

*Demology*

## The So-Called “South Ossetia” or “North Kartli” or “Shida Kartli Highlands”?

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On April 20, 1922 the Soviet government, without any real necessity and in gross violation of historical justice, set up the so-called “Autonomous Region of South Ossetia” on the territory of Shida Kartli, the ancient region of Georgia. Numerous Georgian, Russian and other historical sources unequivocally prove that there has never been and could never have been any Ossetia on this land or anywhere else in Georgia. Ossetia and historical homeland of Ossetians has always been located on the northern side of the Caucasioni Range. Intensive settlement of Ossetians on the territory of Georgia in accordance with colonization policy pursued by Russia openly began only in 1860s. It was the establishment of the terms “Ossetian district”, “South Ossetia” and “North Ossetia” during the mentioned period that served this policy. The establishment of these terms and formation of two Ossetian administrative units in one state (first in the Russian Empire, and then in the Soviet state) should have become the basis for unification of both entities within Russia. The paper explains why the term so-called “South Ossetia” should not be used and why one of two historical terms should be established to designate this unit both in Georgia and in the world community: “Shida Kartli Mountaineous Region” or “North Kartli”. Many demographic-statistical data of the past and present are cited to substantiate the views expressed in the paper. © 2024 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

“South Ossetia”, “North Ossetia”, “Shida Kartli mountaineous region”, “North Kartli”, natural increase, migration

According to Georgian and foreign records, as well as archaeological data, Shida Kartli, which stretches from the Aragvi river to the Likhi mountain range and from the Main Caucasioni Mountain Range to the Trialeti, is the region where a state originated 2,500 years ago and later expanded to cover the rest of Georgia. It is known as ‘Shida Kartli’, or ‘Inner Kartli,’ for this reason. This region continued to serve as the nation's cultural and national hub during the Middle Ages,

uniting the entire country. The autochthonous population of this territory was undoubtedly Georgians, specifically Kartlians (Kartli people), as evidenced by the fact that Shida Kartli is one of the most significant centers of Georgian statehood.

The toponymy of the area and historical sources, such as the seventh-century “Geography of Armenia” and the architectural monuments of the fifth and sixth centuries, which are solely adorned with Georgian inscriptions, attest to this same fact.

According to the aforementioned Armenian source, which preserved the old Georgian toponymy, it is quite evident that the entire area where the Bolsheviks created the so-called “South Ossetian District” is an integral part of Shida Kartli, inhabited by Georgians up to the Caucasioni Range, and no Alania ever existed or could exist there. North Caucasus is where Alania and Sarmatia were located.

The Dariali Valley's name, “Darialani”, which is a 3rd-century Persian toponym that is translated as “Gate of Ossetia” in Georgian sources, is another unquestionable evidence of this. This toponym, along with the toponym “Gate of Sarmatia”, clearly establishes the location of “Alania” or “Ossetia” in the North Caucasus; so, its placement in the South Caucasus is absurd. Based on the analysis of Shida Kartli archaeological material, most scientists conclude that the ethno-cultural process that started in ancient times (the beginning of the Bronze Age) in the northwest of Shida Kartli, or “South Ossetia”, is primarily local, developed internally, and equally occurred in other parts of Georgia. Generally speaking, none of the Scythians, Sarmatians, or Alans are native to the Caucasus, not just the South Caucasus. These nomadic tribes come from the steppes of the Southern Urals and the Volga region. It was not until much later in history that the distant ancestors of Alans, or Ossetians, made their way onto the North Caucasus slopes. Even later, in the latter part of the 17th century AD, only their small numbers settled in the Shida Kartli mountain massif. Numerous Georgian and foreign sources and works of literature attest to this. Regarding the prehistoric Georgian writing samples, there are many of them in this region that date back to the fifth century AD. Epigraphic monuments of Shida Kartli created over the centuries have been published by renowned Georgian and international scholars such as M. Brosset, P. Uvarov, and E. Takaishvili. All of the documentary evidence demonstrates that Shida Kartli, a historically significant region of Georgia, has always been a

part of the Georgian Kingdom. The epigraphic monuments indicate that the people who lived there were Georgians, as were the major feudal lords in the area and the rulers of this region. Throughout the Middle Ages and up until the turn of the 20th century, Georgian was the only official language of the state and churches in the region [1,2].

The Alans, the ancestors of the Ossetians, did not yet have a state union in the early centuries AD. The Alans, the ancestors of the Ossetians, did not yet have a state union in the early centuries of the new era. The Alans established the state union later, following the Hun invasions in the 70s of the 4th century AD, as they advanced southward toward the North Caucasus steppes. They didn't begin to settle down and become accustomed to the ethnocultural environment of the Caucasus until the 6th-7th centuries. The Alans- the Ossetians already controlled enormous lands between the rivers Tergi and Kuban by the V c. AD. Additionally, they possessed a portion of the land on the northern slope of the Caucasioni Range – the mountains and foothills. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this location was the seat of the pre-feudal state of Alania, also known as “Ovseti” in Georgian sources. This entity established political and cultural contacts with Georgia. In 12th-13th centuries Ossetia, the same as Alania was a vassal and military ally of the powerful Georgian monarchy.

Ossetian ethnos was formed later, after 13th-14th centuries, after Mongols forced the Ossetians to mix with local Caucasian tribes in the North Caucasus mountain valleys. There is not a single source from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries that attests to the Ossetians' migration and settlement in Georgia. They started to settle in the North Caucasus mountain valleys around this time. Actually, Ossetians did not start settling in Georgia until the middle of the 17th century, and even then, only in small numbers and near the origins of mountain valleys. Georgian, Ossetian, Russian and other foreign scholars all agree that Ossetians from

the North Caucasus, or their motherland, came to Georgia primarily in the 17th century [3,1].

Famous Ossetian scientist B. Pliev wrote in this regard: “South Ossetia as a national-ethnographic unit emerged as a result of the fact that part of Ossetians moved from the North Caucasus to the southern slope of the Main Caucasioni Range”. Famous Russian scientists G. Chursin, V. Pfaff, N. Dubrovin, L. Zgursky and others assumed that Ossetians migrated to Shida Kartli from North Ossetia. In particular, according to G. Chursin, “Ossetians came to the territory of South Ossetia relatively recently”. Prof. V. Pfaff shares the same opinion. “All Ossetians of the South Caucasus remember that they settled here from the north.” Academician Dubrovin, who is well aware that there is no South Ossetia, to the term “South Ossetia”, he adds “so called”. L. Zagursky notes that “Basic Ossetia is located on the northern slope of the Caucasioni Range” [3].

It can be definitely stated that prior to the 19th century neither Georgian, nor Russian and other foreign sources contain the fact that the term “South” or “North” was used for Ossetia. This is confirmed by numerous Georgian, Russian and other foreign sources. On the contrary, one can name many such documents in which even Russian high-ranking officials referred to Ossetians living on the territory of Georgia as Ossetians living in Shida or North Kartli. For example, Count Paskevich, Russian Viceroy in Georgia, in a letter sent to the military minister of the Russian Empire Chernyshov calls Ossetians living in Georgia not Ossetians from South Ossetia but Ossetians living in small numbers in North Kartli, as “Ossetians of North Kartli”, i.e. there was no name “South Ossetia” but only the name “Ossetians of North Kartli”.

This is also confirmed by Professor L. Chibirov in his four-volume “Periodicals of the Caucasus about Ossetia and Ossetians”, published in Tskhinvali in the 1980 [4].

To better understand the issue it is necessary to briefly review the administrative-territorial divi-

sion of East Georgia during the rule of the Russian Empire. In 1830 Ossetian district was created from the villages of Gori Uyezd inhabited with Ossetians, which was divided into four districts: Java-Cheselti, Koshka-Roki, Magran-Dvaleti and Ksani-Zhamuri. On April 10, 1840 the Russian Empire divided the Caucasus into two entities: the Georgian-Imereti Province and the Caspian Okrug (District). In 1842 two districts were created to govern mountainous Georgia: Tusheti-Pshavi-Khevsureti and Ossetian Districts. In 1843 Ossetian District was divided into two more districts: Ossetian District and Mountain District. In order to have a clearer picture of what districts of Shida Kartli the so-called “Ossetian District” was formed, let us look at its borders. If we compare the borders of so-called South Ossetia and Ossetian District on the “General Map of Caucasus” published in 1847, we will see that not only Tskhinvali but also Akhlagori was not part of the latter and Kudaro-Mamisoni District was part of Racha Uyezd. Even the uninformed reader will see that the Ossetian Okrug (District) included only about one third of so-called “South Ossetia” [5].

In 1859, the administrative-territorial division of the entire Caucasus changed radically again. We will only mention that Tushi-Pshavi-Khevsureti District was renamed into Tianeti District, and Ossetian District was abolished, joined Gori Uyezd and was renamed into Tskhinvali Police District (Sabokaulo in Georgian). At the same time, radical changes took place in the North Caucasus. In particular, Tergi District was formed in its central part, which, in addition to Vladikavkaz District, now included the northern part of the former Ossetian District of Gori Uyezd: Nar-Mamisoni and Zaki. i.e. Dvaleti, the ancient historical province of Georgia.

Numerous Georgian and foreign sources prove that historically Dvaleti has always been an integral part of Georgia and it was inhabited by only one Georgian tribe - the Dvalis. This is how one of the most significant and indivisible parts of Georgia

was detached from the country with one sweep, under the specially ‘invented’ pretext of improving administrative management. In addition, by doing so, the Russian Empire grossly violated the northern border of Georgia, which from ancient times passed through the main pass of the Central Ridge of the Caucasus [5].

As in other valleys of the Shida Kartli mountains, Christianity spread in Dvaleti from the very outset, from the 6th century, and this region was a part of Nikozi Eparchy. After the dissolution of united Georgia, from the 15th century it was part of the Kingdom of Kartli. As a royal district, it was governed by the governors appointed by the king. Here, as in Shida Kartli as a whole, representatives of such noble families as Amilakhvari, Machabeli, Kanchaveli, Orbeli, Abazadze, Bagvashi were appointed as voevods and superiors. At the beginning of the 17th century the governor of Dvaleti was Giorgi Saakadze, who was also the governor of Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. It should be noted that in 1801 Russia annexed Georgia, including Dvaleti [1].

A separate mention should be made of the city of Tskhinvali. Historically, it has always been a Georgian city. According to statistical data of the Russian Empire itself, in 1858 only Georgians, Armenians and Jews lived in Tskhinvali. The same data are confirmed by family lists compiled and officially published in 1886. Even then not a single Ossetian lived in Tskhinvali. In both cases data was collected and published by Russian officials. By mentioning this, we would like to emphasize that these facts could not have been falsified by Georgian scientists.

The movement for unification of Ossetians of Shida Kartli into one administrative unit and establishment of the term “South Ossetia” began only after the 1917 February Revolution. On April 20, 1922 according to the Decree №2 of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Georgian SSR South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast was formed within Georgia and Tskhinvali was declared the capital.

It is remarkable that in the Ossetians’ homeland in the Caucasus there was no Ossetian state administrative-territorial union and North Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (District) was founded only on July 7, 1924 and on December 5 of the same year it was granted the status of an autonomous republic. It is clear that the establishment of two Ossetian administrative units in one state should have become the basis for unification of the both entities within Russia. This is confirmed by the fact that after the August 2008 War so-called Russia recognized the independence of the region of “South Ossetia” as an “independent country” in violation of all international laws and even its own constitution. Moreover, the Russian authorities, for no reason whatsoever, further expanded the so-called “South Ossetia” and added to it many historically Georgian villages in the Gori Municipality of Georgia that were never part of the Autonomous District (e.g. Kvemo Nikozi, Zemo Nikozi, Ditsi, Variani, Pkhvenisi, Dzevera and many others).

Given all of the above, we would like to say that we believe that instead of the terms: “South Ossetia”, “Tskhinvali region” and even “Samachablo” (which cannot include all the territories that historically have always been Georgian), the terms “North Kartli” or “Shida Kartli Mountaineous Region” should be officially introduced in Georgia and the international community. Accordingly, the terms: “Ossetians of North Kartli” or “Ossetians of Shida Kartli Mountaineous Region” should be established. We are sure that this will be historically fair and will help avoid many misunderstandings and artificially created conflicts in the future, especially when officially tsarist Russia at that time used this exact and historically fair name.

The facts, arguments and opinions we have presented are further supported and made reliable by unmistakable demographic statistics, which are available in large quantities, and here we will present only a part of them [5].

Mass immigration of Ossetians from the North Caucasus to Georgia began in the 1960s. Reliable

information about this is given by the famous Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary. According to the Encyclopedic Dictionary, in 1860 the number of Ossetians living in “North Ossetia” was 46,802 people, while in Georgia, namely in North Kartli, there were 19,324 Ossetians, i.e. in just 20 years their number has increased by only 12,124, i.e. approximately 1.3 times. According to the same data, 51,988 Ossetians were already living in Georgia. i.e. their number increased by 32,664, i.e. approximately tripled. It is noteworthy that almost 47,000 Ossetians living in North Ossetia increased by only 12,000 in 20 years, while the number of Ossetians living in Georgia in much smaller numbers increased by 32,664 during the same period. Of course, in such a short period it is absolutely impossible to attribute the growing number of Ossetians to natural increase [4]. This was possible only as a result of mechanical growth, i.e. intensive migration process. This means that during this period a large number of Ossetians from the North Caucasus migrated to live in Georgia. Opinions based on the statistical material we have cited were expressed at different times and in different forms by many Russian scientists: G. Chursin, V. Pfaff, L. Zangursky, Dubrovin and others.

Intensive settlement of Ossetians on the territory of Kartli and Kakheti Plain continued throughout the XX century. According to the Union census of 1926, the number of Ossetians in Georgia was already 113 thousand, of which 60 thousand lived in the newly formed autonomous region “South Ossetia” and 53 thousand lived outside it. According to the last census conducted in the Soviet Union in 1989, the number of Ossetians in Georgia was already 164 thousand people. Of them about 64 thousand Ossetians lived on the territory of the former District and up to 100 thousand lived outside it.

## Results and Discussions

As it is clearly seen, between 1926 and 1989 the number of Ossetians in Georgia outside the District increased by about 47 thousand, i.e. 87%, while in

the former District it increased relatively insignificantly, by about 4.8 thousand, or 8%.

According to the general census conducted in Georgia in 2002, 82 thousand Ossetians lived in Georgia, including 46 thousand in the former District.

According to the Ministry of Health of so-called “South Ossetia”, there is an annual trend of decreasing birth rate in the region showing a 20% decrease for the last 5 years.

According to the statistical department of the Tskhinvali regime, in 2008 (before the August War) the population of the entire territory of the former so-called “South Ossetia” was about 82.5 thousand people, including about 68 thousand on the territory controlled by the Tskhinvali regime and about 14 thousand on the territory controlled by Georgia. Of these 58 thousand or about 70% were ethnic Ossetians, and 22.5 thousand or about 27% were ethnic Georgians.

According to a census carried out by the de facto government in 2015, the population is 53,532, including 48,146 ethnic Ossetians, or about 90%, and 3,966, or about 7%, Georgians.

Today, the total number of Ossetians in the world is about 755,297, including 530,000 living in Russia.

## Conclusion

It is very important to note that the so-called “South Ossetia” conflict had no ethno-demographic basis. This is confirmed by the fact that throughout the twentieth century there were no obstacles to the demographic development of Ossetians in Georgia. Therefore, in both, the so-called “South Ossetia” and the rest of Georgia, almost all indices of Ossetian demographic development were better or equal to the all-Georgian indices. For example, in 1989, before the start of the conflict, the total birth rate in so-called “South Ossetia” and throughout Georgia was 16.7 ‰, while in Tbilisi it was much lower of 14.4 ‰). The mortality rate was also the same and amounted to 8.1 ‰ (in Tbilisi this figure was much lower amounting to 6.2 ‰).

## დემოლოგია

# ე.წ. „სამხრეთ-ოსეთი“, თუ „შიდა ქართლი“, ან შიდა ქართლის მთიანეთი?\*

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\*\* ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახ. თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, სოციალურ და პოლიტიკურ მეცნიერებათა ფაკულტეტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

საბჭოთა მთავრობის მიერ 1922 წლის 20 აპრილს, ყოველგვარი რეალური საჭიროების გარეშე, ისტორიული სამართლიანობის უხეში დარღვევით, საქართველოს ძირძველი მხარის, შიდა ქართლის ტერიტორიაზე შეიქმნა ე.წ. „სამხრეთ ოსეთის ავტონომიური ოლქი“. ნაშრომში მრავლად არის მოყვანილი როგორც ქართული, ასევე რუსული და სხვა ისტორიული წყაროები, რომლებიც უტყუარად ამტკიცებენ იმას, რომ, აღნიშნულ ტერიტორიაზე, ისევე, როგორც დანარჩენ საქართველოში, არასდროს არსებობდა არავითარი ოსეთი და არც შეიძლება რომ მას ეარსება. ოსეთი და ოსების ისტორიული სამშობლო ყოველთვის იყო კავკასიონის ქედის ჩრდილოეთ მხარეს. საქართველოს ტერიტორიაზე ოსების ინტენსიური ჩამოსახლება, რუსეთის მიერ დაუფარავად წარმოებული კოლონიზატორული პოლიტიკის შესაბამისად, იწყება მხოლოდ 1860-იანი წლებიდან. სწორედ ამ პოლიტიკას ემსახურებოდა იმ პერიოდში ტერმინების „ოსეთის ოკრუგი“, „სამხრეთ ოსეთი“, „ჩრდილოეთ ოსეთი“ დამკვიდრება. ამ ტერმინების დამკვიდრებით და ერთ სახელმწიფოში (ჯერ რუსეთის იმპერიაში, შემდეგ საბჭოთა სახელმწიფოში) ორი ოსური ადმინისტრაციული ერთეულის შექმნა უნდა გამხდარიყო ორივე ერთეულის რუსეთის შემადგენლობაში გაერთიანების საფუძველი. ნაშრომში დასაბუთებულია, თუ რატომ აღარ უნდა იხმარებოდა ტერმინი ე.წ. „სამხრეთ ოსეთი“ და რატომ უნდა დამკვიდრდეს ამ მხარის აღსანიშნად, როგორც საქართველოში, ასევე მსოფლიო თანამეგობრობაში ორი ისტორიული ტერმინიდან ერთ-ერთი: „შიდა ქართლის მთიანეთი“ ან „ჩრდილო ქართლი“. ნაშრომში გამოთქმული მოსაზრებების გასამყარებლად, მოყვანილია მრავალი, როგორც წარსულის, ასევე თანამედროვე დემოგრაფიული სტატისტიკური მონაცემი.

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