representations influence how groups perceive their enemies, often reinforcing colonial and militaristic ideologies. The construction of the "other" in war propaganda plays a crucial role in dehumanizing opponents, making violence more psychologically acceptable.

Beyond the causes of war, it is essential to consider its psychological aftermath. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is one of the known consequences of war, affecting individuals exposed to combat, displacement, and violence (Van der Kolk, 2014). Symptoms include hypervigilance, intrusive memories, and emotional numbing.

Another known effect of the trauma is a Moral Injury. Moral Injury Theory suggests that individuals involved in war may suffer from deep psychological wounds when they violate their moral beliefs, leading to guilt, shame, and existential distress (Litz et al., 2009). This theory is particularly relevant for soldiers and civilians who engage in or witness acts of violence, highlighting the moral and emotional toll of warfare.

Intergenerational trauma is another key aspect of war psychology. Research on Holocaust survivors and conflict-affected populations indicates that trauma can be transmitted across generations through both social and biological mechanisms (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). The impact of war trauma extends beyond those who directly experience it, affecting future generations. The intergenerational transmission theory posits that trauma can be passed down through biological, psychological, and sociocultural mechanisms, affecting future generations who have not directly experienced war (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Children of war survivors may inherit psychological distress through both environmental and epigenetic mechanisms (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Families living in post-conflict societies often face disruptions in attachment patterns, parental mental health challenges, and socio-economic hardships that compound the effects of trauma (Masten & Narayan, 2012). From an epigenetic

perspective, stress-induced changes in gene expression can be passed down, predisposing descendants to heightened stress reactivity and increased vulnerability to mental health disorders in their later life (Yehuda et al., 2015). Studies on Holocaust survivors and their descendants, as well as populations affected by conflicts in the Balkans and the Middle East, have demonstrated measurable psychological and biological markers of intergenerational trauma (Schwerdtfeger & Goff, 2007).

Understanding the psychology of war requires an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates psychological theories, cultural studies, and historical perspectives. War is not merely a product of political or economic conditions but is deeply rooted in human cognition, identity formation, and cultural narratives. Addressing the psychological impact of war necessitates comprehensive mental health interventions, conflict resolution strategies, and efforts to reshape cultural perceptions of the "other" to foster peace and reconciliation.

2.2 Trauma, Identity, and Cultural Memory

Trauma, particularly the one caused by war and conflict, is not only an individual psychological experience but also a collective phenomenon that shapes identity and cultural memory. Societies that endure traumatic events, such as war, genocide, or forced displacement, develop collective narratives that influence national identity, group cohesion, and intergenerational memory (Alexander, 2004). Understanding the interplay between trauma, identity, and cultural memory requires examining psychological theories of trauma, sociocultural frameworks, and historical

narratives that shape communal recollections of suffering and resilience.

Several theories from cultural studies provide insight into the nature of trauma and its sociocultural impact. One foundational concept is Cultural Trauma Theory, which argues that trauma is not only a psychological response but also a socially constructed phenomenon that alters collective identity (Eyerman, 2001). This theory suggests that societies interpret traumatic events through cultural frameworks, influencing collective memory and historical narratives.

Postcolonial Trauma Theory, developed from the works of Fanon (1961) and Bhabha (1994), explores the psychological wounds inflicted by colonialism, including cultural alienation, systemic violence, and the loss of indigenous identity. This theory highlights how trauma is embedded in historical oppression and how postcolonial societies struggle with the remnants of colonial trauma.

Symbolic Interactionism and Trauma, as explored by Goffman (1963), examines how social stigma and cultural perceptions shape the experience and expression of trauma. Individuals and groups construct their trauma narratives through cultural symbols, rituals, and discourses, influencing their collective memory and identity.

Cultural memory refers to the ways societies remember and interpret past events, often through monuments, literature, rituals, and oral traditions (Assmann, 2011). It differs from personal

memory in that it is mediated by cultural institutions and shared narratives, shaping how groups conceptualize their history.

Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) Collective Memory Theory argues that memory is a social construct influenced by institutions such as governments, religious organizations, and educational systems. Through official histories, commemorations, and memorial sites, societies selectively remember or forget traumatic pasts, shaping group identity and intergroup relations.

Pierre Nora's (1989) Concept of Lieux de Mémoire (sites of memory) emphasizes that cultural memory is anchored in specific places, monuments, and rituals that reinforce collective identity. For example, Holocaust memorials, slavery museums, and war cemeteries serve as cultural markers of trauma that shape collective consciousness.

The theory of Postmemory, developed by Hirsch (2012), suggests that the children of trauma survivors inherit and re-experience their ancestors' suffering through storytelling, art, and collective rituals. This transmission of trauma affects identity formation and can either contribute to healing or perpetuate cycles of victimization and conflict.

Trauma is often instrumentalized in nationalist movements, where historical suffering is used to justify political ideologies and territorial claims. Anderson (1983) argues that nations are "imagined communities" constructed through shared symbols and narratives, many of which involve historical trauma.

However, cultural memory is not static; it evolves in response to political changes and societal needs. Reconciliation efforts, such as

truth commissions and public apologies, seek to reshape collective memory to foster healing and social cohesion (Hamber, 2009). In post-conflict societies, acknowledging trauma through memorials and educational programs plays a critical role in identity reconstruction and peacebuilding.

Trauma, identity, and cultural memory are deeply intertwined, influencing how individuals and societies process historical suffering. Theories from cultural studies provide valuable insights into how trauma is experienced, transmitted, and remembered across generations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the long-term effects of collective trauma and promoting reconciliation.

Piotr Sztompka (2004) identified four key criteria for classifying an event as collective trauma: (1) it is sudden and unexpected, disrupting the normal course of social life; (2) it affects a large portion of society, leaving long-lasting emotional and psychological scars; (3) it causes deep and fundamental changes, leading to shifts in values, beliefs, and social structures; and (4) it generates a collective sense of shock and disorientation. The war of August 2008 as well as war in Ukraine (2022) meet all these criteria, making them a suitable case for analysis within the framework of collective trauma:

- **Suddenness and Unexpectedness** – The war was a rapid and intense conflict that erupted suddenly, catching many civilians unprepared and resulting in large-scale displacement.
- **Widespread Societal Impact** – The war affected all aspects of Georgian society, from political instability to economic

hardship and psychological distress among civilians and displaced persons.

- **Fundamental Societal Changes** – The conflicts reinforced existing geopolitical tensions, reshaped national security policies, influenced Ukraine's and Georgia's foreign relations with NATO and the European Union.
- **Collective Shock and Disorientation** – The trauma of war continues to manifest through ongoing displacement issues, PTSD among affected populations, and the presence of Russian forces in occupied territories and ongoing war in Ukraine.

These theoretical frameworks set the stage for examining specific national contexts where historical trauma continues to shape contemporary identity and memory. Georgia and Ukraine, with their long and complex history of invasions, occupations, and internal strife, offers a compelling case study. Understanding the roots of Georgia's and Ukraine's collective trauma requires a closer look at the country's conflict-ridden past.

3.

A History of Conflict in Georgia

Georgia's history is marked by resilience, shaped by its unique geopolitical position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. For centuries, this strategic location has made the country a focal point for empires and regional powers seeking control over the Caucasus (Suny, 1994). From the ancient Kingdoms of Colchis and Iberia to modern independence struggles, Georgia has faced continuous waves of invasion, occupation, and internal strife.

During the medieval period, Georgia flourished under rulers like King David IV (r. 1089–1125) and Queen Tamar (r. 1184–1213), ushering in a golden age of cultural and military strength (Rapp, 1991). However, this period was followed by centuries of conflict, including Mongol, Persian, and Ottoman invasions, which weakened Georgia's political unity (Allen, 1932). In the 19th century, the country was annexed by the Russian Empire, leading to increased resistance movements and calls for national independence (Jones & Toria, 2021).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a new era for Georgia, but it also led to internal conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which escalated into violent separatist movements (Cornell, 2001). The 2008 Russo-Georgian War further entrenched territorial disputes, leaving lasting political and social consequences (Cornell, 2001). These conflicts have not only shaped Georgia's contemporary foreign policy but have also left deep

psychological and societal scars, influencing national identity and regional security concerns.

Understanding Georgia's history of conflict is crucial to comprehending its ongoing struggle for sovereignty and stability. The interplay of historical legacies and modern geopolitical challenges underscore Georgia's enduring resilience and strategic significance in the broader Black Sea and Caucasus region.

3.1 The Legacy of the 1990s Wars

The 1990s were a defining period for Georgia, as the country transitioned from Soviet rule to independence while simultaneously facing political instability, economic collapse, and violent conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These wars not only reshaped Georgia's territorial integrity but also had lasting political, social, and economic consequences that continue to affect the country today (Jones, 2013). The post-war legacy includes the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, strained ethnic relations, and the long-term militarization of the breakaway regions, contributing to an ongoing cycle of instability and external intervention (Cornell, 2001; Sichinava, 2020).

The conflicts of the early 1990s were rooted in the growing nationalism of the late Soviet period and the geopolitical vacuum left by the USSR's collapse. Georgia declared independence in 1991, but the newly formed state struggled with internal divisions and weak governance under President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was ousted in a coup in 1992 (Suny, 1994). The subsequent wars in Abkhazia (1992–1993) and South Ossetia (1991–1992) were fueled