

## 1921: The End of the Georgian Democratic Republic

In the drawing of national borders in Transcaucasia and the formation of its territory, Georgia exhibited a practical preference for using contours dating back to the “Golden Age” of Georgian history (the eleventh to twelfth centuries) as the guiding principle rather than actual ethnic distribution. The problem for the government of the new Georgian Democratic Republic was that in many of the peripheral areas under dispute there was either no Georgian population whatsoever or it constituted an insignificant minority, or—despite being Georgian in terms of language or ancestry—it did not have a politically significant Georgian national identity (as in Ajaria and Meskheta, whose populations saw themselves first and foremost as Muslims). When a new nation-state is just taking shape and lacks legitimacy, the ethnic makeup of the population and the government’s policies toward minorities become important factors that can promote or hinder the internal consolidation of the country. Those in charge of Georgia’s state machinery were working to solve the problem of establishing control and securing foreign and domestic legitimacy in several areas: “Muslim Georgia,” Borchalo, Abkhazia, the Zakataly District, and South Ossetia.

Unlike in Armenia, the lands of historic Georgia were largely located in one state—the former Russian Empire—and therefore the drawing of the borders of an independent Georgian republic was planned and carried out almost entirely within the former borders of the empire. When it came to “foreign territory” (Lazistan and others) that remained under Turkish control and was populated almost entirely by Muslims, Georgia took a cautious approach. These areas were of peripheral importance to the Georgian national project, and attempts to incorporate them by force promised to come at great military and political cost. While laying claim to some of these districts, the Georgian government did not undertake unilateral actions to seize them. In particular, Georgia refrained from becoming embroiled in the Armenian-Turkish War in the fall of 1920.

The Entente’s victory over Germany and its allies in World War I and the departure of Turkish troops from Transcauca-

sia made it possible for the government of Georgia to absorb the portion of “Muslim Georgia” that had been part of Russia between 1829 and 1918 and lost under the Treaty of Batum (4 June 1918): by December 1918 Javakhetia and Meskheta had been annexed to Georgia, though it was not until August 1919 that the northern portion of Kars Province (the northern portion of the Ardahan District) was firmly incorporated into the new republic. The Batum District (Ajaria) was directly governed by the British, although both a local autonomous government and the prospect of extending Georgian jurisdiction were preserved there.

The military conflict of December 1918 between Georgia and Armenia over disputed areas in Borchalo and Javakhetia was quickly halted by the Entente: Georgia was allowed to keep Javakhetia, and Borchalo was divided into three zones: Georgian, Armenian, and neutral (Lori). During the Turkish invasion of Armenia in the fall of 1920, the Lori Neutral Zone was also held by Georgian forces (possibly by agreement with the Armenian government, to forestall another Turkish occupation).

Georgia controlled the territory of the former Sukhum District, which it had occupied since June 1918, but promised Abkhazia autonomy. Georgia also held the Sochi District but did not succeed in annexing it. When the White general Anton Denikin recaptured the district in 1919, he ignored the British proposal that it be made into a buffer zone between his forces and the Georgians and essentially placed Sochi into Russian hands. One of the little-known consequences of the “Sochi conflict” between Georgia and Denikin’s Armed Forces of South Russia was to shift the western border of Abkhazia. By the time Denikin was defeated and the Red Army had occupied the Sochi District in 1920, the line of the Georgian forces’ actual control passed through the Mekhadyr-Psou area, the point reached by the White offensive. In the Soviet-Georgian treaty of May 1920 the line of the state border between the two countries had been determined accordingly: it was traced along the Psou rather than the Bzyp River (which was farther south and had

marked the 1904–1917 administrative border between the Sochi and Sukhum Districts).

In the spring and summer of 1920 Georgian government troops suppressed a rebellion in South Ossetia. Tiflis’s problems in this territory dated back to 1918, when efforts to quash social unrest in areas populated by Ossetian peasants quickly became an ethnic conflict, specifically between the local Ossetian population and the Georgian state machinery. The resulting tangle of antagonisms became entrenched, and the declaration of Soviet rule in South Ossetia in March 1920 was perceived by many there as national self-determination outside the Georgian state: for Ossetian leaders it was a form of reintegration into the Russian, albeit sovietized, state. After the Georgian state-sponsored pogrom of 1920, “sovietization” and “self-determination” became synonymous in the minds of many South Ossetians.

Georgia’s neutral stance in the feuding between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the normalization of relations with Kemalist Turkey and Soviet Russia created the illusion of a certain stability in the country’s foreign relations. A treaty concluded in Moscow on 7 May 1920 defined the borders between Soviet Russia and Georgia (including the border with the newly sovietized Azerbaijan). The inclusion of the Zakataly and southern Borchalo Districts within Georgian borders prompted protests from Soviet Azerbaijan and then still independent Armenia, respectively. But as the fate of Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1920 seemed to indicate, the sovietization of Georgia was only a matter of time. Russian (and Georgian) Bolsheviks had a long list of grievances against Georgia’s Menshevik government: the occupation of Soviet Sochi and Tuapse in 1918, the handover of interned officials from the Terek Soviet Republic to Denikin’s forces in 1919, the suppression of a pro-Soviet revolt in South Ossetia in 1920, the support of Sheikh Najmuddin (Gotsinsky) of Hotso’s uprising in 1920–1921, and repressive measures against the Georgian branch of the Bolshevik Party. But all these were just a pretext. A guiding doctrine for the Soviets was that world revolution had to cross borders in order to develop, and the