

Soviet-Georgian War and Sovietization of Georgia, II-III. 1921



La guerre soviéto-géorgienne et la soviétisation de la Géorgie (février-mars 1921)

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Revue historique des Armées Numéro 254, 1/2009

Photographs: private archive of Levan Urushadze

Introduction

In the year 1918, Georgia restored her independence from the Russian Empire. This became possible as a result of World War I - which endorsed a tremendous pressure on states with weak economies and social structure - one of which was Russia. Military defeat in combination with both economic and political failure, led to the collapse of the empire, undermined by the devastating war, and eventually led to the Revolution of 1917, as well as the establishment of a Bolshevik dictatorship in former the imperial centres, the civil war and secession of non-Russian peripheries.

Initially, the Georgian elites were reluctant to separate from Russia. However, the disintegration of the Caucasus front, and the threat of invasions and chaos, forced them to build a state in an attempt to protect Georgia from both military and political challenges from the Bolsheviks, anti-Bolsheviks and the Turks, who claimed dominance over the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan and Armenia followed Georgia's example¹.



Military parade in Tbilisi, January/1921

During the three years of independence, Georgia's moderate socialist leadership were rather successful in the establishment of a democracy-track society with universal suffrage, democratically-elected legislature, freedom of speech and tolerance to both right- and left-wing opposition². However, the development of democratic processes in the First Republic faced a

¹ Stephen F. Jones, "Transcaucasia: Revolution and Civil War" in H. Shukman (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1988).

² Stephen F. Jones, "Georgia: The Trauma of Statehood" in J. Bremmer and R. Taras (eds.), *New States New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 508.

number of challenges that included involvement in military conflicts with Turkey, Armenia, as well as “the Reds” and “the Whites” of Southern Russia, economic blockade by Western powers, delay of international recognition until early 1920, internal conflicts with some ethnic minorities and subversive activities of local Bolsheviks encouraged by Moscow and following orders from the Kremlin³.

By the end of February, 1920, an alliance was formed between the Kemalist government of Turkey and the Soviet leadership of Russia. The new allies required a stable land-bridge between the two countries. In order to achieve that goal, the three independent states of the South Caucasus - namely Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia - were to be taken over and partitioned between Soviet Russia and Turkey. By 31.05.1920, Azerbaijan was invaded and Sovietized by Russia’s 11th Red Army. Four months later, Armenia was invaded by Turkey and had to cede more than a half of her territory, the rest being taken over by the Red Army by the end of 1920. The last independent country believing to be a bastion of the West squeezed between the Kemalists and the Soviets was Georgia, and it was to fall as well in order to finalize Soviet-Turkish project in the Caucasus.

SOUTH CAUCASUS, AS OF MARCH, 1921



³ Stephen Blank, “Bolshevik Organizational Development in Early Soviet Transcaucasia: 1918-1924” in R.G. Suny (ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change* (Ann Arbor, 1999)

Beginning of the War

In February 1921, the Soviet Red Army invaded Georgia following the instruction from Moscow. This action launched against a sovereign nation in breach of Soviet-Georgian peace treaty of March 7, 1920, was later presented and explained in Soviet historical literature as a response to Georgia's alleged support of anti-Soviet guerilla movement in Daghestan, repressions against local Bolsheviks and economic blockade of already Soviet Armenia.

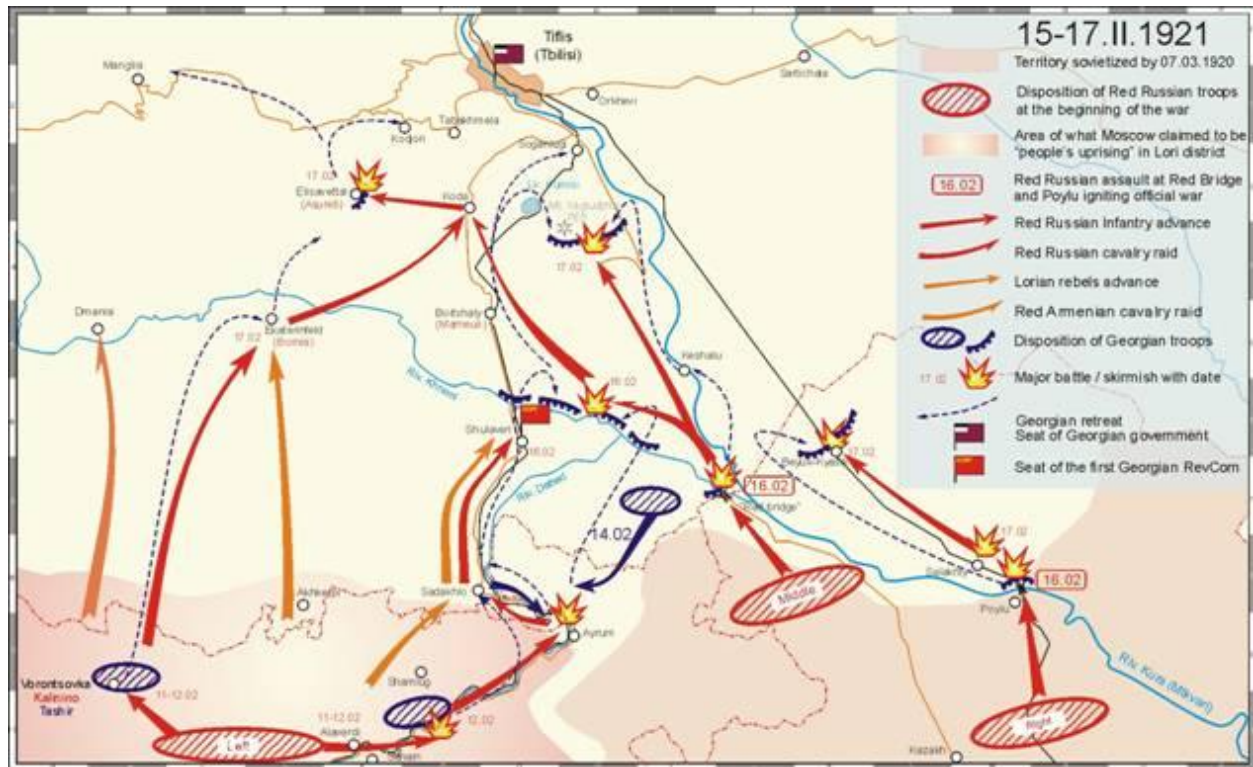
The massive assault on Georgia was preceded by Soviet-staged “popular revolt” against Georgian government in mostly Armenian-populated Borchalo district

and a series of violent border clashes near the town of Zakatala claimed by Soviet Azerbaijan.



Georgian soldiers

On February 11, 1921, Soviet Russian and Soviet Armenian troops percolated into Georgian-controlled Borchalo and with some support of the local population hit Georgian garrisons in Sanaini and Vorontsovka (Tashir). Caught by surprise and heavily decimated, Georgian units retreated north- and westwards. During the next 68 hours they got limited reinforcement (one battalion only) and made an abortive attempt to regain control over the lost territory. After the failure of their counterattack, the Georgians fell back further north of the line Ayrum – Sadakhlo (Sanaini group) and towards Ekaterinenfeld (Vorontsovka group).



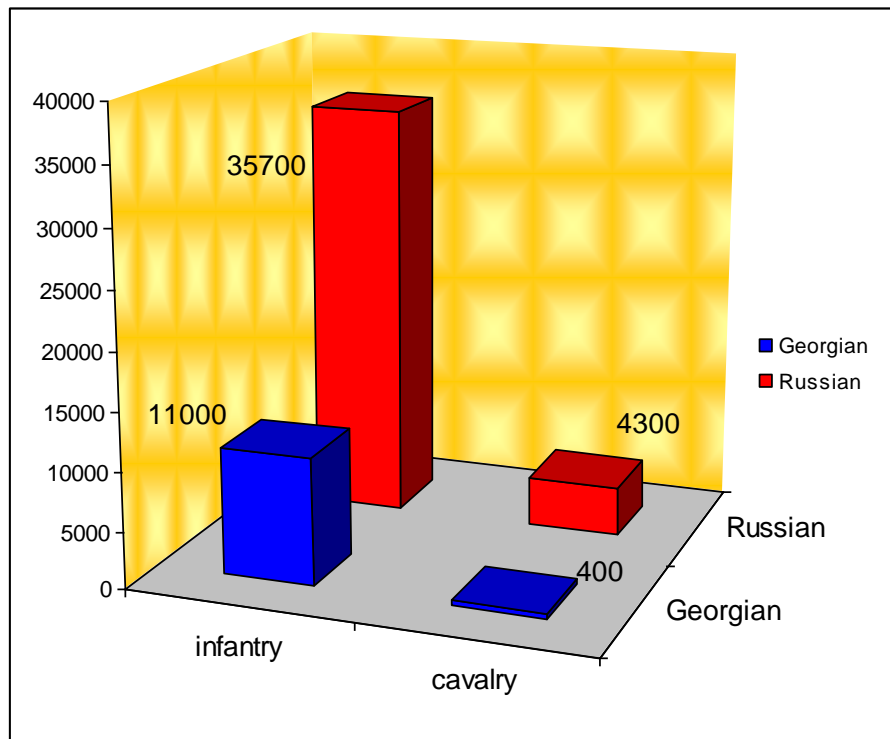
On February 16 the Soviet troops including the regiments of 96th, 60th and 20th Rifle Brigades of Russia's 11th Red Army, Soviet Armenian Mounted Brigade and several detachments of local Bolshevik sympathizers entered the village of Shulaveri some 25 km to the north-west of Armenian border and the so-called "Revolutionary Committee of Georgia" consisting of Red commanders and local Bolsheviks was formed in the village. The same day, it declared itself to be the only legitimate government of Georgia and pledged Soviet Russia for immediate military intervention. Hours later, 54th and 58th Rifle Brigades of the 11th Army stormed into Georgian territory across the Red Bridge followed by the 12th Mounted Division and the 55th Armored Group. Simultaneously, 26th Rifle Brigade and Mounted Regiment of 9th Rifle Division entered Georgia across Kura river near Poylu railway bridge which was blown up by the retreating Georgian border guards in a successful attempt to block the advance of Soviet armored trains

and tanks.⁴ Next day, Georgia was also invaded through the border town of Zakatala by the troops of 59th Rifle brigade and 18th Mounted Division also belonging to the 11th Army. Anatoliy Gekker who at that time was the commander of the 11th Army, received direct order from Moscow to capture Georgian capital no later than February 19.

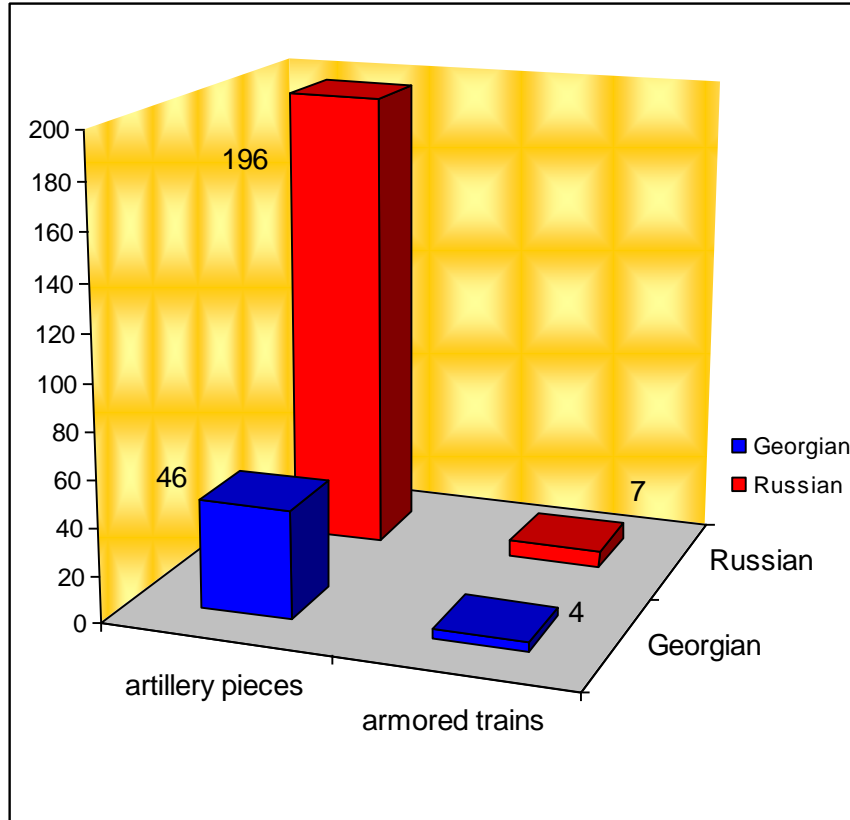
At the same time, Soviet Russia's 98th Rifle Brigade with Tersky Mounted Division was preparing to attack Georgia from Terek Province through Roki and Mamisoni passes while the 9th Army was to invade the country through Abkhazia and advance along the Black Sea coast.

Soviet Russia had a significant numerical advantage over Georgia. By February 16, 1921, combined Soviet forces including the 11th Army, the 9th Army and the auxiliary units including 98th Rifle Brigade, Soviet Armenian Mounted Brigade and Red Baku Brigade could boast more than 40 000 combat-tested troops with 4 300 cavalry among them, 196 artillery pieces, 1065 machine guns, 50 airplanes, 7 armored trains, 4 tanks, and over a dozen armored cars.

To contain the above invading force, Georgia could put forward some 11 000 men of the 1st and 2nd Rifle Divisions, a Mountain Artillery Division, 1st Sukhumi Border Regiment, 2nd Border Regiment and a dozen battalions of People's Guard the latter being civilian militia lacking proper training, command and discipline. Georgian defense forces had 46 pieces of artillery, several hundred machine guns (exact number unknown), 4 armored trains, several tanks and armored cars (exact numbers unknown) and almost no cavalry (only 400 mounted troops) that could prove quite useful in the mountainous landscape of the country.



⁴ Giorgi Kvinitadze, *My Memoirs from the Years of Independence 1917–1921* (Paris, 1985), p. 282.



Georgian officers David Sarjveladze and Akaki Skhirtladze

Georgians also had several modern airplanes that were of much better quality than those in possession of the Red Army. However, due to the absence of proper oil and spare parts that the government refused to purchase, Georgian pilots were incapable of taking full advantage of their technical superiority⁵.

Battle of Tbilisi

Within the next 24 hours in spite of sustained resistance of the Georgians, the forces of Soviet Russian Central Group took over strategically important Yaghluja heights while the troops of Left Group (Soviet Russian and Soviet Armenian) entered the towns of Ekaterinenfeld and Elisavettal thus pushing the Georgians back to the line Kodjori-Manglisi, whereas the vanguard of the 26th Rifle Brigade and Mounted Regiment of 9th Rifle Division penetrated Georgian territory as far as the village of Beyuk-Kyasiq. By that moment, the remnants of Georgian Lori group entrenched along the left bank of Khrami river with their flank dangerously open to the Red Army 54th and 58th Rifle Brigades advancing from the Red Bridge. That weakness resulted in their total defeat by the end of the 16th of February⁶.

In fact, this was the perfect moment for the Red Army to storm into Tbilisi keeping in mind that by the early morning of the 17th of February the defense forces of the Georgian capital were limited to 400 battle-worthy soldiers and some 150 Military School Cadets. Nobody else was prepared to defend Georgian capital while the reserves were still on their way to the front line and the remnants of jaded Georgian units were in the process of reorganization.⁷ Meanwhile, Zakatala direction faced fierce battles for the town of Dedoplis-Tskaro from early 17th until the late 18th of February. The skirmish at Dedoplis-Tskaro resulted in severe casualties from both sides including the death in action of Soviet brigade commander Kuryshko who was in charge of the whole right group of the invading 11th Army. During the first days of war, Georgian government tried to address Moscow in order to stop the war but the only answer they were repeatedly getting from the Kremlin was that there was no war but "some local border clashes"⁸

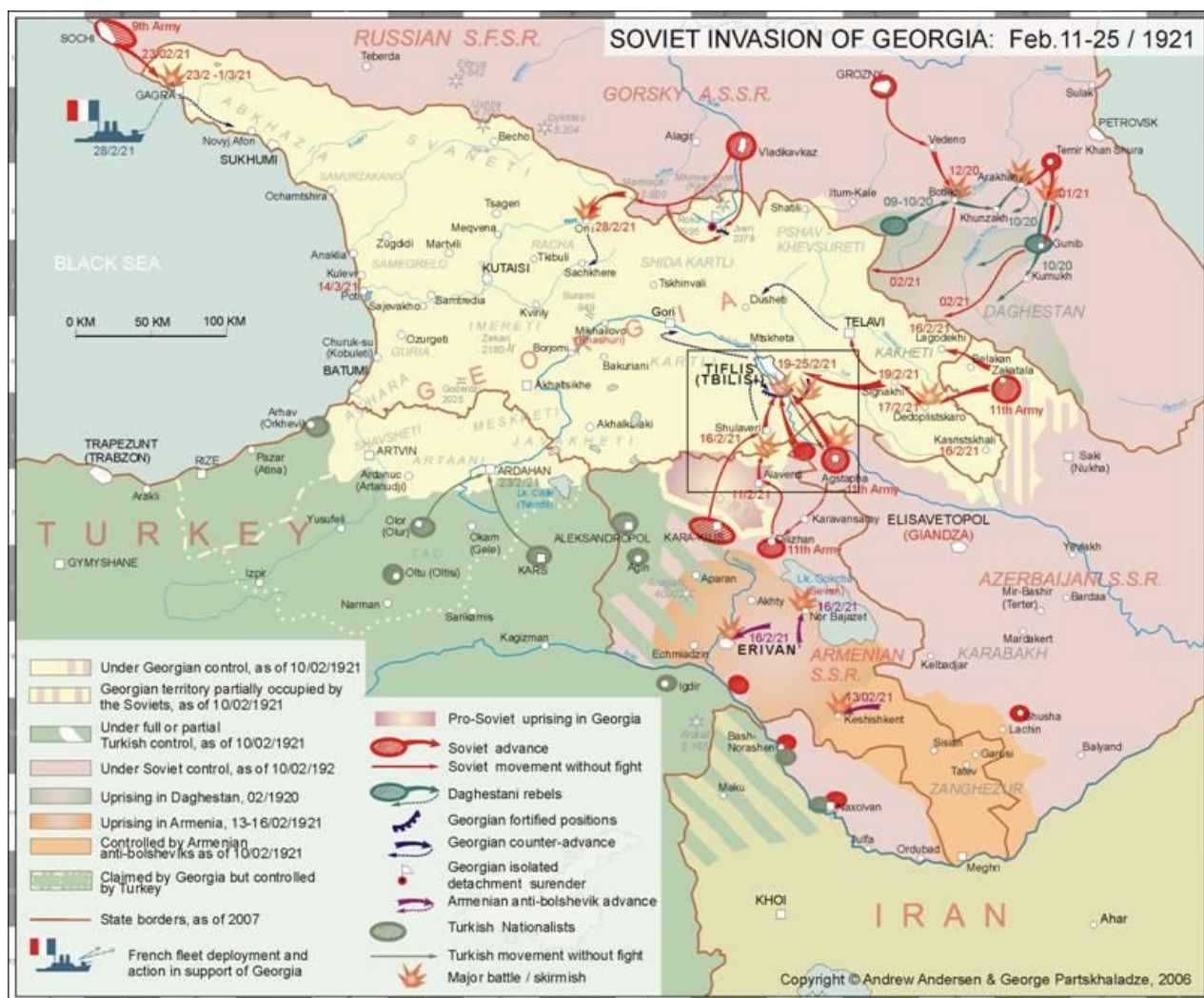
Meanwhile, the Red Army got a serious problem in their rear. National uprising started in recently sovietized Armenia and between the 16th and 18th of February Armenian nationalist rebels were launching their assault on Yerevan.

⁵ Ibid., p. 303.

⁶ Ibid., p. 279.

⁷ Ibid., p. 283.

⁸ Ibid., p. 281.



Early in the morning of February 18, the Commander-in-Chief of all Soviet forces in the Caucasus, Vladimir Gittis, issued an order demanding intensification of all military operations and immediate capture of Tbilisi, Surami and Borjomi by the 11th Red Army with the Terek group simultaneously taking over the Dusheti district to the south of Main Caucasus Range. Other units of the 11th army not involved in the invasion of Georgia were to strengthen the garrisons of Elisavetpol (Gianja) and Shusha in order to prevent possible anti-soviet uprisings in the surrounding area, prevent the spread of Armenian national uprising into Kazakh and Nakhichevan districts and launch more active operations against anti-soviet guerillas in Lenkoran. The operations of the 11th Army in Kakheti was to be accompanied with an attempt to seal Georgia's border with Daghestan where guerilla warfare was still going on. At the same time, the 9th Red Army stationed in Sochi district was to take over Gagra and Sukhumi in

Abkhazia in cooperation with pro-Bolshevik rebels of Abkhazia who launched an uprising sponsored by Soviet Russia.

Following the above order, the right wing of the 11th Army was to take Karatapa and Karadjalar with two rifle regiments and two mounted squadrons enforced with the red cadet battalion that just arrived from Baku while the 18th Mounted Division was to take Signakhi, Avchala and Mtskheta thus outflanking Tbilisi from North-East and sealing a major retreat route.

At the same time, the central group was to secure Yalghuja heights, which the Georgians were desperately trying to take back.



An unknown Georgian officer in new-style uniform

The forces of the left wing of the 11th Army were to take over Kodjori heights and possibly Manglisi and after that enter Tbilisi from the South and secure the bridges across Kura (Mtkvari) river. In case of successful capture of Manglisi the troops stationed there were to develop their

offensive towards Akhalkalaki. They were to be supported by the Soviet airplanes that were to bomb railway stations and communications in and around Tbilisi⁹.

The above plan clearly demonstrates that the Soviet command was quite sure to achieve quick victory. The Soviets counted on panic, weak and ineffective resistance, active fifth column (Georgian Bolsheviks), possible lack of popular willingness to fight as well as weakness and non-professionalism of Georgia's social-democratic leadership¹⁰. To a great extent the situation in Georgia came up to Soviet expectations. The government in Tbilisi did not expect Soviet invasion and had no clearly defined concept of national defense. The armed forces were underfunded and the commanders had no clearly defined rights and responsibilities. Had that situation been different, there was a good chance for Georgia not only to defeat the invading Red Army but completely push it out of the South Caucasus in cooperation with Armenian nationalist rebels, Daghestani guerillas and at least passive anti-Bolshevik resistance in Azerbaijan.

It is hard to underestimate active support of Sovietization of the South Caucasus provided by Kemalist Turkey. Since the beginning of the first Soviet-Georgian skirmishes, Turkish Nationalist troops were ready to invade Georgia from the South and South-West and occupy all or at least some of the disputed territories. In addition, during the first days of the Soviet-Georgian war, there were two visiting Turkish officers at the Georgian General Staff who kept providing the Red Army command with strategically important information by wiring it through Ankara.¹¹

Facing the disaster and almost total military collapse of the country, the government of Georgia followed the old pattern by appointing the retired general George Kvinitadze commander-in-chief of all Georgian armed forces. Outstanding strategist Kvinitadze immediately reported to the government that keeping in mind the current situation only miracle could save Georgia and for the fourth time in three years led Georgian troops to defend their country.

The first order issued by Kvinitadze was to move all troops he had at his disposal in and around Tbilisi back to the ring of heights dominating the terrain around the capital and contain the enemy on Kodjori-Tabakhmela-Shavnabada-Soganlugi line until the arrival of reinforcements from internal Georgia¹².

Simultaneously, Kvinitadze ordered most of the troops protecting Abkhazia from the advancing 9th Army to re-deploy to Tbilisi leaving minimal amount of soldiers in front of Gagra to retreat slowly along the coastal line with rearguard fighting aimed at wearing out and containing the enemy until the moment when possible success near Tbilisi would allow some troops to be sent back and re-take whatever is lost in Abkhazia. However, even that measure did not prove sufficient for success although it allowed to postpone the loss of Georgian capital to the Soviets.

⁹ A.B. Kadishev, *Intervention and Civil War in Transcaucasia* (Moscow, 1961), p.386-389.

¹⁰ Kvinitadze, p. 301.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 269.



General George Kviniitadze, 1920

February 18-20

Early in the morning, on February 18 the artillery barrage from board of two Georgian armored trains stationed on he left bank of Kura (Mtkvari) river forced the Soviets to withdraw from Yaghluja heights their heavy artillery that was placed on the heights the night before to shell Georgian positions in front of Tbilisi. That successful Georgian operation deprived of artillery support the central group of the 11th Army that launched offensive on Tbilisi at night of February 18 and in the morning of February 19. The mountainous range forming natural fortification half-circle to the South-East of Tbilisi along Kodjori-Tabakhmela-Shavnabada-Soganlugi line, was

protected by some 5.5 army and guard battalions as well as some 150 cadets of Tbilisi Military School¹³. Several attacks of the Reds resulted in their defeat and retreat.



Modern view of Shavnabada monastery

By the end of 19.02, the 54th Brigade of the 20th Rifle Division was thrown back from the village of Shavnabada while the 58th Brigade was literally decimated near the town of Soganlugi by its 1500 defenders with several armored cars, artillery support from two armored trains and a number of bomb raids of two airplanes. That day the 58th Brigade lost over 530 dead as well as some 1000 prisoners and had to retreat to Sakaraulis mountain.

On the left flank the 96th rifle brigade of the Reds reinforced by the 12th Mounted brigade captured by the end of February 19 the village of Kodjori because its Georgian defenders ran out of ammunition. That was a serious defeat that could result in the immediate loss of Tbilisi because since that moment Georgian capital could be heavily shelled from Kodjori heights, not

¹³ Ibid., p. 285.

to mention that possession of Kodjori allowed the Reds to attack the defenders of Tabakhmela from the rear. To prevent this, General Kvinitadze managed to put together all his reserves including two new battalions that just arrived from Western Georgia and gave them an order to take Kodjori heights back. Meanwhile, early in the morning of February 20, several dozens of Georgian cadets with one officer, counter-attacked the advancing 96th Brigade near the village of Tsavkisi and managed to contain them for a while until several hours later, the last Georgian reserves counter-attacked the 96th Brigade from Tskhneti and Tabakhmela and re-captured Kodjori together with several pieces of heavy artillery that the Soviets were mounting on top of the heights at the very moment of successful Georgian counter-attack.¹⁴

West of Kodjori, Soviet cavalry group made several attempts to take over the town of Manglisi that fell to their hands by the end of the next day only.



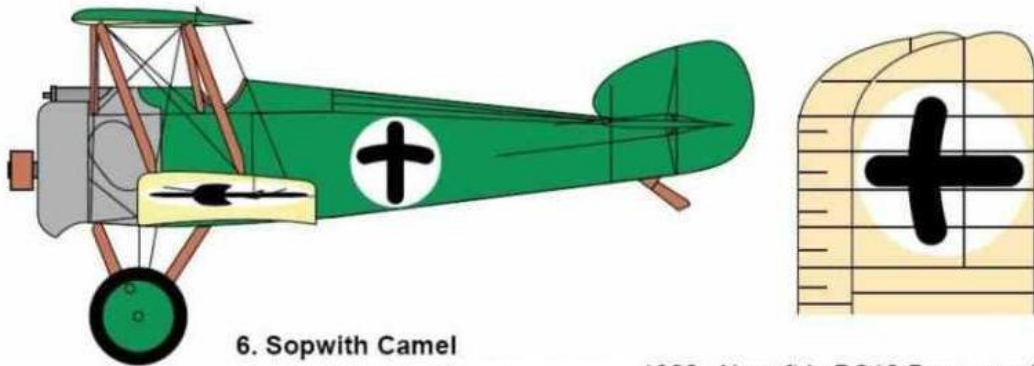
Georgian cadet Boris Hechtmann

On the right flank the 26th Rifle brigade of the 11th Red Army took the railway station of Rustavi and stormed towards Tbilisi along Tbilisi-Elisavetpol railroad. On the 19th of February however, it was stopped by the Georgians between the villages of Karajala and Karatagla. Several hours later the 26th rifle brigade was forced to retreat as far as Amartouli mountain where it was reinforced with a mounted regiment of the 9th Rifle Division. North-East of the railroad, the Reds advancing from Sartichala were also stopped in Orkhevi-Lilo area on the 19th of February and by the end of the 20th they were thrown back East of Sagarejo.

¹⁴ Kvinitadze, p. 288-289.



Georgian military pilots, 1921



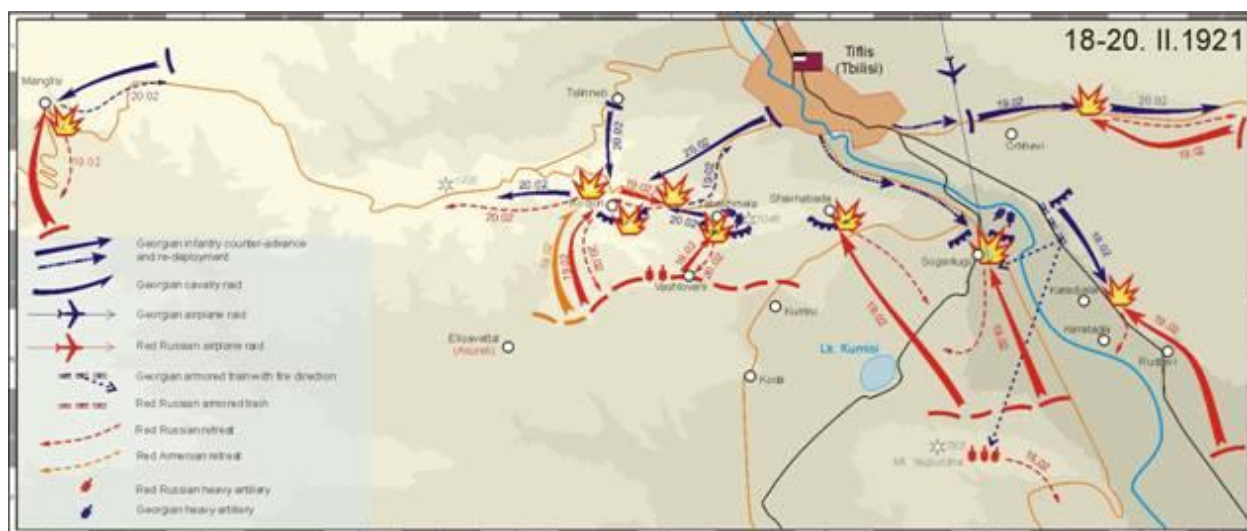
6. Sopwith Camel

1920. Aircraft is PC10 Dope on all upper surfaces, with Clear Doped Linen lower surfaces. Front fuselage panels are Medium Grey. Georgian national insignia consists of a distinctive Black cross on a White circle, and this appears on the fuselage sides and the undersides of the lower wing. The use of this insignia on the upper wing is unconfirmed. The Georgian cross has been derived from a 6th century design, and has also been noted in Georgian church paintings.

According to the Insignia Magazine No. 4 / 2008, the Georgian Airforce had an estimated strength of 56 Aircraft by Febuary 1921, including 25 Ansaldo SVA-10 and one Sopwith Camel.

Further North-East of Tbilisi the 18h Mounted Division advancing from Telavi took over Signakhi and by the end of the 20th of February appeared in Kachreti-Kalauri area threatening to envelope Georgian capital from the North¹⁵.

Thus, the end of the 20th of February, 1921, marked the failure of the Soviet-planned blitzkrieg. Georgian defenders of Tbilisi withstood the first attempt to take over the city, and the heavy casualties of the 11th Red Army made it incapable of any serious action during the next 4 days. Decades later, soviet military analysts mentioned severe winter and the destruction of the Poylu railroad bridge that did not allow the Reds to move their armored trains and platforms with tanks to the war theater. Georgian analysts in their turn, tend to believe that Tbilisi withstood the first blow due to the enthusiasm of the army and almost all strata of the civil society.

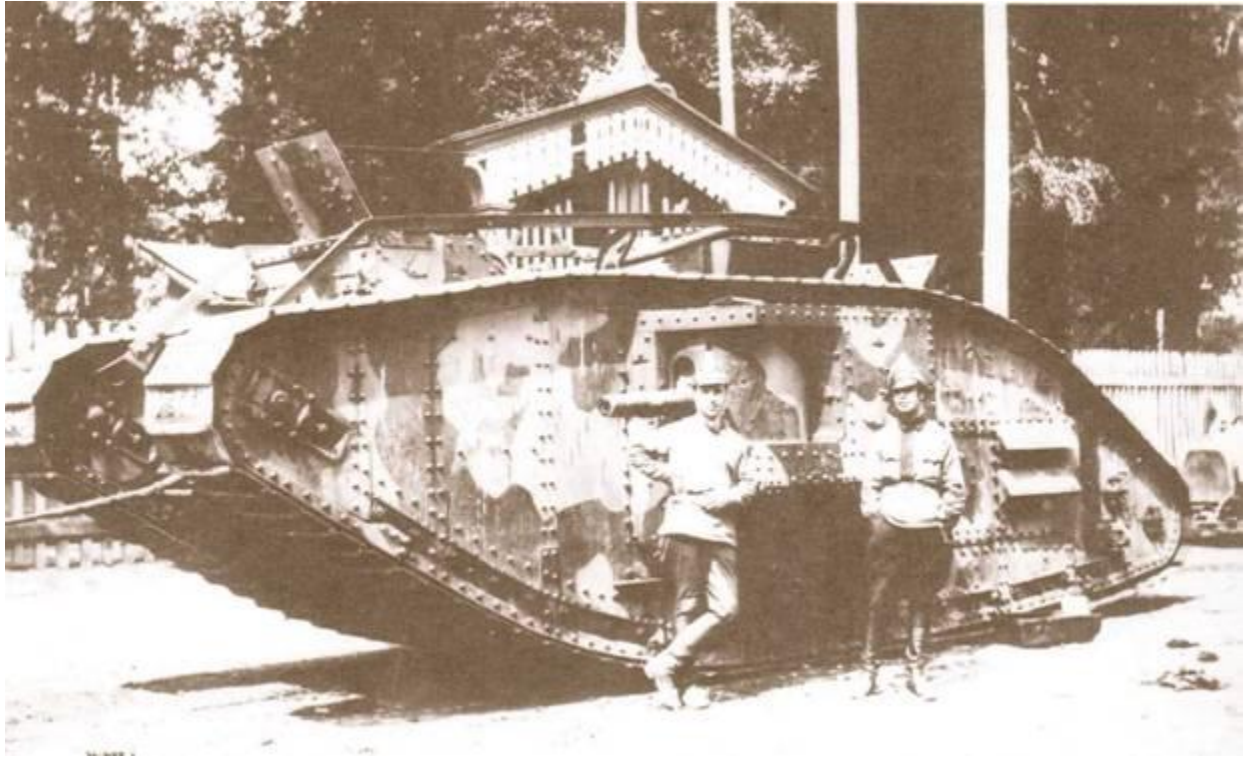


February 24-25

During the four days following the victories at Kojori and Soganlugi, Georgians were planning to launch a counter-offensive against the 11th Red Army from their positions between Lilo and the left bank of Kura (Mtkvari) river in order to throw the Reds as far back from Tbilisi as possible. However, shortage of manpower made that plan unrealistic. Meanwhile, the Red Army kept increasing its numerical superiority by receiving reinforcements that consisted of well-organized troops with combat experience on the fronts of Russian civil war of 1918-1920. During the above-mentioned four days, Soviet engineers also managed to repair the Poylu railway bridge,

¹⁵ Kadishev, p.391.

and the 5 armored trains of the Red Army could come close to the front line together with the tanks mounted on railway platforms.

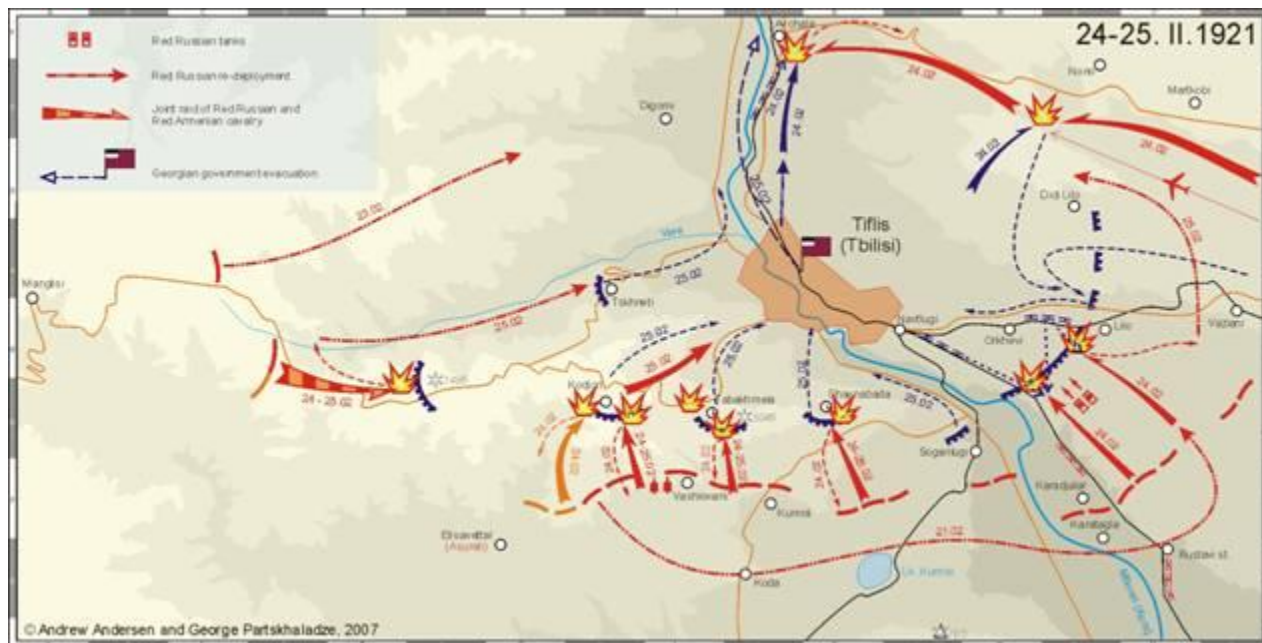


British made Mark-V tank used by the red army at the battle of Tbilisi

Early in the morning on February 24, the 11th Red Army received a new order, this time also demanding immediate capture of Tbilisi. 24 hours prior to the new offensive, all the forces of the 11th Army were re-grouped into two wings, left and right of Kura (Mtkvari) river.

The right wing of the 11th Army was to advance on Tbilisi trying to envelope the city from North-East. This group consisted of the 9th Rifle Division and the 18th Mounted Division both subordinate to Nikolai Kuybyshev. The backbone of this group was the 26th Rifle Brigade combined with the 154th Rifle Regiment (5 rifle regiments altogether) that was to launch offensive supported by armored trains and tanks from the position between the Lilo railway station and the left bank of Kura. Additionally, the 12th Mounted Division re-deployed on the 21st of February from the left wing was to storm into Tbilisi bypassing Lilo, take over the bridges across Kura and further advance on Mtskheta following the retreating Georgians. Simultaneously, the 18th Mounted division was to raid through Sortichala and Martkobi towards the railway station of Avchala. The capture of Avchala would seal Tbilisi at the west and make impossible both the evacuation of the Georgian government and organized retreat of the army.

If it failed to capture Avchala, the division was to destroy the railway to the west of Tbilisi in as many places as would be possible in order to block the movement of trains. The offensive of the right wing was to be actively supported by Soviet airplanes.



The left wing of the 11th Army under the command of Mikhail Velikanov was to enter Tbilisi from the right bank of Kura (Mtkvari) and develop further offensive on Mtskheta. In order to fulfill this task, the 25th, 54th and 58th Rifle Brigades supported by heavy artillery battalion, were to take over the Tabakhmela and Shavnabada heights. The 96th Rifle Brigade supported by the 9th Mountain Battery, Red Armenian irregulars and Red Cadets from Baku - was to capture the Kodjori heights. At the same time, the combined cavalry group consisting of the Mounted Regiment of the 20th Rifle Division, Red Armenian Mounted Brigade and one light battery, was to storm into Tbilisi from the West through the village of Tskhneti¹⁶.

The following 48 hours were marked by fierce fighting around the Georgian capital. In spite of overwhelming superiority of the enemy, Georgian soldiers, guardians, cadets and irregulars put up stiff resistance, especially along the line Lilo-Kura, Kodjori heights, near the village of Tabakhmela and Height 104, as well as in Shavnabada section. Many positions changed hands several times because each time the Soviets took them, Georgian counterattacks forced them to withdraw. All the defense positions around Tbilisi were evacuated by the end of February 25 only after Georgian troops were given an order to retreat. Most of them withdrew in perfect order.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 392-393.



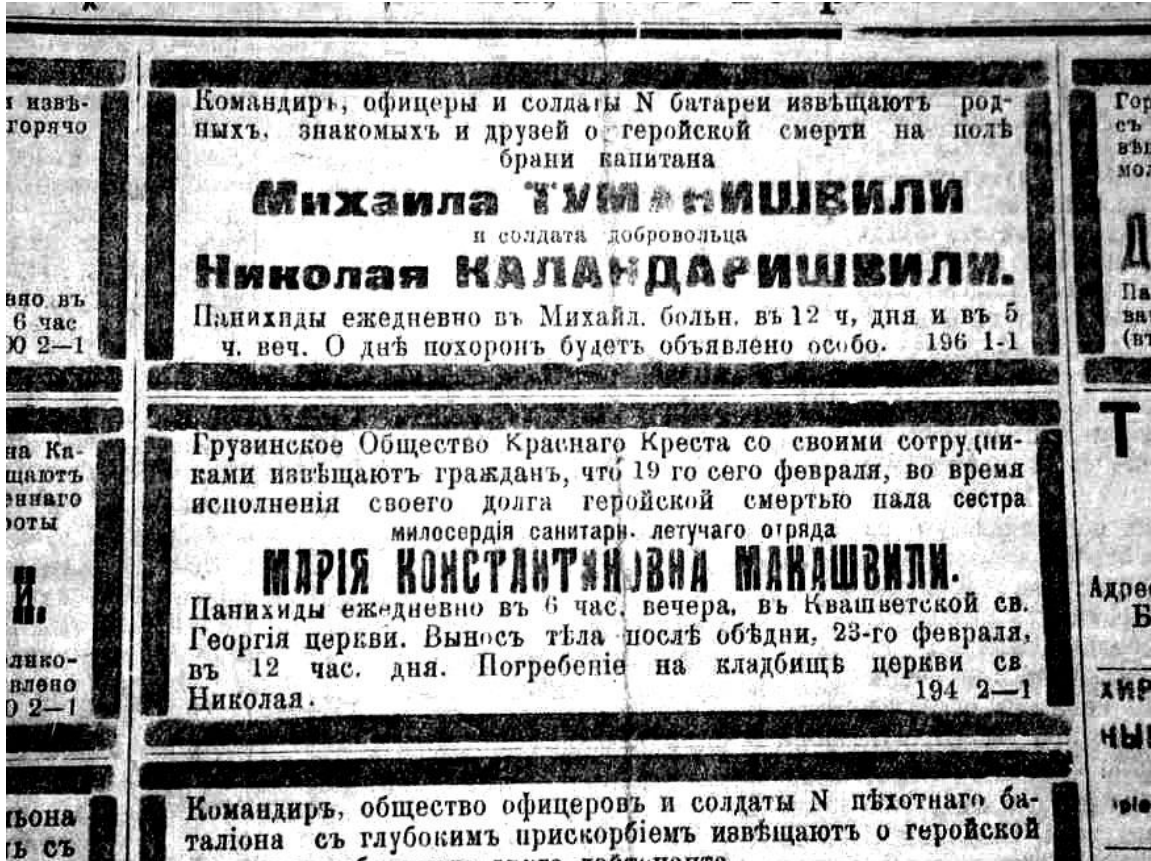
Hugo Maler, officer of Georgian Counterintelligence

In fact, the Soviet plan of full encirclement of Tbilisi failed. The 18th Mounted Division that was to block the evacuation route west of Tbilisi managed to capture the village of Martkobi. However, several miles to the west, near the village of Norio it had to withstand a desperate counter-attack of scanty Georgian cavalry (400 against 1500). The 18th Division managed to defeat the Georgians near Norio and stormed further westwards along Mamkoda-Gldani-Avchala line. Avchala station was captured by the Soviets for several hours but evacuated by the end of the 24th after the counterattack of Georgian irregulars from Tbilisi supported by an armored train. This local victory made it possible to successfully evacuate the national government and battle-worthy armed forces that occurred next day.

Simultaneously, the combined Cavalry group that tried to attack Tbilisi from the West, had no success in her attempts to defeat the Georgians entrenched around strategically important. Height-1496. After a series of ineffective attacks supported by artillery barrage on the 24th and 25th of February, this group relocated north-eastwards to Tskhneti area where it also proved unable to crush Georgian resistance. However, the mounted patrols of this group appeared in Digomi area, and Georgian command considered that maneuver a serious threat.

Keeping in mind the overpowering numerical and technical superiority of the Red army, Georgian command made a decision to evacuate all positions around Tbilisi as well as the capital city herself. Both the well-organized retreat of Georgian army towards Mtskheta and quick evacuation of the Government occurred by the end of the 25th of February. While losing

the capital, Georgians managed to save both their armed forces and administration to continue armed resistance.



Newspaper clip informing on the deaths in action



Field nurse Maria Makashvili mentioned in the above clip as killed in action

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On February 25, the “Revolutionary Committee” moved into Tbilisi from Shulaveri and for the second time proclaimed itself the only legitimate government of Georgia.

Struggle for Eastern Georgia, Abkhazia and Racha

February 25 – March 4

Within the 6 days after the fall of Tbilisi, Georgian troops under the command of George Kvinitadze were retreating westwards in the direction of the Surami range. Several attempts to organize counter-offensive against the Red Army along the left bank of Kura (Mtkvari) river and re-take Tbilisi failed mainly due to the poor organization and low spirit of the Guard that made up to 75% of all Georgian military force at that moment¹⁷.

Meanwhile, Kakheti - the biggest and the easternmost province of Georgia North-East of Tbilisi - was also lost to the Soviets after approximately 10 days of resistance of several thousand local irregulars under general Akhmeteli. At the end of February, two Red Army detachments of the Tersky group entered Eastern Georgia from the north, across the Main Caucasus range through the Roki and Jvaris passes. The first detachment that officially claimed to be Georgian Bolshevik guerillas under Alexander Gegechkori attempted to storm its way through Jvaris pass protected by a small Georgian garrison. The attempt was unsuccessful until another detachment of some 900 former Ossetian rebels organized and trained in Vladikavkas under the command of Red Ossetian warlord Gagloev went through unprotected Roki pass and prepared to attack the garrison of Jvaris from the rear. Facing inevitable overkill, defenders of Jvaris surrendered, and by March 1, the two “Red Guerilla” detachments marched into Dusheti thus further complicating Georgian defense of the remaining part of the province of Kartli¹⁸. Another detachment of Tersky group on February 25 percolated through Mamisoni pass the province of Racha in Western Georgia. That group was officially called the 98th Brigade of the 33d Rifle Division although it was reported to be only 300 men strong bringing it closer to the level of a

¹⁷ Kvinitadze, p.306.

¹⁸ Kadishev, p. 400.

battalion¹⁹. On February 28, this 98th Brigade took over the town of Oni forcing its small Geogian garrison to retreat towards Sachkhere and continued its offensive down Rioni river towards Kutaisi where by that time Georgian government was stationed.



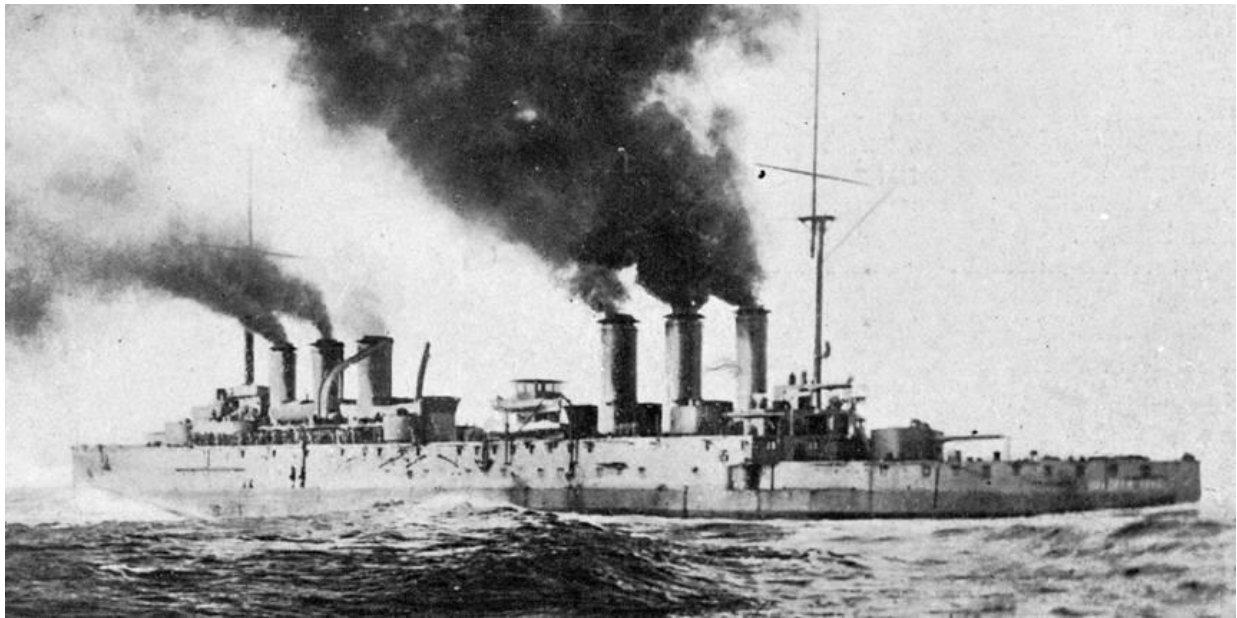
Click on the map to get high resolution image

Simultaneously, the 31st Rifle Division of the 9th Red Army together with 271st Naval Infantry Regiment and some irregular troops calling themselves “Abkhazian rebels” was developing successful offensive in Abkhazia and by the end of February took Gagra and Gudauta in spite of sustain resistance of scanty Georgian troops under General Artmeladze supported by heavy artillery fire of the French fleet stationed near the Abkhazian coast²⁰. On March 3, the Georgians had to leave their well-fortified positions west of Novyi Afon, where they were outflanked by the

¹⁹ Kvinitadze, p. 320, Kadishev, p. 404.

²⁰ Kvinitadze, p. 321, Kadishev., p. 406.

Reds. On the next day, Artmeladze decided to evacuate Sukhumi and three days later, on March 7, Ochamchira fell. On March 4, the Soviet occupational authorities in Sukhumi sanctioned the creation of a separate “Revolutionary Committee” which was not subordinate to the one already existing in Tbilisi. The Committee proclaimed the creation of a separate “Socialist Soviet Republic of Abkhazia” following the traditional Russian policy of dismembering Georgia²¹.



French Dreadnought Waldeck-Reusseu that provided artillery support of Georgian troops in Abkhazia, 1921

The main war theater however, was still the province of Kartli west of Tbilisi where Kvinitadze assembled about 6000 efficient Georgian troops comprising 4000 guardsmen and 2000 regular soldiers. In order to defeat that bulk of Georgian resistance force, the command of the 11th Army formed special “Batum Group” under Nikolai Kuybyshev that included 2 brigades of the 9th Rifle Division, 96th Rifle Brigade as well as the 12th and 18th Mounted Divisions while the 54th Rifle Brigade was sent back east to Kazakh district in order to crush nationalist rebels still fighting in Armenia and other formations were deployed as garrisons in Tbilisi, Telavi and strategically important towns of Kartli and Kakheti. In early March the “Batum Group” started offensive on Mtskheta and Gori and by the end of March 3 secured both towns after severe fighting. The Georgians of Kvinitadze retreated towards the fortified town of Mikhailovo (Khashuri) in order to seal the Surami pass that could block further advance of the Reds into Western Georgia.

²¹ Kadishev, p. 407.

Battle of Surami

March 4 -7

By the end of March 4, the vanguards of the advancing Soviet “Batum Group” in the amounts of 3000-4000 men approached Mikhailovo moving along both banks of Kura (Mtkvari) and taking the villages of Nabathevi and Azarma. On the next morning they attempted an attack on fortified Georgian positions and were repelled. Immediately after that, Georgian troops launched counter-attack supported by 3 armored trains. By the evening of March 5, the outnumbered Soviet forces of 52nd, 25th and 26th Rifle Brigades and the 9th Mounted Regiment were pushed back, forced to abandon their artillery and partially enveloped on their right flank. That was a significant military defeat that caused panic in Tbilisi and even forced the Soviet Command and the Revolutionary Committee to send out a group to conclude ceasefire agreement²².



Georgian soldier, 1921

Next morning, however the situation changed drastically, and the ceasefire talks were dropped. During night between March 5 and 6, the guardsmen of Georgian left flank under General

²² Kvinitadze, pp.314-316.

Koniashvili, abandoned their positions for unclear reasons and started an unorganized retreat westwards²³. That voided Georgian victory of the previous hours and turned it into defeat. Kvinitadze had to order retreat of his remaining forces, and during the 6th of March, the Reds, who received reinforcements from Tbilisi launched new attack on Mikhailovo. By the end of the day, Georgians lost both Mikhailovo, Surami pass with fortified positions around it and strategically important tunnel in the Surami range. That put an end to the plan of Georgian command to organize effective defense in Western Georgia as well as to all more or less organized resistance. The disaster of Surami marked the slide of Georgia into chaos and total collapse.

Upon the capture of Surami, the forces of "Batum Group" split in two subgroups. The 52nd, 25th brigades together with the 12th Mounted Division, secured their positions around the railway station of Tsypa west of Surami range while the 26th Rifle Brigade supported by the newly-arrived 18th Mounted Division turned southwards. By the end of the same day after a short but fierce skirmish, it took the town of Borjomi and advanced further on Akhaltsikhe²⁴.

Turkish Involvement

At the very beginning of Soviet Russia's military campaign in Georgia, the Nationalist government of Turkey performed quite complicated policies at their North-Eastern frontier. Aiming at cooperation with Soviet Russia in their mutual confrontation with the West, Turkish Nationalists were trying to take over the bigger chunks of disputed territory in the collapsing South Caucasus. Georgia in turn largely abandoned by the allies tried to obtain Turkish support by offering territorial concessions. With the battle flaring up around Tbilisi, Georgian diplomats were promising to cede to Turkey the districts of Ardahan and Artvin in exchange for Turkish intervention on Georgia's side or at least neutrality²⁵. Accepting that offer, Turkish troops subordinate to the Eastern Front commander Kazim Karabekir Pasa crossed the border into Georgia and by February 23 secured the above-mentioned districts with the towns of Ardahan, Artvin, Ardanuc and Okam. After the fall of Tbilisi, the Turks started advance far beyond the territory offered to them by the Georgian government trying to reach their 1828 border. By March 7 the Turkish troops took over Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki and entered the South-Western outskirts of Batumi facing no or very limited resistance on behalf of few Georgian troops stationed in the area of their activity.

However, the Turkish expansionist plan in Georgia faced Soviet challenge on March 8, when the 18th Mounted Division of the Reds under the command of Dmitri Zhloba entered Akhaltsikhe, and after some non-combat confrontation, the Turks retreated to the border of Ardahan district. The same thing happened on the next day when a small detachment of the 11th Army marched

²³ Ibid., p. 317.

²⁴ Kadishev, p. 402.

²⁵ Kvinitadze, pp. 277, 430, Kadishev, p. 408.

from Borjomi into Akhalkalaki forcing the Turks to withdraw.²⁶ At the same time, according to Kadishev, the Soviet forces stationed in Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki districts received an order to refrain from any hostilities towards the Turks and under no circumstances cross the administrative borders of Artvin and Ardahan districts²⁷ thus allowing the Turks to secure the border line of 1877 and satisfy at least their minimal territorial ambitions in Georgia. Ten days later, the events that happened in Batumi created additional stumbling-blocks for Soviet-Turkish cooperation to be described below.

The Fall of Western Georgia, Retreat towards Batumi and Evacuation of Georgian Government

March 8-13

The loss of Surami in combination with successful Soviet advance from Abkhazia and Racha made the defense of the remaining Georgian territory next to impossible. On March 8, the remnants of Georgian defenders of Abkhazia retreated across Inguri river towards the town of Zugdidi which fell into the Soviet hands 24 hours later. Simultaneously, Soviet Mamisoni group advancing from Oni, wiped out small Georgian covering force near the village of Meqvena and enveloped Kutaisi from North-West. On the 10th of March, the 98th Rifle Brigade advancing from Surami approached Kutaisi and entered the city after 2-hour battle. The Georgian government hastily left Kutaisi for Batumi while some 3000 Georgian troops retreated towards Samtredia²⁸ covered by the armored trains.

Despite recent defeats, Georgian Commander-in-Chief Kvinitadze had a new plan for further continuation of the war against the Soviets. According to Kvinitadze, all the Georgian forces that were still battle worthy, were to cross the river of Rioni into the provinces of Guria and Ajaria and contain the Soviets along the new defense lines formed by mountain ranges and rivers running down into the Black sea. In case that strategy had failed as well, Kvinitadze considered it possible to consolidate the government and the remaining troops in the excellently fortified port of Batumi simultaneously launching guerilla warfare all over Georgia using Georgia's alpine provinces of Svaneti and Pshavo-Khevsureti as major partisan base areas. That plan was actively supported by Colonel Kaikhosro Cholokashvili who later organized guerilla resistance and became famous field commander and a national hero²⁹.

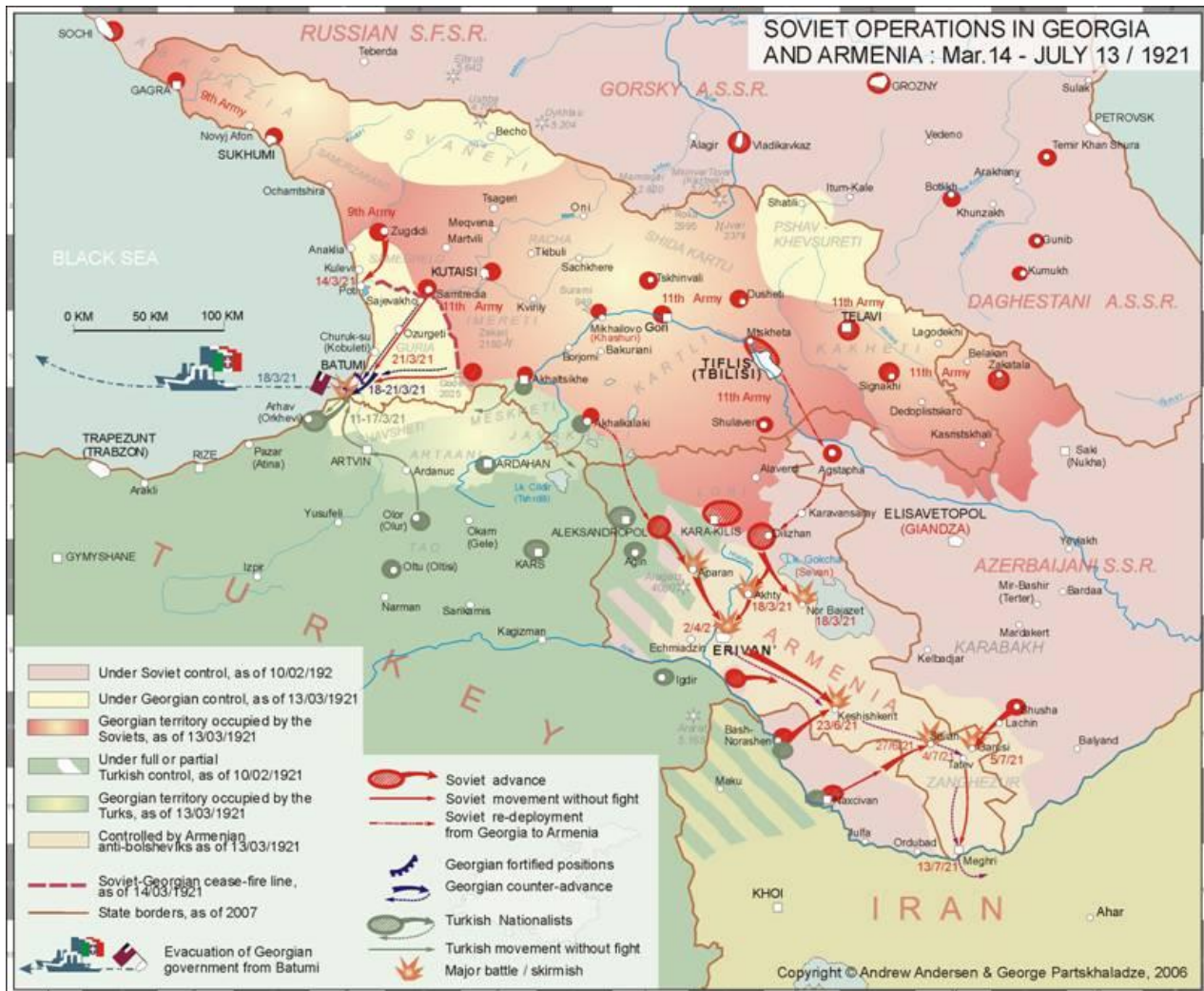
²⁶ Kadishev, p. 413.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 408.

²⁸ Ibid., p.409.

²⁹ Kvinitadze, p. 324.

However, the last strategic plan of Georgian military leadership failed largely due to the Turkish invasion of Batumi and Ajaria. Between 11th and 17th of March, the Turks under Kazim bei entered the city, took over some of the forts of its defense system and tried to take over all other forts still in Georgian hands. As General Kvinitatze wrote in his memoirs, Turkish-Georgian relationship in Batumi and around it was marked with a combination of friendly rhetoric and hostile actions³⁰.



Click on the map to get high resolution image

³⁰ Ibid, p. 330-332.

March 14-21

The loss of Batumi that had been considered as the last Georgian stronghold, made further resistance impossible. Facing the inevitable loss of the war, The government of Georgia sent envoys to Kutaisi to negotiate ceasefire with the command of the Red Army that in its turn, was exhausted and scattered. On March 14 an agreement was signed in accordance with which Georgian government was given several days for demobilization of the remnants of Georgian army and evacuation from Batumi to Constantinople (Istanbul).



General George Mazniashvili



General George Purtseladze

On March 17, the national government and military leadership of Georgia along with thousands of soldiers and civilians boarded two French and one Italian ships tied up at Batumi bay to leave the port next morning. The troops still remaining in Batumi were put under the command of General George Mazniashvili who was put in charge of their demobilization. On the same day Kazim bei, the commander of all Turkish troops stationed in Batumi and around it declared the city under Turkish administration with himself as a Governor General and demanded disarmament of the remnants of Georgian army. That action was confronted by Mazniashvili who ordered his troops to attack the Turks and draw them out of the city. After three days of ferocious fighting, Kasim bei's Turks were forced out of Batumi and Northern Ajaria. Next morning, the Red Army troops under Zhloba entered Guria and Northern Ajaria and accepted capitulation of Mazniashvili's troops. Small amount of Georgian soldiers still stationed in the

area refused to surrender to the Soviets and escaped into the mountains to continue fighting as partisans under Colonel Cholokashvili. Those who surrendered, including General George Purtseladze, were shot to death at the beach near Batumi

Three days later in Tbilisi the Parliament of Georgia was dissolved by the decree of the Revolutionary Committee.



Colonel Kakutsa Cholokashvili (right) with his guerilla troopers

Conclusion

In 1921, the nation-building process of Georgia was interrupted as a result of the Soviet-Georgian war – lost by the Georgians - and the Sovietization of the country, except in the districts ceded to Turkey. The brief intermezzo of independence was over. Born of crisis and chaos, the First Republic did not have enough resources to solve the most important domestic problems and, at the same time, withstand outside pressure. The restored state also lacked international support partially due to the fact that her geographic position and geo-political situation in the whole East Mediterranean area did not attract enough interest on behalf of the Allied powers. An international attempt to protect tiny and weak socialist republic from her aggressive neighbors seemed much less effective than to wait for a conflict between victorious Russia and Turkey to arise around the territorial issues in the South Caucasus. Independent Georgia also did not have either dominant ideology or significant nationwide pro-independence sentiment. Among other reasons for Georgia's military defeat, one can also mention the lack of strong professional leadership capable of consolidating the nation to win the war against significantly superior enemies.

However, shortcomings and failures aside, the precedent of independent nationhood was created, basic democratic institutions built and major economic reforms performed. Moreover, after the loss of independence, Georgia was not incorporated directly into Russia as it was within the former Russian Empire. Rather, it was transformed into one of several "Soviet republics" that enjoyed limited quasi-statehood in spite of political and economic subordination to Moscow. Three years of troubled independence were never totally forgotten by the people of Georgia, and the memory of that period was forwarded from generation to generation and became a vital part of the active national liberation movement of the late 80s and the "Rose Revolution" of 2003.