
On September 24, 2015, Dr. Erik R. Scott, Associate Professor at the University of Kansas, delivered his lecture ‘Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of the Soviet Empire.’ Scott began by putting forth the notion of reinterpreting the Soviet Empire as a collection of diasporas that were perpetuated by the structure of the empire itself, in the sense of distilling and elevating national cultures, and by extension certain attributes and characteristics of those cultures. More explicitly, Scott suggests that the idea of internal diasporas can be used as an analytical tool in order to re-conceptualize the relationship between the periphery and the center.

Cultural characteristics were promoted not just as distinctions but as the identifiers of that specific culture. As it pertained to Scott’s lecture, Georgia quickly became known for its hospitality, toasting culture, national dishes and wines within the broader Soviet Union. The relationship between the center and periphery was reinforced through the export of Georgian wines and foods, favored by the nomenklatura and others who had means. Indeed, Georgian culture was perceived as one of the most prominent as far as peripheral relationships are concerned. The establishment of Georgian restaurants in Moscow also transmitted a culture that was also very intensely exoticized.

Later during the 1960s and 70s, other aspects of Georgian culture such as film, literary publishing and music circulated in Moscow. Such transfers of Georgian culture became associated with high culture and contributed to a Georgian intelligentsia community in Moscow, as Scott noted. Moreover, the similarities between Russian and Georgian artistic representations encouraged these cultural links. That said, this transferability of certain cultural aspects was done in such a way that its difference and “foreignness” was made acceptable.

Further, Scott argues that it was apparent to internal diasporas that these aspects of Georgian culture were overplayed often giving way to cultural clichés. Today there are still remnants of the role the periphery-center relationship assumed throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century but that emphasis, even though filtered to an extent through a Muscovite lens, has waned.

Katherine Butterworth graduated from the REEES MA program in 2015. She is currently working toward an MS in Library and Information Science in the GSLIS program here at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.