

The Vulnerability of a Small Post-Colonial State: Georgia's International Prospects in 1918

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Just before the outbreak of the Great War, the idea of political independence was far from the mind of the Georgian political elite. In an era of Great Powers, international law left no room for self-determination and sovereignty for smaller nations. Moreover, the conquest of the weaker by the stronger was legal, and the practical protection provided by the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other peacekeeping and monitoring missions did not yet exist. Located in the heart of the turbulent Caucasus region – wedged between the Ottoman and Russian Empires – Georgia could therefore hardly dream of independence. The Georgian political elites fluctuated between advocating for political autonomy and cultural self-governance in their nationalist claims.

The only way to secure long-lasting independence was to find a great power as a protector, but who would risk countering the Russians and the Ottomans in the distant region of the Caucasus? Unexpectedly, the Great War provided such an opportunity, as Germany aimed to stir up internal turmoil in Russia and force it to lay down arms. This would eventually allow Germany to concentrate its troops on its 'western frontier' against the Allies and drive their march all the way to India, thus menacing the British Orient. At the very beginning of the war, the German Foreign Office and the Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*) sponsored national committees, such as those of the Baltic, Finnish, and Georgian people. These committees formed paramilitary groups, organised uprisings against the Russian Empire and recruited prisoners of war of Baltic, Finnish and Georgian origin. The German Empire was committed to granting Georgia independence after victory.¹ Nevertheless, the most popular Georgian Social Democratic Party stayed loyal to Russia and maintained a *defensist*



Fig. 1: German Military in Tiflis, Summer 1918.

position, hoping for a democratic transformation of Russia as well as the enhancement of national rights in the Caucasus. The pro-German Georgian Committee was comprised of Georgian rightists, who subsequently shaped the National Democratic Party. Yet the two parties made a deal that they would not go against each other and that in the end one of their sponsors was to be a victor; thus, they agreed that both were working in the national interest.²

The Russian Empire was unable to handle years of intense warfare. Following the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II (1868-1918) in February 1917, the German-sponsored Vladimir Lenin successfully overthrew of the provisional government in October 1917, and the Bolshevik party's dictatorship was subsequently inaugurated. The Soviets withdrew Russia from the war, abandoned the Caucasus frontier and – in accordance with the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 3 March 1918 – handed the provinces of Batumi and Kars over to the Ottoman Empire.

The Bolsheviks' seizure of power triggered the political secession of Transcaucasia from Russia. Geor-

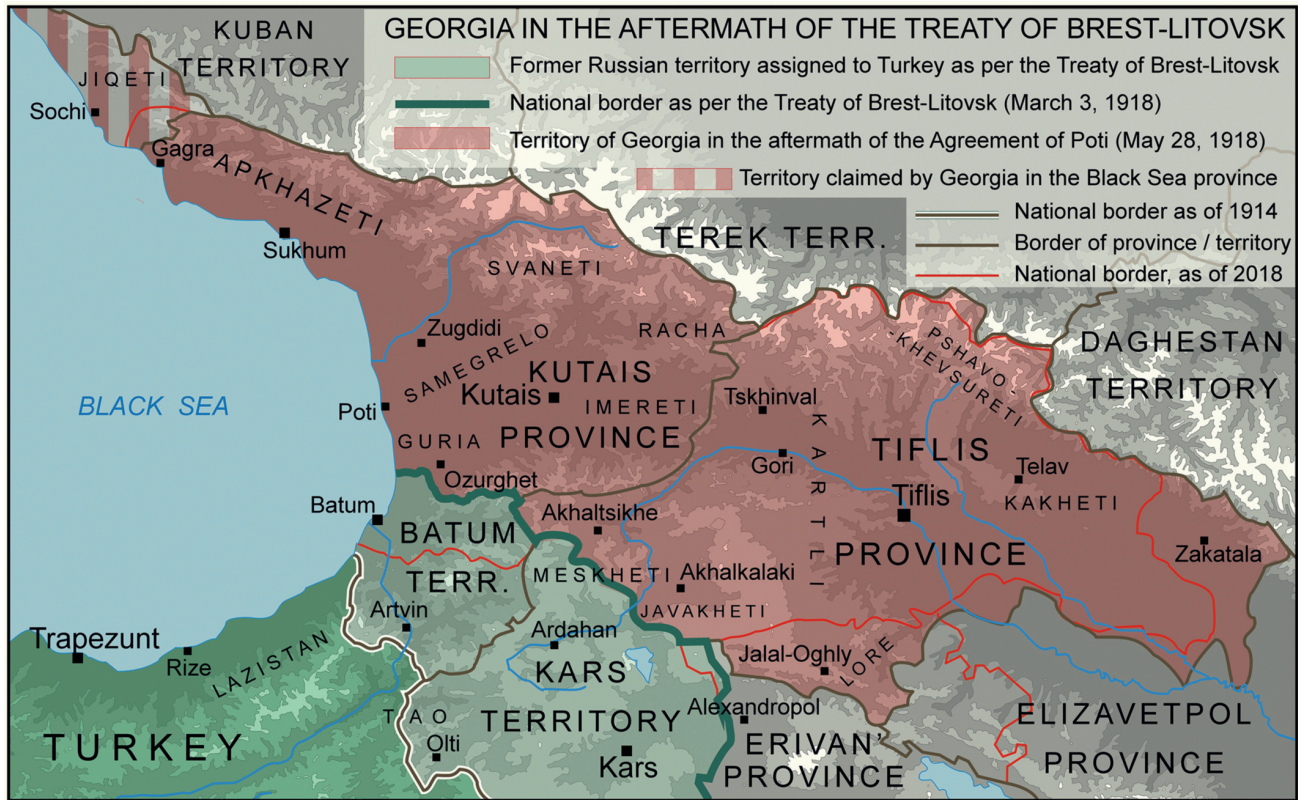


Fig. 2: Map of Georgia, March 1918.

gians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis did not recognise the Soviet Government and first declared the Transcaucasian Commissariat and then the Transcaucasian Federative Republic. Within the framework of the aforementioned stillborn entities, Georgians and Armenians went to war against the Ottomans in order to defend their territories from conquest. As the military power of the opposing sides was dramatically unequal, Transcaucasia was in danger not only of losing the provinces of Batumi and Kars, but also of being completely conquered by the Ottomans. It was at this point that the political connections with the Germans, established by the Georgian Committee, were activated.

During the Great War, Germany was allied with the Ottoman Empire and could not afford to ignore Turkish interests. The Ottomans were primarily targeting Armenian territories in order to realise pan-Turkish ambitions and pave a way to their Azerbaijani kinsmen. The Germans, on the other hand, were interested in Georgian manganese mines, the Baku-Batumi railway and the Baku oil industry. Conse-



Fig. 3: Coat of Arms of the Democratic Republic of Georgia 1918-1921.



Fig. 4: First Georgian Foreign Minister, Social Democrat Akaki Chkhenkeli (sitting in the centre). Summer of 1918, Berlin. All members of his delegation, surrounding him in this photograph, were members of the Georgian Committee or other rightist Georgian politicians. They had been establishing ties with Imperial Germany since 1914 and were now helping the ruling Social Democratic Party to protect Georgian national interests in Berlin.

quently, they were least interested in Armenia. The German military attaché in Constantinople – General Otto von Lossow (1868–1938), who was mediating between the Transcaucasians and the Ottomans – advised Georgians that they would have to declare independence if they wished to secure German protection,³ as the German Empire was unable to protect all of Transcaucasia.

Georgia's Declaration of Independence

And so Georgian independence was declared on 26 May 1918. Two days later, Georgia and Germany signed an agreement in the Georgian seaport of Poti that served as a *de facto* recognition of Georgian independence.⁴ The treaty with the Ottoman Empire was signed on 4 June in Batumi through German mediation. With the treaty, Ottoman Empire recognised Georgia's independence. Although the Ottomans con-

tinued to occupy the Batumi region and the districts of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, the rest of the country was spared from invasion,⁵ and a narrow strip of Armenian land was left around Erevan. In August 1918, Germany negotiated another treaty with Soviet Russia, whose Article 13 reads as follows: 'Russia agrees to Germany's recognising Georgia as an independent State.'⁶

Germany provided security guarantees to Georgia, protecting it from both of its potentially aggressive neighbours. Moreover, Germany deployed up to 20,000 troops to the Caucasus for security provisions, began investing in the Georgian economy and assisted in the state-building process. The Germans acted cautiously and planned everything step by step. First, they secured legal guarantees of Georgian independence from its neighbours; second, they deployed troops to ensure stability; and finally, they commenced negotiations with the Georgian delegation,



Fig. 5: Map of Georgia, June 1918.

headed by the foreign minister Akaki Chkhenkeli (1874-1959), on the protectorate agreement and *de jure* recognition.⁷

Georgia's carefully designed security architecture collapsed like a house of cards after the German defeat in November 1918. The fate of the newly born country now lay in the hands of the victors. In December 1917, after the Bolshevik coup, France and Britain had summoned a conference in Paris. They had to discuss how to fill the gaps created by the Russian abandonment of the Allied cause. On 23 December, they reached an agreement that the Caucasus would fall under British responsibility, while Ukraine, Crimea, and Bessarabia would go to France.⁸

During the war, the Allies were too busy fighting on other frontiers to implement the agreement, but after the Armistice of Mudros with the Ottomans and the Armistice of Compiègne with the Germans, in December 1918, the British deployed up to 20,000 troops to the Caucasus.⁹ Great Britain was to some extent unprepared

and even unqualified for the mission, because the Caucasus had been an internal region of Russia just a year before – the British had never seen the need to formulate a policy or study the region. Discussions on policy-making commenced very hastily at the end of October.

By September 1918, the Georgians too had sensed that the Great War would end unfavourably. The diplomatic envoy Zurab Avalishvili (1876-1944) departed from Berlin to Norway in secrecy to meet with the Allied (English, French, Italian, US) ambassadors, behind the Germans' backs, and to hand over memoranda explaining that the pro-German foreign policy was not a Georgian choice, but rather a necessity for survival. In reality, the memoranda claimed, Georgia wished to have close and good relations with the Allies.¹⁰ Moreover, after the end of the war, a pro-German foreign minister Akaki Chkhenkeli was dismissed and advised to keep a very low profile. All other pro-German diplomatic envoys were replaced simultaneously.¹¹

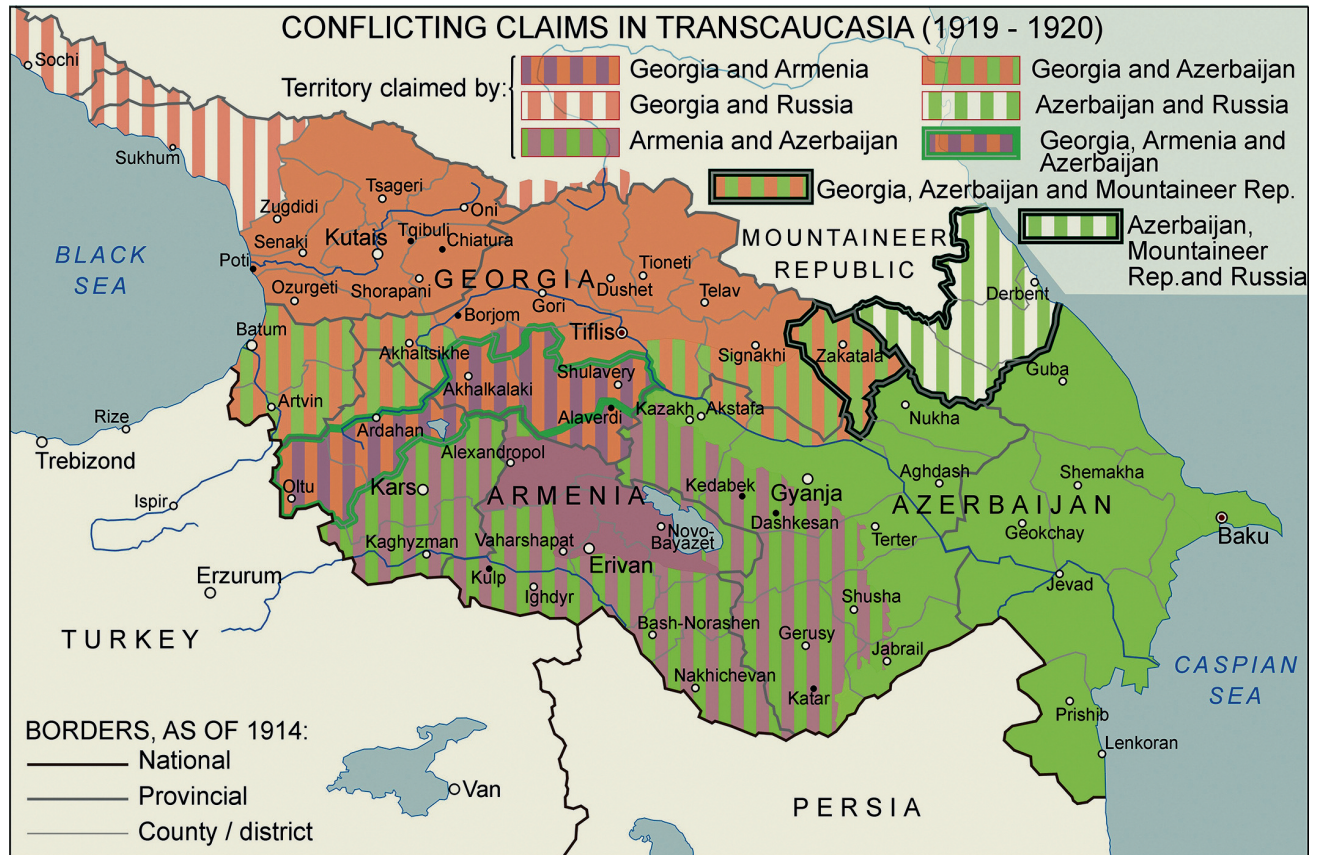


Fig. 6: Map of Transcaucasia 1919-1920.

Regional Challenges

Georgia faced not only external threats but also regional challenges. Before 1918, the Caucasus had been placed under the Tsarist administration and enjoyed a unified economy. If the local population suffered from the national suppression, that suppression stemmed from Russia. Since the Russian 'umbrella' was now gone, the Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis had to share and divide the imperial economic legacy and political power as well as draw boundaries between the newly born states. These were extremely difficult tasks to deal with amicably. With the exception of the Kutaisi governorates (*guberniia*), Transcaucasia was all but devoid of ethnically homogenous territorial units. Moreover, the Armenian political, cultural and economic elites were coming from Tiflis and the city was now set to become the capital of an independent Georgia. Parts of

the Tiflis *guberniia* such as the districts of Akhalkalaki and Lori were overwhelmingly populated by Armenians, although administratively, economically and, as the Georgians claimed, historically they were indisputably a part of Georgia. In the spring of 1918, when Russia deserted the Caucasus and the Ottoman offensive was marching towards Erevan, Georgia seemed to be Armenia's only ally in opposing the foreign invasion. When the Germans threw a 'life belt' to Georgia, the latter seceded from the Transcaucasian Federation, thus upsetting the Armenians.

After the end of the Great War, bitter memories and claims between the two republics came to the surface. In November 1918, Armenia was no longer an unprotected martyr country, whose only hope was Georgia. In July, the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929) wrote to the head of Armenian delegation in Europe Boghos Nubar Pasha (1851-1930):

I am happy to confirm to you that the government of the Republic [of France], like that of Great Britain, has not ceased to place the Armenian nation among those peoples whose fate the Allies intend to settle according to the supreme laws of humanity and justice.¹²

The British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George (1863-1945), noted in his memoirs:

From the moment war was declared, there was not a British statesman of any party who did not have in mind that if we succeed in defeating this inhuman [Ottoman] Empire, one essential condition of the peace we should impose was the redemption of the Armenian valleys forever from the bloody misrule with which they have been stained by the infamies of the Turk.¹³

During the war, the Allies were too far away to implement their Armenophile plans, but at the end of 1918 they were in the Caucasus. In the United States, the Armenophile movement reached an extreme point: in December 1918, the Senate adopted a resolution supporting an Armenia stretching between three seas, the Mediterranean, Black, and Caspian Sea.¹⁴

Armenia thought it was time to join the Russian and Ottoman controlled territories of Armenia into a united independent country. Moreover, Armenians now considered Georgia a rival rather than an ally, and judged it the right time to take the territories of Lori and Akhalkalaki and exact revenge for the past 'misconduct'. These premature judgements spurred Armenia to initiate an ill-advised war against Georgia in December 1918. Its main goal was the occupation of Lori and Akhalkalaki, but some hot-headed nationalists also targeted Tiflis. The war did not produce a victor, as British troops quickly arrived in the Caucasus and demanded an armistice from both parties. This war left wounds that would remain unhealed for years to come in terms of disputed territories, undivided economic assets and so on.¹⁵

In a short interim period between the end of the First World War and the war with Armenia, on 21 November the Georgian government compiled instructions for its diplomats, advising Georgia to support the Armenian claims towards the Ottoman Empire to

ensure that the bulk of the Armenian policy would be focused on the Turkish territories, thus relieving Georgia. Furthermore, it would have been much more beneficial for Georgia to be paired with Armenia than with Azerbaijan, as the former was on favourable terms with the Allies.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the plan proved to be short-lived, and Georgia was forced to make a deal with Azerbaijan. This decision was instigated for a number of reasons. First, both countries had an immediate border with Russia, the main threat; Georgia and Azerbaijan were to be responsible for blocking the Russian drive over the Caucasus mountain range, while Armenia was menaced by Turkey. Second, the Baku-Batumi oil pipeline and the railway line made Georgia and Azerbaijan economically dependent on each other, making friendship the only choice. Neither Georgia nor Azerbaijan needed Armenia for transit purposes or other economic reasons. Third, both countries were former allies of the Allied enemies: Georgia had possessed a strategic partnership with defeated Germany and Azerbaijan with the defeated Ottoman Empire. The close ties between Georgia and Azerbaijan and their unification in the same political, economic, and security packages were no mere coincidence of circumstance, but an international standpoint. Great Britain's foreign secretary Lord George Curzon (1859-1925) was a champion of Caucasian independence and wrote the following in a memorandum to the Cabinet:

[Azerbaijan] has no more moral claim to independence than have the inhabitants of the Persian provinces of Ghilan and Azerbaijan. At the same time it is very difficult, if not impossible, to treat Georgia in one way and Azerbaijan in another. If the Russians are allowed to cross the Caucasus range and occupy Azerbaijan at one end of the Batoum-Baku railway, the liberties of Georgia can never be secure.¹⁷

The Allies succumbed to wishful thinking in their initial euphoria, viewing their victory as a kind of magic wand that would make all their commands and wishes easily come true across the world. When Lord Curzon told Prime Minister Lloyd George during a Cabinet meeting that Great Britain needed to pay some sort of price to get the Turks out of the Caucasus, the latter replied:

What it would be if we were so beaten that the German fleet was in the Thames, with garrisons at Greenwich and other parts of London; – the German Fleet in the ‘pool’ ready to bombard London. Would it then be worthwhile for us to bargain about distant colonies when the whole of our country was at Germany’s mercy? If Admiral Calthrop¹⁸ reached Constantinople, nothing else really mattered.¹⁹

The Allies and the Armenians alike were misled by this short-sighted perspective.

The Positions of Soviet Russia and Great Britain

The Bolsheviks were in power in Moscow and did not really care about the Allied plans. Even the ‘White’ General Anton Denikin (1872-1942), commander of the Volunteer Armies of South Russia and an Allied protégé, ignored the British ultimatum in the first half of 1919 while waging a civil war against the Bolsheviks. He first occupied the Black Sea towns of Sochi and Gagra, at that time administered by Georgia, and then moved to the North Caucasus and carried out his conquest of the mountainous Republic. Despite the fact that the Ottoman Sultan was in Allied captivity, in Eastern Anatolia Mustapha Kemal’s insurgent movement was emerging and gaining success in the Turkish War of Independence. Both Mustapha Kemal and Lenin were leading anti-systemic wars, both were fighting to regain former imperial territories and were interested in expelling Allied troops from the Caucasus – and most importantly, both were heavily threatened and embargoed by the Allies. Therefore, probably for the first time in history, the rival states of Russia and Turkey were forced to unite in the face of the bigger threat posed by the Allied Powers and their protégés, the Transcaucasian Republics. Therefore, probably for the first time in history, the rival states of Russia and Turkey were forced to unite in the face of the bigger threat posed by the Allied Powers and their protégés, the Transcaucasian Republics.

As time passed, the victors of the Great War lost their illusions. They recognised that statements and moral encouragement did not suffice as security provisions for the Caucasian States; what was needed



Fig. 7: Second Georgian Foreign Minister Evgeni Gegechkori (1881-1954) (on the right) and British High Commissioner in Transcaucasia Oliver Wardrop (1864-1948), August 1919.

was substantial support with a long-lasting troop deployment, the supply of arms and munitions, and similar measures. The Allies were exhausted by four years of war, their economies and societies were in need of recovery – and the Caucasus was too peripheral an issue to warrant engaging in a distant war in a turbulent region. During the Eastern Committee meeting of 2 December 1918, the British foreign undersecretary Sir Robert Cecil stated:²⁰ ‘I do not in the least contemplate that any European Power will be able to take possession of these Caucasus districts, nor do I think it at all desirable. They would be perfectly insane to do it. The Russians had 150,000 men there to hold it.’²¹ Before their defeat, the Germans were interested in Baku oil and Georgian manganese, but the British owned 23% of the world’s manganese supplies in India, and they obtained politically safer and cheaper Mesopotamian oilfields after the war. Gaining possession of the Caucasian natural resources would therefore hardly have been considered a cost-effective enterprise.

Once the German-designed security architecture had collapsed, it was clear that Georgia had to look for another great power as a protector, now among the victors. Although the British troops deployed on the ground seemed to be its best option, Britain was too busy in various quarters of the world, and liberal social reforms, electoral democracy, the Labour

pacifist movement and most importantly four exhausting years of war had made the British coalition cabinet somewhat sceptical about the prospects of a new adventure. In addition, Georgia was a former ally of Germany and might have looked unreliable. To a certain extent, Georgia was lucky because it had two friends among the British policy makers. The first was a chairman of the Eastern Committee, foreign secretary from 1919 and a former viceroy of India, Lord George Curzon. He had travelled to Georgia several times during his youth and admired the Georgian people. As Lloyd George put it in his memoirs:

[Curzon] was mostly concerned about rescuing Georgia from the contamination of Bolshevism. He had a special affection for the Caucasus. He had paid a visit to that region some years before and had acquired great admiration for its gallant mountaineers. The thought of abandoning them to the despotism of Lenin and Trotsky filled him with horror, and he fought to the end for the retention of British forces in Georgia.²³

Nevertheless, Curzon was guided by pragmatic policies: since he wanted to sign a protectorate agreement with Persia, he saw an independent Caucasus as the best buffer shield to a revived Russia.²⁴ The second man was Oliver Wardrop,²⁵ a former consul-general in Bolshevik Moscow who served as His Majesty's High Commissioner to Transcaucasia from 1919 to 1920; he was long connected to Georgia. A Georgian speaker, he admired Georgians and was an ardent supporter of their independence. In October 1918, Wardrop, then an employee of the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office, drafted a favourable lengthy memorandum on Transcaucasia.²⁶ The Foreign Office elaborated several other documents on the basis of this document, and Lord Curzon finally submitted a fourteen-point draft resolution on Transcaucasia to the Eastern Committee. Curzon argued that '[of the Caucasian states] Georgia is the most advanced and has the strongest claims to early recognition'. The draft resolution treated Georgia's territorial claims favourably; most importantly, Curzon was asking for a British mandate over the Caucasus. This met with strong opposition from Arthur Balfour, Robert Cecil and Michael Montague, and Curzon's initiative failed as a result. The version



Fig. 8: Headquarters of British Military Intelligence in Tiflis, 1919.

of the memorandum that was finally adopted retained points favourable to Georgia, but the possibility of a mandate was dismissed.²⁷

This resolution was transferred to the guidelines of the British Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference,²⁸ but could pretty words have an actual impact on policy without an effective mandate? Curzon therefore fought to retain the British troops in the Caucasus, clashing with the newly appointed war secretary Winston Churchill, who was an ardent supporter of a 'united and undivided Russia' with White Generals at its head.

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919-1920 brought together all great and minor political actors from various quarters of the world. It was the biggest diplomatic forum of history so far, in which a new world map and a new world order were to be drafted. Lloyd George, Balfour, Curzon, Churchill, Clemenceau, Stefan Pichon, President Woodrow Wilson, and the other leaders were making long-lasting decisions. Among many questions, they had to deal with one peripheral issue – the future of the Caucasus. The decision-makers considered their attitude towards Georgia in light of their policy dynamics towards Russia and the former Ottoman Empire.

The year 1918 was a turbulent and stressful one. Georgia had to clarify its relations with its regional neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan without any involvement of the Russian Empire; it was forced to

change three patrons and adjust its foreign vector three times, from Russia to Germany and from Germany to Great Britain. Nevertheless, at the start of the Paris Peace Conference everything was up in the air. Such was the vulnerability of a small post-colonial state.

Endnotes

1. See more details in: Wolfdieter Bihl, *Die Kaukasus-Politik der Mittelmächte*, vol. 1 (Wien-Köln-Graz: Böhlau, 1975); Lasha Bakradze, *germanul-kartuli urtiertobebi pirveli msolfio omis dros* (Tbilisi: Pegasi, 2010).
2. Noe Jordania, *chemi tsarsuli* (Tbilisi: Sarangi, 1990), 71-72; Revaz Gabashvili, *rats makhsovs* (What I remember) (Tbilisi: Gulani, 1992), 149-150.
Jordania was a leader of the Georgian Social Democratic Party and prime minister of Georgia during the independence years (1918-1921). Gabashvili was one of the leaders of the National Democratic Party.
3. For more on this topic, see: *Dokumenti i materiali po vneshnei politiki zakavkazya i gruzii* (Tiflis: 1919); Baron Friedrich von Kressenstein, *chemi misia kavkasiashi* (Kutaisi: Motsameta, 2002). Von Kressenstein was a commander of the German troops in the Caucasus.
4. See the full text of the agreement in: Georgian National Historic Archives (GNHA) 1864/1/11.
5. See the full text of the treaty in: GNHA 1864/2/11 (in French); *dokumenti i materiali po vneshnei politiki zakavkazya i gruzii* (in Russian) (Tiflis: 1919), 343-366.
6. Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), *Russia 1918*, vol. 1, 602.
7. Werner Zurrer, *Kaukasien 1918-1921* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1978), 79-110.
8. British Cabinet Papers (CAB) 28/3 I.C. 37, 23 December 1917.
9. For detailed maps of the British military deployment in the Caucasus, see: British War Office Papers (WO) 153/785 Persia and Caucasus, Situation Maps 1916-1920.
10. FRUS, *Russia 1918*, vol. 2, 639-642; Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères de la France (AMAE), Europe, Russie, Caucase (Georgie) 1918-1919, vol. 10, 833 f.; GNHA 1864/2/71/1-23; Zurab Avalishvili, *sakartvelos damoukidebloba 1918-1921 tslebis saertashoriso politikashi* (Tbilisi: Mkhedari, 2011), 141-148; on this topic, see the report of the French ambassador Edmond Bapst to Foreign Minister Stefan Pichon in AMAE, Europe 1918-1940, URSS, Georgie 1918-1919, vol. 648, 4-5.
11. GNHA 1864/2/53/2-4; 1864/2/45/119.
12. *The Case of Armenia* (New York: 1919), 9.
13. David Lloyd George, *Memoirs of The Peace Conference*, vol. II, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), 811-812.
14. Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vol. I (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 261.
15. See the Armenian and Georgian interpretations of this war in: Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vol. I (Los Angeles: 1971); Archil Chachkhiani, *dashnakta natsionalistur-ekspansionisturi ideologia da somkhet-sakartvelos omi 1918-1919 tslebshi* (Tbilisi: Aradani, 2007).
16. GCHA 1861/4/3/5-6.
17. CAB 24/95 CP 336.
18. Admiral Calthorp (1864-1937) – Commander of the British Mediterranean Forces, the British High Commissioner in Constantinople.
19. CAB 23/14 Minutes of the War Cabinet Meeting, 26 October 1918.
20. This was a consulting body to the Cabinet dealing with issues relating to the 'British Orient', i.e. from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to India, including the Caucasus. The Eastern Committee was created on 10 March 1918, and dissolved in January 1919. Lord Curzon was the chairman, and the other members included the chief of the imperial general staff Sir Henry Wilson, foreign secretary Arthur Balfour and state secretary for India Sir Edwin Montague.
21. CAB 27/24 Eastern Committee 40th Meeting, 2 December 1918 (annex).
22. See Curzon's early accounts on Georgia in: George Nathaniel Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1889), 28-29; George Nathaniel Curzon, *Persia and The Persian Question*, vol. 1 (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1966), 61-69.
23. David Lloyd George, *Memoirs of The Peace Conference*, vol. II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), 213-214.
24. See more on this topic in: Donald Ewalt, 'The Fight for Oil: Britain in Persia, 1919,' *History Today* 31, no. 9 (1981); John Fisher, 'On the Glacis of India: Lord Curzon and British Policy in The Caucasus, 1919,' *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 8, no. 2 (1997), 50-82.
25. See more on him in: *Sir Oliver Wardrop 150*, ed. Beka Kobakhidze (Tbilisi: Irida, 2015).
26. CAB 24/68 GT 6176 Memorandum on the Political Situation in Transcaucasia.
27. CAB 27/24 Eastern Committee 42nd Meeting, 9 December 1918 (annex).
28. CAB 29/2 P-84 Peace Conference: Memorandum on Armenia and Transcaucasia.