

*History*

## Georgian-Armenian Relations in 1918-1920 and Georgia's Constituent Assembly

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**ABSTRACT.** The paper highlights the position of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia on the relations between Georgia and Armenia in 1918-1920. It is emphasized that the relations of the Democratic Republic of Georgia with the Republic of Armenia during the period of their independent existence were rather complicated and volatile.

Georgia and Armenia acknowledged each other's sovereignty only in March of 1919, and on November 3 of the same year they also concluded two agreements in Tbilisi. The first one envisioned the solution of debatable questions by obligatory arbitration, as for the other, it envisioned free transit for Armenia's goods on Georgia's railway.

The Constituent Assembly, the supreme legislative body of the Democratic Republic of Georgia ratified both agreements with the majority of votes in spite of the resistance of the oppositional parties. Armenia's Parliament also confirmed the agreements successfully.

Georgia's Constituent Assembly immediately reacted to the issues of the day, connected with the relations with Armenia and expressed its impartial opinion. © 2012 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

**Key words:** *Georgia, Armenia, Constituent Assembly, free transit, arbitration agreement.*

The relations of the Democratic Republic of Georgia with the Republic of Armenia during the period of their independent existence were rather complicated and changeable. These two states that appeared almost simultaneously (in May of 1918) in the same city (Tbilisi) acknowledged one another only *de facto* and abstained from recognizing each other *de jure* for ten months. The main reason of this was that there were no fixed frontiers between the two newly established republics. In spite of the fact that the Georgian state was established on its historic territory it could not escape the unjust claims of its

neighbors, among them of Armenia.

The authorities of the Democratic Republic of Georgia began establishing the state frontiers of the country according to the historic, economic, strategic and other parameters. As the publicist of the newspaper "Sakartvelo" said, "Georgia took a definite and quite correct position from the very start; I do not want anything of anybody else, and I will not give you anything belonging to me. Georgia has not declared any claims to the historic territory of any of its neighboring nations, or strategic points of these states, and it has not touched the vital interests of

any of its neighboring peoples. Georgia demands the same kind of attitude of the neighboring peoples [1: 1],” but the neighboring states acted differently.

The governmental circles of Armenia requested that the frontiers in the districts, considered to be debatable, should be fixed according to the principle of ethnic and real population in them. They wanted to take the Lore-Borchalo, Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki districts from our country. They had been conditioned by the colonial policy of the Russian Empire and it was not the result of the natural development of these parts of the country.

The authorities of Armenia did not take part in the work of the conference of south Caucasian republics, appointed in Tbilisi, and tried to get hold of the disputed territories by war.

On December 9, 1918 Armenia's armed forces invaded the Borchalo district and occupied its main strategic points in several days. The government of Armenia presented an ultimatum to Georgia that it should free the territory, including Tbilisi [2].

The Georgian regular army and the units of people's guards liberated the districts, occupied by the enemy in a short time and restored the *status quo ante bellum* [3]. After the Georgian armed detachments had made the enemy retreat the commanders of the army of the Allies, deployed in the Southern Caucasus, intervened. Following their advice, the military operations were stopped on December 31 and the disputed territory was declared the neutral zone of Lore. Before the question was finally solved the Georgian and Armenian armies were to stand there in turn [4:13].

The above-mentioned incident was called a military conflict between Georgia and Armenia, the war of two neighboring republics. The bloody clash whose victims exceeded 1000 people on both sides [5: 460-462], let alone other damage, did not settle the contradiction of interests between the neighboring states. Later on the Prime Minister of the Armenian Republic O. Kajaznuni said, “The war made us think of many things. We had fought against the neighbor

with whom we should have had the closest contacts. It was Georgia through which we got in touch with the outer world. We felt it and we really wanted to have friendly relations with the Georgians, but we were unable to do it. Alongside the positions of Georgia's government, a certain part was played by the fact that we were weak, politically undeveloped and lacked the ability of governing the country” [6:24].

The leaders of Georgia and Armenia placed their hopes on the Paris Peace Conference in vain too. The leaders of the allied states, busy with large-scale matters, did not show great interest in settling the debatable questions of the small Caucasian republics. It was the economic necessity that stimulated the drawing together and partner cooperation between Georgia and Armenia that were on the way of building independent states.

More attention was paid to diplomatic formalities in Tbilisi and Yerevan. In March 1919 when the Constituent Assembly, Georgia's supreme legislative body, began to work the government of the Armenian Republic, Armenia's Parliament and the National Council of Armenians living in Georgia sent telegrams of congratulation to mark this event. The Presidium of the Constituent Assembly considered these congratulations to be an especially important and noteworthy fact and in contrast to many other telegrams, given to the press for publication, they were read at the plenary meeting straightaway [7: 32, March 14].

The Constituent Assembly of Georgia answered the received congratulation telegrams with telegrams of thanks.

The democratic Republic of Georgia was the first to make a step towards a mutual juridical recognition. On March 8, 1919 Georgia's government recognized the Republic of Armenia as an independent state *de jure*, confirming it with a special note. On March 24 of the same year the minister of foreign affairs of Armenia S. Tigranyan sent an answering note to his Georgian colleague: “I am firmly convinced that the republics,

established on the territory of Transcaucasia, have common interests and goals in a number of questions, which are very important for their steady existence and prosperity, the Republic of Armenia is glad and sees solidarity and the confirmation of interrelations in this act. For its part the government of Armenia thinks it their duty to confirm before your government that it considered and considers the Democratic Republic of Georgia an independent state” [8].

“The claims have become moderate. The psychology of confrontation between states has died down. The wishes have been put in order. It has become clear to everybody who had the right to demand what, and who could give up what... The energy of self-sacrifice and readiness for sacrifice has made it clear what rights each of us have and shed light on unjustified violence as well,” the Georgian press remarked concerning the fact of Armenian and Georgian relations [1: 1].

Two important agreements were concluded in Tbilisi on November 3, 1919. According to the first one Georgia and Armenia undertook to solve all disputes, existing at present or that might arise between these states in future, by agreement, but if no agreement was reached to solve it by obligatory arbitration. The other document envisaged free transit of Armenian goods on the Georgian railway for three years.

The agreements were signed by the Minister of Internal Affairs and the Defence Minister of Georgia N. Ramishvili, the Deputy Chairman of Georgia’s Constituent Assembly S. Mdivani, the representative of the government of the Republic of Armenia S. Mamikonyan and member of Armenia’s Parliament Khachatryan. Both agreements were subjected to ratification. The exchange of the instruments of ratification was to take place in the capital of Georgia within two weeks.

Upon proper consideration of the agreements, the committee of foreign affairs and the juridical committee of Georgia’s Constituent Assembly passed the agreements to the supreme legislative body for

ratification. The Constituent Assembly convened a special session on November 14, 1919 to ratify the agreements.

The Social-Democrat K. Japaridze, member of the committee of foreign affairs of the Assembly presented the question for discussion at the plenary meeting.

The deputies discussed the good and bad sides of the agreements separately. Japaridze said, “Last year’s sad conflict has been forgotten since an agreement was reached with Armenia, the conflict entered our history as a dark spot. Some people thought that this event meant relations between Georgia and Armenia were spoilt for ever. But such a thing cannot happen to nations that are joined and interlocked by historic destiny” [7: 4, Nov. 14].

The Minister of Foreign Affairs Evgeni Gegechkori spoke on behalf of the government of Georgia. According to him, owing to the concluded agreements, Georgia would be acknowledged by the whole of democratic Europe as a republic of progressive, cultural principles. “This agreement is a guarantee that the disaster that happened between our country and Armenia will not occur again. It is of great real value, and it depends upon both of our peoples that we should use this beautiful sharp weapon as people’s interests demand.”

“I cannot imagine such an arrangement of Transcaucasia where one nation will be happy and free and others will be wretched and enslaved... Solidarity of nations is the means that will bring prosperity to our republics and will establish the necessary conditions for our existence and development.” Gegechkori stated [7: 7-8, Nov. 14].

The socialist-federalist Samson Pirtskhalava approved of the agreement, concluded with Armenia, welcoming it. “Considering the past life of Georgia, the wars that devastated half of Georgia and destroyed the cultural creations of the nation, considering the important questions facing Georgia, we have no right to choose any other way, but the way of agreement with the neighboring peoples,”

said the deputy [7: 9, 19 XI].

The socialist-revolutionary Leo Shengelaia called the agreement a new victory of democracy and the first step made towards the welfare of the Georgian and Armenian peoples. "The agreement is a splendid proof of the fact that the expectations of nationalists did not come true... Neither the war nor the chauvinistic poison killed the aspiration to democracy of both nations, their aspiration to solidarity, establishing good relations between themselves... No arms will judge us henceforth. War and imperialistic policy are rejected. We believe that the working democracy of Georgia and Armenia will not deviate from this path," he said [7: 12, Nov. 14].

Ter-Stepanyants spoke on behalf of the Dashnaktsyutun. He greeted the agreement and emphasized the following, "This great issue will facilitate the solidarity of Georgia and Armenia's democracy" [7: 17, Nov. 14].

While discussing the agreement, socialists of every colour accentuated only the significance of the peoples' solidarity and cooperation. As for the right-wing opposition – the National-Democratic and National Parties of Georgia, they considered the question from the viewpoint of national and state interests.

The chairman of the National-Democratic faction Giorgi Gvazava focused attention on the international resonance of the Georgian-Armenian agreement and he found it positive from that point of view. "Our situation today is such that this agreement will be considered very important in Europe. Many false and spurious rumors are spread in Europe about us and the peoples of Transcaucasia in general. When they hear about it in Paris where the questions on nations are decided, of course, such a direction of our policy will make a good impression. They will change their opinion of us. From this point of view this act is a good step," Gvazava remarked [7: 14-15, Nov. 14].

The leader of Georgia National Party – Grigol Veshapeli compared the agreement, presented for ratification, with the military-defensive agreement,

concluded with Azerbaijan in June 1919, emphasizing that: "An agreement should not begin with economic questions. It should begin with the political alliance which will make it the duty of the participating countries to defend their neighbor from the aggression of a foreign force." Herewith, Veshapeli expressed his suspicion that "such an agreement will remain a declaration and will not have any real political significance in the life of the Caucasian nations before our neighbor – the Armenian nation – acknowledges that it is absolutely necessary to establish a political alliance of defense of the Caucasian republics whose aim will be the defense and consolidation of the freedom of independent national states" [7: 12, Nov. 14].

The chairman of the National-Democratic Party – Spiridon Kedia found the agreement on free transit defective and considered it damaging for Georgia. "Transit is one of the important sources of Georgia's Treasury and... our government has given away such a factor to Armenia gratis," he remarked. This oppositionist deputy also noted that the government had not paid any attention to the fact of the transit of military material to Armenia via Georgian territory, which he thought quite inadmissible.

The speaker Konstantine Japaridze defended the position of the majority, saying: "If you do not make any concessions, you will not be able to reach an agreement. This concession, was prompted by our wish to have good-neighborly relations with Armenia and we are sure that all the disagreement will soon come to an end, the whole Caucasian democracy will stand on the grounds of common interests and will guarantee our free existence and future" [7: 19-20, Nov. 14].

The ratification of the agreements was put to vote separately. The Parliament factions of the National-Democratic and National Parties abstained from voting. The presented documents were ratified by the majority of votes. The Armenian Parliament too carried out the ratification successfully.

The High Commissioner of Britain in the Caucasus – Oliver Wardrop sent the following telegram to the

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in connection with this important step towards establishing good-neighborly relations between Georgia and Armenia: "Your Excellency, I hasten to congratulate You and Your colleagues on those splendid agreements whose copies you sent me today, showing Your good will. Accept my deepest regards" [9: 4, Nov. 7].

Both agreements, concluded on November 3, 1919 between Georgia and Armenia came into force officially after the ratification. The free transit, which was mainly an expression of good will on the part of Georgia, was put into operation immediately. Georgia implemented the term of the agreement fully. As for the obligatory arbitration, the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia did not violate the terms of the agreement in this case either, and was true to them to the end. But the leaders of the Armenian Republic again dithered in this respect, expressed reluctance in solving the problem by international norms, and on every possible occasion presented territorial claims to Georgia, as, for instance at the San Remo conference in April, 1929, etc.

The Democratic Republic of Georgia carried out the course of close cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan and the Republic of Mountain Peoples, of "the Caucasian unity," and the unity of economic and military defense of the Region [10: 23].

The Armenian Dashnak government also spoke much of the solidarity of neighboring nations, but when it came to the practical realization of this solidarity, they retreated and refused to join the Georgian-Azerbaijan agreement on defense, aimed at averting the threat coming from the volunteers' army in the first place. The dual nature of the political

authorities of the Armenian state was exposed by the Georgian periodical press and quite a few deputies of the supreme legislative body. The "Ertoba" ["Unity"] newspaper wrote: "Georgia, Azerbaijan and the mountain peoples see and feel the coming danger very well. Only the Ararat Republic, blinded by the policy of Dashnaktsyutun, does not see it" [11].

In spite of such disposition, the Georgian political spectrum welcomed the *de facto* recognition of the Republic of Armenia by the Entente. On receiving this information, the minister of foreign affairs, Evgeni Gegechkori, addressing the meeting of the Constituent Assembly on January 23, 1919, said: "I am quite sure that the international recognition of the Armenian republic will cause great satisfaction of our people and it will be received as very pleasant news. Today it is confirmed once more that the fate and interests of the Caucasian nations are intertwined. The happiness and joy of one nation must be the happiness and joy of the other. It is the circumstance that makes it our duty to fight and act together."

The Constituent Assembly sent a telegram of congratulations to the Parliament of Armenia in connection with the recognition of their independence [9: 17, Jan. 23].

Thus, the Constituent Assembly of Georgia immediately reacted to all the issues of the day of the neighboring Armenia, the issues, connected with their relations as well, and openly expressed its opinion: it condemned what was to be condemned and was unacceptable, and welcomed everything that was reasonable and expedient. The supreme legislative body of the country approved and supported the good-neighborly policy of Georgia's government, among them with the Republic of Armenia as well.

ისტორია

## საქართველო-სომხეთის ურთიერთობა 1918-1920 წლებში და საქართველოს დამფუძნებელი კრება

### გ. მამაცაშვილი

ი. გოგებაშვილის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, თელავი

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიკოს დ. მუსხელიშვილის მიერ)

სტატიაში შესწავლილია 1918-1920 წლებში საქართველოს დემოკრატიული რესპუბლიკის ურთიერთობა სომხეთის რესპუბლიკასთან და მისი ასახვა საქართველოს უმაღლეს საკანონმდებლო ორგანოში — დამფუძნებელ კრებაში.

საზღვრების გაუმიჯნაობის გამო ორი მეზობელი სახელმწიფოს ურთიერთობა მათი სახელმწიფოებრივი დამოუკიდებლობის პერიოდში საკმაოდ რთული და ცვალებადი იყო.

სომხეთის მხრიდან საქართველოსათვის წყევნებულ ტერიტორიულ პრეტენზიებს 1918 წლის დეკემბერში ამ ქვეყნებს შორის სისხლიანი შეტაკება მოჰყვა. ომმა მეზობელი სახელმწიფოების ინტერესთა წინააღმდეგობა ვერ მოაგვარა, სადავო ტერიტორია დროებით ლორეს ნეიტრალურ ზონად გამოცხადდა.

საქართველომ და სომხეთმა ერთმანეთის სუვერენიტეტი მხოლოდ 1919 წლის მარტში აღიარეს, იმავე წლის 3 ნოემბერს კი თბილისში ორი ხელშეკრულებაც დადეს. პირველი მათგანი დავების საჯალდებულო არბიტრაჟით გადაწყვეტას, ხოლო სომხეთის ტვირთებისათვის საქართველოს რკინიგზაზე თავისუფალ ტრანზიტს ითვალისწინებდა.

დამფუძნებელმა კრებამ, ოპოზიციური პარტიების წინააღმდეგობის მიუხედავად, ორივე ხელშეკრულება ხმების უმრავლესობით დაამტკიცა. რატიფიკაცია წარმატებით განახორციელა სომხეთის პარლამენტმაც.

საქართველოს დამფუძნებელი კრება სომხეთთან ურთიერთობის ყველა საჭირობო საკითხზე მყისიერად რეაგირებდა და გამოთქვამდა თავის პირუთვნელ აზრს.

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