

“MUSLIM GEORGIA” IN 1918-1921 AND FORMATION OF THE SOUTH-WESTERN BORDER OF THE FIRST REPUBLIC

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For many years the territory that was known in the late 19th and early 20th century as “Muslim Georgia” was an arena of a series of armed conflicts and disputes between the Ottoman Turkey and Russian empires and during the period of the First Republic – between Georgia, Armenia and Turkey. The fall and partition of Georgian Democratic Republic marked the establishment of the contemporary border between Georgia and Turkey as well as the end of the concept of “Muslim Georgia” as most of it was reincorporated into the Turkish state. The smaller part of the former “Muslim Georgia” remained within the so-called “Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic” which in turn became a part of the USSR. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Empire it has been part of the restored Georgia, but up until now the Georgian part of the former “Muslim Georgia” has been closely watched by some foreign governments and investors that seem to have special interests there.

What is “Muslim Georgia”?

In the second half of the 19th century and during the first two decades of the 20th century, the concept of “Muslim Georgia” was used to denote historical Georgian lands that were lost to the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century and were subjected to Islamization and Turkization. Those lands include the Autonomous Republic of Adjara and most of the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti that are parts of present-day Georgia, as well as the Turkish provinces of Ardahan, Artvin, Rize and the districts of Olur, Oltu, Şenkaya, Narman, Tortum, Uzundere, Ispir, Findikli and Ardeşen (see Map A).

Short History of "Muslim Georgia"

The history of the territories later known as "Muslim Georgia" has been long and dramatic. As of today, many experts in Georgian history including Mikaberidze, Rayfield and Suny agree in considering that territory the cradle of both Georgian culture and statehood, as it was there where the first political formation that could be defined as an embryonic proto-Georgian state was created in the 7th century BC by the local tribes known as Taokhi (Diauchi).¹

At least since the 4th century BC, the lands in question were parts of the proto-Georgian states of Colchis and Iberia.² The 2nd century BC saw major changes on the political map of the East Mediterranean region and most of the above territories were lost to their stronger neighbors. From 189 BC to 115 AD, those of them lying to the south of the Pontic (Kaçkar) Alps, were taken over by Armenia.³ In 101 BC, the coastal lands to the north of the Pontic Range later known as Lazistan (Lazona / Chaneti), were conquered by the Kingdom of Pontus together with the whole of Colchis and remained within the borders of that state until the year 64 AD when the Kingdom of Pontus was conquered by Rome.⁴

The middle of the 3rd century AD saw consolidation of the early Georgian states and recovery of the lost territories by Iberia and Lazica (the successor state of Colchis). However, the borders of those early Georgian state formations in the South Caucasus remained unstable for the next 500

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- ^{1,1} W.E.D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People* (London, 1932), pp. 24, 33, 58; R.H. Hewsen, *Armenia: a Historical Atlas* (Chicago, 2001), pp. 30-31; A. Mikaberidze, *Historical Dictionary of Georgia* (New York / London, 2015), pp. 262 and 625; Donald Rayfield, *Age of Empires: a History of Georgia* (London, 2012), pp. 16-17 R.G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Indianapolis, 1994), pp. 6-9.
- ² Hewsen, pp. 31-33; A. Javakhishvili (ed.), *Atlas Gruzinskoy SSR* (Moscow, 1964), pp. 244-245; Suny, pp.2-4.
- ³ Hewsen, pp. 34-39; Suny, p.13. *Atlas Gruzinskoy SSR*, op.cit.
- ⁴ *The Cambridge Ancient History Volume 9: The Last Age of the Roman Republic, 146-43 BC* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 137-140 and 248-258; Mikaberidze, p. 233. Suny, pp.13-14.

years due to permanent wars between Byzantine and Sasanian empires, and from the 650s on, between the Byzantine Empire and the Arabs.¹

By the beginning of the 9th century, following the Arab-Byzantine wars and the decline of the Arab Caliphate, most of the Georgian-speaking territory was a patchwork of small kingdoms and principalities. In the lands that centuries later became known as “Muslim Georgia”, the first decades of the 9th century saw the birth and rise of a new Georgian state in Tao-Klarjeti where prince Ardanase of the Armeno-Georgian House of Bagrationi (Bagratuni) united under his power the provinces of Artaani, Erusheti, Kola, parts of Tao (also known as Tayk in Armenian) and the principalities of Klarjeti, Ojrkhe and Tsunda.² By the year 826, Ardanase’s son, Ashot I the Great was granted the title of *Kuropalates* (Guardian of the Palace) by the Byzantine emperor, expanding his domain by annexing Samtskhe, Trialeti and parts of Shida Kartli and transforming it into the *Kuropalatinat of Iberia* which became the strongest Georgian state of the early 800’s with its centre in Artanudji (now Ardanuç in Artvin Province of Turkey).³ Shortly before his death, Ashot I proclaimed himself hereditary ruler of Iberia. Between 1008 and 1014, King Bagrat III, who was a descendant of Ashot I, created the first united Georgian Kingdom bringing together all Georgian kingdoms and principalities under his crown.⁴

Between 1065 and 1080, the whole of Georgia, including the lands later known as “Muslim Georgia” (but that time still unequivocally Christian), was devastated by the invasions of Seljuk Turks. The decades of struggle against the Seljuk Empire culminated in the re-creation of a united Georgian state during the reign of King David II *Aghmashenebeli* (1089-1125). This signaled the beginning of the period known as the “Golden Age” of Georgian history. This period lasted until 1223 when Georgia was invaded by the Mongols. During the “Golden Age”, the territory in question was organized into the provinces of Tortomi, Parkhali, Oltisi, Imier-Tao, Amier-Tao, Kola, Artaani,

¹ Allen, *A History of the Georgian People* (London, 1932), pp.75-80 Suny, pp.15-29

² Suny, p. 29

³ D.M. Lang, *A Modern History of Georgia* (New York, 1962), p. 28. Mikaberidze, p. 625; Rayfield, pp. 201-230 Suny, pp. 29-30.

⁴ Lang, p. 28; Mikaberidze, p. 626; Suny, pp. 32-33.

Klarjeti, Shavsheti, Javakheti, Samtskhe (Meskheti) and, partially, Guria.⁵

The period of Mongol domination was followed by other invasions of various nomadic hordes from Central Asia, and in the beginning of the 15th century, following more than 200 years of constant warfare and turmoil, united Georgia disintegrated into three kingdoms.⁶ Even earlier, the princely clan of Jaqeli (Jakeli) established a semi-independent domain in the provinces that later became known as "Muslim Georgia". By the year 1491, the possessions of Jaqeli became a sovereign and independent state under the name of Samtskhe Saatabago.⁷

Beginning with the second half of the 15th century, weakened and fragmented Georgia was caught between the two expanding Muslim empires of Ottoman Turkey and Persia (Iran). The subsequent invasions of Georgia by Ottoman and Persian forces were accompanied by territorial losses. By the year 1590, the whole of Samtskhe Saatabago was conquered by the Turks and transformed into the *vilayet* of Gurjistan (the province of Georgia). A few years later most of it was reorganized into the *pashalyk* of Akhaltsykh (see Map A).⁸ Almost three hundred years of Ottoman domination over the former cradle of Georgian nationhood were accompanied by its intensive Islamization and Turkization, so that by the end of the 19th century, it had largely lost its Georgian character. The province of Chaneti (Lazistan / Lazona) was lost to the Ottoman Turks even earlier, in 1461, simultaneously with the fall of the Empire of Trebizond.

In the late 18th century, the Russian Empire joined the Ottoman-Persian rivalry for Georgia. In 1801 Russia annexed the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom in eastern Georgia and by the year 1867, the remaining 5 independent states of western Georgia were also incorporated into the rapidly expanding empire.

⁵ *Atlas Gruzinskoy SSR*, pp. 251-252; Hewsen, p. 130.

⁶ *Atlas Gruzinskoy SSR*, pp. 253-255; Lang, pp. 31-32; Suny, pp. 41-46

⁷ *Atlas Gruzinskoy SSR*, pp. 253-255; Hewsen, p. 148; Suny, pp. 41 and 45-46

⁸ Allen, p. 148; *Atlas Gruzinskoy SSR*, pp. 256-258; Hewsen, pp. 146, 148 and 150; Mikaberidze, p. 23; Rayfield, pp. 227-230.

Remembering the Georgian Democratic Republic 100 Years On: A Model for Europe?



Map A

Between the years 1828 and 1878, as a result of three Russo-Turkish wars, most of “Muslim Georgia” was ceded to Russia by Ottoman Turkey. By the beginning of the 20th century “Muslim Georgia” was organized into the following administrative units:

| RUSSIAN EMPIRE | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Tiflis Province (<i>guberniya</i>) | Akhaltsoh County | Akhalkalaki County |
| Kutais Province (<i>guberniya</i>) | Batum District | Artvin District |
| Kars Territory (<i>oblast</i>) | Ardahan District | Oltu District |
| OTTOMAN EMPIRE | | |
| Erzurum <i>Vilayet</i> | Erzurum <i>Sanjak</i> | Ispir <i>Kaza</i> Keskin <i>Kaza</i> Tortum <i>Kaza</i> |
| Trebizond <i>Vilayet</i> | Lazistan ¹ <i>Sanjak</i> | |

The annexation of the larger part of "Muslim Georgia" in 1878 by Russia, was met with enthusiasm and euphoria by the majority of the Georgian intellectual elite. However, that enthusiasm was followed by disappointment as the Russian imperial government not only split historical Georgian lands between different administrative units but also because the Russian ecclesiastical administration did not support re-conversion of Muslim Georgians to Christianity, and blocked even the most timid attempts of some Georgian clergy to preach in the districts that had been conquered from Turkey.¹

Ethnic Composition of "Muslim Georgia" in Early 20th Century

By the beginning of the 20th century, the "Muslim Georgian" lands within the Russian Empire had the following ethnic composition:²

| BATUM District | | ARDAHAN District | |
|-----------------------|------|-------------------------|------|
| Ethnic origin | % | Ethnic origin | % |
| Georgian | 63.9 | Armenian | 2.9 |
| Russian | 8.2 | Ottoman /Azeri Turkish | 61.0 |
| Armenian | 8 | Kurd | 19.1 |
| Greek | 5.3 | Greek | 11.8 |
| Ottoman Turkish | 3.6 | Russian | 3.1 |
| Other | 11 | Georgian | 2.1 |

¹ N. Durnovo, *Sudby Gruzinskoi Tserkvi: po voprosu o Gruzinskoi tserkovnoi avtokefalii* (Moscow, 1907);

M. Gnolidze, "Activity of Russian Orthodox Church among the Muslim Natives of the Caucasus in Imperial Russia" in *Caucasus and Central Asia Newsletter* (UC-Berkley), Issue 4 / Summer 2003.

² *Pervaya vseobshchaya perepis naselenia Rossiyskoy imperii 1897 goda: Gubernskie itogi* (St. Peterburg), 1903-1905

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| ARTVIN District | | OLTU District | |
|------------------------|-------|------------------------|------|
| Ethnic origin | % | Ethnic origin | % |
| Ottoman Turkish | 73.87 | Armenian | 9.7 |
| Armenian | 13.9 | Ottoman /Azeri Turkish | 64.7 |
| Georgian | 9.8 | Kurd | 10.9 |
| Ukrainian | 1.3 | Greek | 8.4 |
| Russian | 0.5 | Russian | 3.2 |
| Other | 0.6 | Georgian | 3.1 |

| The County of AKHALTSYKH | | The County of AKHALKALAK | |
|---------------------------------|------|---------------------------------|------|
| Ethnic origin | % | Ethnic origin | % |
| Ottoman Turkish | 35.5 | Armenian | 71.1 |
| Armenian | 22 | Tatar (Azeri Turkish) | 10.2 |
| Tatar (Azeri Turkish) | 18 | Georgian | 6.2 |
| Georgian | 17.7 | Russian | 9.4 |
| Russian | 2.5 | Greek | 0.1 |
| Other | 4.3 | Other | 3 |

As can be seen from the above table, Turks were the majority in three of the four districts and in one of the two counties of the Russian-controlled “Muslim Georgia”. Georgians were the most numerous community only in the district of Batum, whereas in the county of Akhalkalak, the majority were Armenians. It is also important to mention here that according to The Russian Imperial Census of 1897, most residents of five of the six administrative units mentioned above were Sunni Muslims. The district of Akhalkalak (also known as Javakheti) was an exception because more than 70 per cent of its population was Armenian. The reason for that lies in the fact that during the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-29, most of the Islamized indigenous Georgians of Javakheti were actively resisting Russian invasion and, following Ottoman defeat, left their native land to find refuge in Anatolia (central Turkey). The victorious Russians almost immediately colonized the empty province with some Doukhobors from central Russia and with Turkish Armenians

(mostly from the province of Erzurum) who were encouraged by the Russian government to re-settle en masse from the Ottoman lands to the new Russian possessions in the Caucasus.

As for the ethnic Georgians of the Russian-controlled "Muslim Georgia", one should mention that by the beginning of the 20th century, most of them were Sunni Muslims. Christian Georgians (Orthodox Christians and Catholics) formed a tiny minority in the district of Batum and in the counties of Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalak. In Artvin, Oltu and Ardahan there were practically no Christian Georgians. The described situation occurred as a result of Islamization and partial re-population that accompanied the incorporation of Samtskhe into the Ottoman Empire. About 60% of local indigenous residents belonging to various social groups converted into Islam, while most of those who refused to become Muslims had no other choice but to flee the region, mostly in the direction of Imereti. The abandoned lands of those who left Samtskhe were settled by Ottoman colonists, most of whom were nomads of Turkic and Kurd background.¹ Since then only the ruins of Christian churches and monasteries including Oshki, Khakhuli, Ishkhani and Otxta Eklesia, as well as the Georgian names of some villages², could remind visitors of the Christian and Georgian past of the territory in question. Starting at least from the early 19th century, the large majority of the locals were devoted Muslims, loyal Ottoman subjects and considered themselves good Turks, notwithstanding the fact that some of them knew about their Georgian or partially Georgian background.

As far as the portion of "Muslim Georgia" that remained under Ottoman control between 1878 and 1915 is concerned, there is no exact official data available about its ethnic composition. However, basing on the church statistics of the early 20th century, one can say that about 25 per cent of the total population of Lazistan were Christians (Armenians and Greeks), whereas the remaining 75 per cent were Sunni Muslims. Just more than half of the Muslims of Lazistan were Laz people who spoke Zan language, which is closely related to the Megrelian vernacular spoken in western Georgia. We also do not possess any information about whether or not there were any Georgian-speaking communities in the three eastern *kazas* of Erzurum *Sanjak*.

¹ Rayfield, pp. 231-232; Suny, p. 52.

² Most of such names were replaced by Turkish ones in the 1920ies

World War I and the Birth of the First Republic: Implications for “Muslim Georgia”

On November 2, 1914, the Russian Empire declared war on Ottoman Turkey, and the Caucasus became one of the battlegrounds of World War I.¹ As soon as the war was declared, both sides started active military operations against each other. On November 16, the units of Turkish 1st Constantinople Army Corps invaded the district of Batum, south of Chorokhi mouth. That action signaled an uprising by local Muslim Georgians, who followed the calls for *Jihad* from the Ottoman capital. Within the next few days, united forces of Ottoman Turks and local rebels took over the towns of Artvin and Ardahan threatening Batum and Ardahan.² The next two months saw fierce battles around Ardahan and Sarykamysch that resulted in the defeat of Ottoman forces. In February-March, 1915, the Russians started a counteroffensive taking back Ardahan, Artvin, Oltu and Hopa. In the spring of 1915, Russian command moved the battle action to the enemy's territory and until the summer of 1916, Russian armies continued their offensive in Anatolia, capturing Erzurum, Van, Erzinjan and Trebizond.³

It is worth mentioning here that during the Russian occupation of Lazistan, the Laz population remained absolutely loyal to Turkey, in contrast with local Armenians and Greeks, who usually greeted Russian troops as liberators.

The Sazonov-Sykes-Picot Agreement

In the light of Russian triumph in eastern Turkey in February-March of 1916, the negotiations between Britain, France and Russia regarding the future partition of the Ottoman Empire, that had started as early as in mid-April 1915, ended up with the signing of a secret convention on May 09, 1916. That convention known today as the Sazonov-Sykes-Picot Agreement, confirmed Russia's claim for the Black Sea Straits and assigned to her the *vilayets* of Erzurum, Bitlis and Van, as well as the eastern half of the *vilayet* of Trebizond and parts of Ul-Aziz and Diyarbekir.⁴ As a result, by the spring

¹ A.M. Zayonczkowski, *Pervaya Mirovaya Voina* (St. Petersburg, 2002) p.299

² Zayonczkowski, p. 376.

³ Zayonczkowski, p 582.

⁴ Richard Hovannissian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence 1918* (Los Angeles,

of 1917 it seemed quite realistic that the majority of Armenian core lands, as well as all of the historical Georgian lands that were still under Ottoman control, would be united under the Russian imperial crown.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 and Ottoman Invasion of the Caucasus

The situation in the region changed drastically in early 1917 which saw major upheaval in Russia. In March, 1917, the empire collapsed, the monarchy was abolished and the country proclaimed itself a republic. At that moment the Caucasus front entered a stage of stagnation. The planned operations were put on hold, while Grand Duke Nicholas Romanov and General Yudenich, who had been the victorious military leaders of 1915-1916, were dismissed and left the Caucasus Army. The new commander, General Przewalski,⁵ was awaiting new instructions from the republican government that never came. Meanwhile, the Russian troops that manned the front line started self-willed evacuation largely caused by inactivity, poor supply and the collapse of the pre-revolutionary systems of seniority and discipline. A de-facto truce was established on the front-lines in May, 1917.⁶ On December 18, a Cease-fire Agreement signed in Erzinjan, put an end to all hostilities until early 1918.⁷

The successful November coup in Petrograd coup orchestrated by the Bolsheviks, was followed by the recognition of the Bolshevik (Soviet) administration all over the former empire,⁸ with the exception of the territory occupied by the Central Powers and some of the outlying regions that included most of Finland, Ukraine and the Caucasus.

In Tiflis, the *Transcaucasian Commissariat* was formed on November 28, 1917, and assumed the functions of an autonomous coalition government, claiming control over the whole of the South Caucasus and the adjacent occupied territories of the Ottoman Empire. That government the creation

1969), pp. 59-62.

Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (London, 2011), pp. 194-213.

Akaby Nassibian, *Britain and the Armenian Question, 1915-192* (London, 1984), p. 55.

⁵ Former commander of the 2nd Turkestan Corps.

⁶ Zayonczkowski, pp.646-648.

⁷ Kazemzadeh, p.p. 82-83.

⁸ In many cases, after some resistance.

of which had been encouraged by the US Consul in Tiflis,¹ was formed as a result of an emergency conference involving representatives of the regional councils, professional unions and various political and civic organizations. In the fall of 1917 the political elites of the South Caucasus were not making any attempts to secede their region from Russia. A few weeks before the formation of the *Transcaucasian Commissariat*, the Armenian and Georgian National Councils were elected in Tiflis but neither of the two claimed independent statehood for their peoples. The Georgian National Congress though adopted the resolution on self-government of Georgia but the issue of independence was not up for discussion yet.²

On February 2, 1918 the Ottoman Empire breached the Erzinjan truce and the 3rd Ottoman army under the command of General Vehip Pasha (45-50,000 men and) started an offensive on Erzinjan and Trebizond. In absence of regular Russian troops that had already left the frontlines, the new Ottoman offensive was faced by a newly formed 10,000 strong Georgian Corps under General Vasil Gabayev whose elements were scattered between Trebizond, Ardasa, Gymushkhane, Batum, Akhaltsikh and Kutais,³ and by the detachments of the Armenian Corps under the overall command of General Thomas Nazarbekov (Nazarbekian) whose strength did not exceed 21,000 men and whose units were to hold the front line between Erzinjan and Van and to endure simultaneous attacks by the 4th Ottoman Caucasian Corps and by Kurd irregulars.⁴

In February and March of 1918, the Ottoman forces were winning one battle after another and by March 15, they reached the pre-war border. During that period of time, most of the Georgian troops demonstrated little willingness to fight the Turks. That could be explained by the fact that, unlike a few Georgian nationalist intellectuals, the majority of the soldiers stationed in Trebizond and Lazistan, were far from even thinking about considering

¹ Kazemzadeh, pp. 53 and 55-56.

² Hovannisian, pp. 86-90. Kadishev, p. 31,

³ W.E.D. Allen, P. Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields* (Nashville, 1953), p. 462; A.B. Kadishev, *Interventsia I grazhdanskaya vojna v Zakavkazyi* (Moscow, 1960), pp. 48-49.

⁴ Allen, Muratoff., pp. 463-464. Kadishev, pp.44, 48 and 51.

Richard G. Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence* (Los Angeles, 1969), pp .135 and 158.

those lands part of their country and thus could not understand what to fight for in that remote area. The morale of Georgian troops was further undermined by the hostility of local Laz people who despite their linguistic affiliation with the Georgians remained actively loyal to the Ottoman Empire and the Turks whom they considered their brethren in Islamic *Ummah*.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk: Implications for Georgia

On March 3, 1918, while the victorious Turks were marching towards the old border wiping out the remaining Christian population of eastern *vilayets*, the representatives of Soviet Russian government signed a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers in Brest-Litovsk. Article IV of that treaty, concluded in absence of the representatives of Transcaucasia, confirmed not only the return of eastern Anatolia (Turkish Armenia and Lazistan) to the Turks, but also abolished Russian sovereignty over the districts of Batum, Artvin, Ardahan, Oltu, Kars and Kaghyzman, thus awarding Turkey the whole territory of "Muslim Georgia" except the counties of Akhaltsykh and Akhalkalak.

After overcoming the shock of the provisions of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the provisional administration of Transcaucasia (the *Transcaucasian Seim*) declared it null and void and attempted to reach a separate agreement with the Ottoman Empire. But neither negotiations, nor the proclamation of an independent *Democratic Federative Republic of Transcaucasia* on April 22, 1918, could moderate territorial ambitions of the Ottoman Empire, whose government demanded even more territorial concessions. One of the reasons for such rigidity of the Turks was that by mid-April they were already in control of all the territories granted to them by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. That included the fortified port city of Batum that had fallen to the 37th Ottoman Division, supported by Laz irregulars and Adjarian militias, on April 15.⁵ The fall of Batum was a result of the low morale of Georgian troops, poor command, lack of discipline, pacifist attitudes and contradictory instructions from Tiflis.

The Struggle for Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalak

By the beginning of May, the units of the 3rd Ottoman Army took over the districts of Oltu, Artvin, Ardahan and, partially, Batum and invaded the

⁵ Kadishev, p.49. Kvinitadze, p. 29.

counties of Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalak, turning them into an arena of ethno-religious warfare. That success was largely due to the uprising launched by local Muslims (both ethnic Georgians and Turks) behind the Georgian defense lines.

As mentioned above, in the early 20th century, Sunni Muslims (Turks, Kurds and Muslim Georgians) formed the majority population of the rural part of the county of Akhaltsikh excluding the county capital. The Christian minorities concentrated predominantly around the villages of Svir, Muskh, Dvira-Saqire, Erkota and Vardzia-Tmogva (Orthodox Georgians), Tskalbila, Pamach and Tskhrut (Armenians), as well as Vale, Ude and Zazalo (Roman Catholics including Armenian Catholics). The town of Akhaltsikh itself was, in turn, predominantly Christian. A little more than half of its total population was Armenian, about one third of the residents were Orthodox Christians, including Georgians, Russians, Ukrainians and Greeks, and less than one percent were Roman Catholics (most of them Poles). The town also had a small Jewish minority (about 10% of the total population). Against the given ethno-religious background, local Muslim guerillas, who in April of 1918 had taken over the rural part of the county and blocked Akhaltsikh, started ethnic cleansing of the smaller Christian communities. In doing so they were supported by their armed coreligionists who came to the county from the neighboring Ardahan district together with several regular detachments of the 5th and 10th Ottoman Divisions of the 3rd Army.¹

In view of the described situation, local Christians (both Armenians and Georgians) demonstrated unity. Their militias, acting in coordination with each other and with some elements of regular Georgian armed forces, managed to defend a few Christian enclaves quite successfully. One should mention here that although lacking combat experience, the Christian militias of the Akhaltsikh county had high morale and were well-armed, including machine guns and artillery. Their units were often headed by experienced officers who had served in the Russian Imperial Army. After 4 weeks of intense fighting, the advance of the Turks was stopped and the troubled county enjoyed relative Status Quo up until early June, when the peace was finally concluded.²

¹ According to Kvinitadze, Akhaltsikh Muslim irregulars were organized into a separate division within the 1st Caucasian Corps.

² Artush Sanosian, **Self-defense in the Counties of Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalak in**

In the county of Akhalkalak (part of the historical Georgian province of Javakheti) the situation as a whole was even more favorable to the local Christians, who formed about 90% of its total population. However, after May 19, the situation in the county changed when it was massively invaded from the south by the 5th Ottoman division. As a result, by the end of May, the county of Akhalkalak was lost to the Turks, who entered its capital but were too weakened by the fight to advance further on Tiflis.

Certainly, the battle area in the counties of Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalak was not the main theater of the strange Turkish-Transcaucasian war of 1918, but it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that it was the stiff resistance put up in the area by Christian militias and troops, that, to a large extent, prevented the fall of Tiflis and significantly reduced the losses among the civilian population.

The Treaties of Poti and Batum

On May 26, 1918, the ephemeral Transcaucasian Federation fell apart and on the same day Georgia proclaimed its independence. On June 4, after painstaking negotiations with German mediation, the Georgian delegation had to sign "the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the Ottoman Empire and Georgian Republic". The provisions of the treaty gave Turkey not only the districts of Batum, Artvin, Ardahan and Oltu, but also the county of Akhalkalak and most of the county of Akhaltsikh, thus returning the whole of "Muslim Georgia" to the Ottoman Empire.

The Armistice of Mudros: Implications for Georgia

While in the fall of 1918 the Turkish armies were triumphant in the Caucasus, their situation was going from bad to worse everywhere else. October 30, 1918, saw the official surrender of Ottoman Turkey that occurred on the decks of HMS "Agamemnon" anchored in Mudros harbour of the Greek island of Lemnos. On the same day the document known as the Armistice of Mudros was signed on board "Agamemnon" by British Admiral Somerset Arthur Gough-Calthorpe and Ottoman Maritime Minister Rauf Bey. To the disappointment of the Georgians, Article XI of the Armistice Convention

demanded the Turks to evacuate the counties of Akhhaltsikh and Akhalkalak, but left the districts of Batum, Artvin, Ardahan and Oltu under “temporary” Turkish occupation for an indefinite period of time.¹

Nevertheless, the treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Batum were now both null and void, thus allowing Georgia and Armenia to claim the territories previously lost by the Transcaucasian Federation to the Turks.

“Muslim Georgia” in 1919 - 1920

“The South-West Caucasian Republic”

The fact that the Ottoman Empire signed the Armistice of Mudros did not at all mean that the Turks were planning to simply leave behind all the territories they conquered in the South Caucasus in 1918. While formally accepting the demands of the victorious Allies, the Turks took certain measures to keep at least the territories of Batum (the districts of Batum and Artvin) and the territory of Kars (the districts of Oltu, Ardahan, Kars and Kaghyzman) within the sphere of Turkish dominance. Hundreds of Turkish officers were left behind as instructors, and whole units of the 9th Army stayed in the above territories. They were cosmetically re-uniformed in order to look more like local militia and in order to prevent Armenian and Georgian takeover in the territories of Kars and Batum.² The evacuating Ottoman administration was also quite successful in the establishment of a puppet state formation known as “the South-West Caucasian Republic (SWCR)” created in Kars shortly after Mudros. The pro-Turkish government of Fakhreddin (Erdoghan) Pirioglu formed in Kars on November 5, 1918, claimed effective control not only over the four districts of Kars territory, but also over all the former Russian territories annexed by Turkey as per the Treaty of Batum.³ The creation of the South-West Caucasian Republic was in sharp contrast with the territorial aspirations of Georgia and Armenia. The government of Georgia claimed the entire territory of Batum (the districts of Batum and Artvin) and the districts of Ardahan and Oltu (Olti) of Kars territory. The government of Armenia, in

¹ R. G. Hovannisian., *The Republic of Armenia, Vol. I: The First Year, 1918- 1919*, (Berkeley, 1971), pp. 56, 199.

² T.Z. Tunaya, *Turkiyede siyasi partiler, 1859-1952* (Istanbul, 1952), pp. 486-487.

³ Hovannisian, pp. 205-206; Kazemzadeh, p. 199.

turn, claimed most of the Kars territory, including not only the districts of Kars and Kaghyzman but also the whole of Oltu and most of Ardahan districts, leaving open the question of the status of Batum.

The conflicting claims of Georgia and Armenia were laying background for a new territorial dispute, but in the late fall of 1918 that was like counting the chickens before they were hatched, as the Kars government rejected both Georgian and Armenian authority and rather effectively exploited the principle of self-determination declared by the USA, Britain and France. Indeed, the SWCR enjoyed some favor from the British mission in the Caucasus.⁴ The British troops even blocked the roads, leading to Kars from the province of Erivan, and prevented some 100 000 Armenian refugees from returning to their homes.⁵

The sympathies of the Allies changed in early February of the year 1919, when the paramilitary forces of SWCR, under the command of Server Beg, started attacking British military and medical personnel, and also invaded the Georgian-administered counties of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki.⁶ That action of the SWCR forced General Thomson to allow Armeno-Georgian takeover of the troublesome Kars territory during his meeting with Armenian and Georgian officials on March 14.⁷ Following the Georgian counter-offensive of early April 1919, the British units that had already been stationed in the province of Erivan, entered Kars on April 6.⁸ On April 10 1919, the SWCR leaders were arrested and deported. Nine days later, the city of Kars was handed to the Armenian governor.

By April 22, Georgian army units, under the command of General George Kvinitadze, completely crushed the resistance of Server Beg's paramilitaries in the county of Akhaltsikh and in the district of Ardahan, thus putting them both under Georgian control (See Map B).⁹ The South-West Caucasian Republic was abolished, and the districts of Kars and Sarykamysh

⁴ Kazemzadeh, pp. 199-200.

⁵ A.S. Lukomsky, , "Denikin I Antanta" in *Revolucija I grazhdanskaja vojna v opisaniyah belogvardejcev: Denikin-Yudenich-Wrangel* (Moscow, 1927), p. 92.

⁶ Hovannisian, pp. 210-211; Kvinitadze, pp. 84-89.

⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 213.

⁸ Kvinitadze, pp. 89-124.

⁹ Kvinitadze, pp. 89-136. A. Denikin, *Ocherki Russkoy Smuty, Vol. IV* (Berlin, 1925), p.147.

were annexed by the Democratic Republic of Armenia, while the county of Ardahan was taken over by Georgia.¹ At the same time, the British command in the Caucasus did not allow either Georgian or Armenian troops to enter the district of Oltu (Olti), which was claimed by both nations, and the sector of Karaqurt claimed by Armenia. That left the said area in the hands of local Muslim chieftains until it was once again taken over by the Turks during the Turkish-Armenian war of late 1920. A few months later, Georgia conceded part of the district of Ardahan (part of Okam sector and most of Chyldyr sector) to Armenia (see Map C).²



Map B

¹ Hovannisian, pp. 220-221.

² Hovannisian, p..221.



Map C

The Territory of Batum

As for the territory of Batum, since December 15 1918, it found itself under British governorship³ that spread to parts of the districts of Oltu (part of Olor sector) and Ardahan (part of Okam sector evacuated by the Georgians).⁴ British occupation of the territory of Batum (the districts of Batum and Artvin) lasted until July 9, 1920, when the whole territory was officially transferred to Georgia. The unification of Batum with the rest of Georgia was met with euphoria in Tiflis, although in reality it signaled a major shift in British policy towards the Caucasus. In the summer of 1920, for a combination of reasons that are beyond the framework of this paper, the Allied powers gave up the idea of supporting the independence of Georgia and other republics of Transcaucasia.⁵

³ Kadishev, p. 164.

⁴ Hovannisian., p..221.

⁵ A. Andersen, *Abkhazia and Sochi: the Roots of the Conflict 1918-1921* (Toronto, 2014), pp. 97-103.

Georgian Territorial Claims at Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Sevres

On the 10th of August, 1920, “the Treaty of Peace” was signed in Sèvres (France) by the representatives of 14 “Allied and Associated nations”, including Armenia, on one part, and the Sultan’s government of Turkey on the other. Article 89 of Part III, Section VI of the Treaty of Sèvres virtually gave Armenia some territory in Eastern Turkey. This territory encompassed a considerable part of the former Western (Turkish) Armenian lands in the *vilayets* of Erzurum, Trebizond, Van and Bitlis.¹ While legally satisfying about 40% of the Armenian claims to the “Ottoman estate” at the Paris Peace Conference, the Treaty did not specify either the exact borders between Armenia and Turkey, or between Armenia and other parties, including Georgia, that claimed or could claim some of the Turkish territories assigned to Armenia.

Georgian territorial claims specified in the Memorandum submitted by the representatives of the First Republic to the Supreme War Council of Entente Allies on March 1 1920, included some Ottoman territories that were also claimed by Armenia. Those territories included Lazistan *sanjak* of Trebizond *vilayet* that embraced a relatively small territory squeezed between the Pontic Mountains and the Black Sea coast from the village of Hopa at the old Russo-Turkish border, to the River Kalopotamo, east of the town of Of, as well as the *kazas* (districts) of Keskim and Tortum of Erzurum *sanjak* and a small part of the *kaza* of Ispir of the same *sanjak*.²

No matter how reasonable historical and geographical backgrounds for the Georgian claims were, they were met with extreme scepticism by the Allied decision-makers. Until early June of 1920, the Allies were even reluctant to agree to Georgian sovereignty over the former Russian districts of Batum, Artvin and Ardahan, that had been also mentioned in the above

¹ “Treaty of Piece between the British Empire and Allied Powers (France, Italy, Japan, Armenia, Belgium, Czecho-Slovakia, Greece, the Hedjaz, Poland, Portugal, Roumania and Serb-Croat-Slovene State) and Turkey- Sevres, August 10, 1920” in *British and Foreign State Papers*, CXIII, 1920, ed. Edward Parkes et al. (London, 1923), p. 672.

² Z. Avalov, *The Independence of Georgia in International Politics, 1918-1921* (London, 1940), p. 255-257. V. Babet, *Les richesses naturelles de la Georgie – Richesses minieres* (Paris, 1920), p. 5; Hovannisian, pp. 30-31.

March Memorandum.³ As for Lazistan, both British and French decision-makers were united in sharing the opinion of Robert Vansittart (at that time Assistant Secretary of British Foreign Office), according to whom the acquisition of Lazistan by Armenia would serve as a good compensation for her "loss" of the sea access in the district of Batum after the annexation of the named district by Georgia. Meanwhile, the Lazes could be satisfied with "guaranteed minority rights" within Armenia.⁴ Another weighty argument against Georgian claims to Lazistan was the fact that the Lazes never expressed any desire to be incorporated into the Georgian state.⁵ The Georgian counter-argument to that was that while the residents of Lazistan and Keskim-Tortum-Ispir did not wish to be seceded from Turkey, while the Turkish state was in stable control of Eastern Anatolia, their sympathies could swing toward the Georgians if the union with Georgia was their only alternative to avoid becoming part of Armenia.⁶ That argument fell on deaf ears of the Allied leaders. The Georgian representatives at the Paris Peace Conference were neither invited to sign the Peace Treaty with Turkey, nor even to attend the conference at Sevres, leaving the question of Armeno-Georgian delimitation to potential bilateral talks between the two nations.

Despite the fact that the provisions of the Treaty of Sevres failed to satisfy Georgian territorial claims against Turkey, it was still important for Georgia, because it was mentioned in Article 92 of the Treaty as an independent country.⁷

Georgian Expansion During the Turkish-Armenian War

In early September of 1920, the Turkish Nationalist army under Karabekir Pasha, launched a full-scale offensive along the whole perimeter of the Turkish-Armenian border. Unable to withstand the military pressure, the Armenian forces were slowly retreating towards Alexandropol and Erevan.

In view of the military collapse of Armenia, Georgian armed forces attempted to take over the remaining part of the disputed district of Ardahan

³ Avalov, *Op. cit.*, pp. 253-255; Hovannisian, pp. 31-33 and 53-55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55

⁵ Аваловъ, *Op. cit.*, p. 255.

⁶ Avalov, p. 256.

⁷ Avalov, pp. 289-290.

that was not yet under Georgian control. On October 1 1920, Georgian troops occupied the small area near Chyldyr Lake and entered the village of Okam (Gyole) on the Armenian side of Kura. That demarche caused indignation and protests on behalf of the Armenian Foreign Affairs ministry. A few days after the Georgian incursion south of Kura, the Armenian command ordered the West Armenian regiment under Sebough to move into Okam. In order to avoid military confrontation, the Georgian troops evacuated Okam on October 6 and retreated back to Ardahan. The Chyldyr sector with the town of Zurzuna remained under Georgian control, and on October 13 it was ceremonially declared Georgian.¹ Ironically, just four months later, Chyldyr was taken over by the Turks as a result of the Soviet-Turkish conquest of Georgia.

Muslim Georgia” and the Treaties of Moscow (16.03.1921) and Kars (13.10.1921)

On February 11, 1921, the Soviet Red Army invaded Georgia in breach of the Soviet-Georgian peace treaty of May 7, 1920. Eleven days later, Turkish Nationalist forces attacked Georgia from the south. On February 23 they took Ardahan and started an offensive on Batum and Akhaltsikh.

On February 25, after a week of fierce fighting around Tbilisi, and in view of the overpowering numerical and technical superiority of the Red army, Georgian command made a decision to evacuate the capital city. Both the well-organized retreat of the Georgian army westwards and the quick evacuation of the Government occurred by the end of the 25th of February. While losing the capital, the Georgians managed to save both their armed forces and their administration. That allowed them to continue organized armed resistance for another 3 weeks.

¹ R. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia / Vol. IV* (Los Angeles, 1996), pp. 222-226.



Map D

Next day, on February 26, a Russian-Turkish Conference aimed at working out the provisions of a new bilateral treaty, was opened in Moscow under the chairmanship of Soviet Russian Foreign Affairs Minister² Georgy Chicherin.³ One of the major questions addressed at the conference was the territorial one. The Moscow Conference of February-March 1921, was marked by a striking paradox: two internationally unrecognized and thus illegitimate governments, Soviet Russian and Kemalists Turkish⁴, were negotiating the border between Turkey and two other countries (Armenia and Georgia), at least one of which was internationally recognized *de-jure*. On the day the conference was opened, the legitimate government of Georgia was still in control of a considerable part of the country, and Georgian army and militias were still desperately fighting in an attempt to repel the Soviet invasion (see Map D).

² Chicherin's official title was People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic.

³ *Dokumenty Vneshney Politiki SSSR, Vo. III* (Moscow, 1959), p. 683.

⁴ At the described moment there was no internationally recognized government of Russia, whereas the internationally recognized Turkish government was that of Sultan Mehmed VI stationed in the Allied occupied Constantinople.

During the talks, that lasted almost 3 weeks, the representatives of the Kremlin accepted most of the Turkish demands. On March 16 1921, the day before the government and military leadership of Georgia abandoned its country, the Russian-Turkish “Treaty of Friendship and Brotherhood” was signed in Moscow. That treaty finalized the partition of the South Caucasus after the series of wars that took place in 1920-1921. Article I of the Treaty of Moscow gave Turkey the districts of Artvin, Ardahan¹ and Oltu, plus the southern half of the district of Batum. Article II contained a confusing statement which said that Turkey agreed to yield sovereignty of the port and the city of Batum, as well as the northern half of the district of Batum to Georgia under the condition that autonomy was to be granted to the Muslim population of the said territory. By the time the treaty was ready to be signed, Turkey did not control either the port, or the territory to the north of it. That makes it hard to understand how Turkey could yield something that it did not control. In any case, though, Article II meant that the Kemalists’ claims to Batum were dropped.²

The treaty of Moscow, the provisions of which were confirmed on October 13, 1921, by the Treaty of Kars, established the contemporary border between Georgia and Turkey that has remained the same ever since. As a result, most of “Muslim Georgia” was once again returned to Turkey and stopped being referred to as “Georgia”. Georgia was left with the counties of Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalak as well as with the northern half of the district of Batum, which formed the new Ajarian autonomy. At the same time the whole of Georgia lost its sovereignty, because by the end of the Soviet-Georgian war it had become a satellite of the Kremlin.

¹ To be specific, the part of the district of Ardahan which was under Georgian control by the beginning of the Soviet-Georgian war.

² *Documenty vneshnei politiki, Op. cit.*, p. 598; Janne Degras (Ed.), *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy, Vol. I* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 238-239.