

## Ossetian Rebellions and the Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia 1917-1920

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### Abstract

Ethnic conflict in South Ossetia still remains as one of the acute problems for Georgia. Despite numeral attempts of the conflict resolution August War of 2008 was not avoided. A big number of Georgian and foreign researchers work on the ways of conflict resolution with no significant success. In the article below will be analyzed one of the historical periods of the beginning of the 20th century when the first ethnic clashes between Georgians and ethnic Ossetians took place. The important factor of this period is that the soviet power was taking all efforts to conceal these facts as it was against its interest to have ethnic conflicts on its multiethnic and multicultural territory. After the collapse of the USSR Russia again helped to provoke the conflict as weakening of newly independent Georgia was in its interests.

**Keywords:** ethnic conflict, Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia

### Introduction

Before starting to describe the armed revolutionary actions of Ossetians against the Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921 years) together with the national and social issues we should also take into consideration the political venture of Ossetian extremists that were giving the separatist character to the rebellions.

In the article below while analyzing the period of 1917-1920 following questions will be answered:

1) Were Ossetians really striving for their self-determination in 1917-1920 or was this conflict caused by Russian-Oriented activists who were using people for their interest?

2) Is it justified to hide real facts of history even of the goal of it is avoiding ethnic clashes?

#### *1917-1918 Years*

A movement for the reuniting of Ossetians living in Georgia in the single political unit started soon after the February Revolution of 1917. Initially Ossetians were asking for the creation of separate administrative province (“Samazro” სამაზრო). In the letter sent to the Head of Special Committee of South Caucasus on April 10, 1917, Nikoloz Jioevi, representative of Ossetians beyond Caucasus, was raising reasons for the separation: “With the name of all Ossetians, living in Gori, Dusheti, Racha and Vladikavkaz Regions”, Jioevi stated that Ossetians were living in one separated unit where Georgians were only landlords and Ossetians only peasants. He claimed that this territory was “a single cultural-economical territory that could not be separated” and the willing power of separation was the King’s (Tsar’s) power that was supporting separation for keeping region weak. But now when the power of temporary government and the nation itself are directing for realization of cultural-enlightening missions... is needed quickest reunion under one administration that would be responsible according to the scheme of its administrative county. Of course the letter is full of mangled facts but at the moment we only need to

focus on the fact that the only request Ossetians had was the creation of the single administrative unit inside the country. We should also admit here that in the movement started Ossetian peasants were not included. Another fact worth to admit is that in the letter the King’s Russia is blamed in the willingness for creating tensed atmosphere and rivalry between two “brother nations” Georgians and Ossetians. From another letter sent by Ossetian committee to the Executive committee of Tbilisi, Ossetians state that revolution didn’t change anything in their life as the power was occupied by same people who were in power before; just the names of their positions were changed. They were asking Tbilisi for supplying them with the sources providing information about revolution of 1917 and send credentials for comprehensive work in Ossetian villages on Georgian territory. Executive committee of Tbilisi took their request into consideration and 20 people from Tbilisi were sent. Unfortunately they did not succeed and were not able to manage avoidance of March 1918 tragedy.

On December 15-17, 1917 the second congress of South Ossetian delegates was held in Tskhinvali. They chose the National Council of South Ossetia (NCSO). One of the cases discussed was granting South Ossetia broad self-governance right, congress members decided to create administrative unit. Newly created NCSO sent official letter to National Council of Georgia on January 4, 1918 informing them that NCSO has already started to act and from now on every case concerning Ossetian nation NCG had to directed to them. In the letter also was mentioned that NCSO is the highest representative of the region.

On January 10th, 1918, the National Council of South Ossetia represented the project which described in details how and in which frames had to be formed the unit of south Ossetia. Authors of the project were requiring the following: 1) separation of south Ossetia as the separate region; 2) creation of separate provincial organization with national administration.

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Georgian city Tskhinvali was considered to be the center of the newly created region.

In March 1918 the first session of National Council of South Ossetian (NCSO) was held. At the same time Turks were successfully attacking Georgian lands abandoned by Russia. At that time Georgia was not even granted the full independence, the country was finding very hard to repulse Turkey's attacks. Defense was especially complicated by tensed economic and national relations caused by revolution. NCSO decided to support Georgia against common enemy. On the session held NCSO also discussed the case of building the road connecting North and South Ossetia. Despite the fact that the term "South Ossetia" as an official term did not exist till the Soviet Rule and before USSR it was never considered as the separate administrative Unit, unofficially the term was still used in speeches, in documents and blanks of NCSO before the revolution of 1917. Even Iakob Gogebashvili used this term in his famous book "Bunebis Kari" while describing Shida Kartli region and Ossetian people. Anyway the term cannot be considered legal as Ossetia as an independent unit can't exist inside another independent state's territory. (We may have territory settled by Ossetian ethnic minorities and defend their rights)

From its beginning NCSO had normal business relations with the National Council of Georgia. NCG welcomed the creation of NCSO and was often sending its representatives to the congress. At one glance situation seemed calm but arguments between Georgians and ethnic Ossetians existed much earlier. One of the cases causing dissatisfaction between two nations was the case of using forests. After the abolition of serfdom Georgian peasants were divided into two categories: peasants of temporary duty and migrants (Khiznebi). Peasants of temporary duty received lands; each household (farmstead) received approximately 6.54 (ha) but until the full expiation of lands peasants had to pay 1/4-th of their income to landlords. At the same time landlord remained the individual owner and manager of forests and pastures. Government was trying its best to procrastinate the process of changing this regulation as they were on landlords' side. Conditions of peasants in temporary duty were getting worse day by day and the main reason of this was the lack of lands. In case of family separation lands were decreasing and there were some families that owned not more than 1.6 ha of lands. On the contrary the conditions of migrants (khiznebi) that were actually nonresidents quite differed from those in temporary duty. A huge part of free lands that appeared after the abolition of serfdom migrants took in lease. Ossetians living in mountainous ridges started to move down, they occupied the territories of Gori and Dusheti administrative provinces (samazro). Lands occupied by immigrants were mainly forests, which Ossetians were cutting to broaden their lands. Landlords were giving all freedoms to migrants to attract them and receive leases from lands. That's why migrants were free to use forests; landlords were even supporting them to arrange homes. At the beginning there were no problems between landlords and migrants, migrants were uncontrollably using forests and honestly paying rents to the landlords, but time changed and cutting forests by leasers became unprofitable for landlords. Reduced forests were becoming more and more expensive and leaser's conditions were becoming harder. Numerous disputes have erupted on the basis of forest case, so the government was forced to interfere and in 1893 special regulations were issued concerning immigrants (khiznebi.) Leisurers that had not signed any contract were granted the

right of migrants and their number was sufficiently big. Russian King's government strengthened the rights of migrants for using lands, forests and pastures. Wealthy migrants were also occupying the lands that local peasants had leasured. Absolute majority of migrants in Gori province were Ossetians and later from Gori province they started to settle in other parts of Georgia. Usage of forests was creating the cause of confrontation between Georgian peasants and Ossetian migrants. Ossetian migrants had right to use forests for free when Georgian peasants had to pay even for taking to wood. Georgians protested with no success as the head executive committee of the villages as majority of committee members were Ossetians. Situation especially hardened when the warriors came back from the WWI. They created the armed unit with absolute majority Ossetians (approximately 300 people) and started to "establish order" that caused anarchy. Armed extremists were attacking landlords and ordinary families as if to disarm them but the real reason was robbery. (Toidze Levan, 1991)

On the first congress of NCSO held on March 2-4, the case of inevitable disarmament of distrusted elements was discussed and the members decided to create democratic organizations in villages. This way they could isolate criminal gangs from revolutionary democrats. At the same time Turkey was attacking Georgia and the country was finding too difficult to resist the enemy. Georgia had no army, as during creation of it, most of the soldiers appeared to be under Bolshevik influence. The committee of Transcaucasia was not able to count on them; moreover they had to disarm those soldiers. Disarmament took place in January-February 1918. Government organs were ruining distrustful gangs and gaining weapon but were not able to erase dissatisfaction. Disarmed solders went back to their villages and started to provoke people against government. In some villages they killed landlords. After Gori regiment Disarmament, National Army started to disarm villages. National Army soldiers on the spot executed the murders of landlords, which of course increased peasant's dissatisfaction. Demagogues were spreading the information that National Army was corrupted by landlords to defend their interests. Dissatisfied elements started to unify in Tskhinvali and Java. Ossetian folks started to prepare for resistance to the National Army. Yet disarmament was not the only reason for struggle, social, national and separatist motives were twisted in each other. Rebels required: 1) division of lands; 2) expulsion of specific people working in revolutionary organs in Gori province; 3) expulsion of all noblemen from Gori province; 4) freedom of speech and assembly. Workers and Peasants Committee of Tskhinvali and the Executive committee were troubled as they were not able to fulfill rebel's requirements, and they were given only three hours to fulfill them. Delegation sent to rebels tried negotiation but they responded by shooting to delegation members' who were carrying the white flags. Government was trying to accept requirements of rebels but rebels were making them more and more complicated. It was clear that rebellions were provoking the government to start military actions. At last they took negotiators to the stadium as if for negotiations and started to shoot from caches. In the evening all the gardens and vineyards around Tskhinvali were burned. Georgian armed forces were able to get involved in the fight only after the dawn but unfortunately Red Army run out of ammunition and were forced to leave. Soon after the armed crowd rushed in Tskhinvali, they were looting, killing and burning everything. "Looters were taking everything and from everywhere: clocks, money, jew-

elry, even spoons and linen” (Correspondence, 1918). Sources claim that together with Ossetians, Georgians from the village Erdevi were participating in armed lootings. All communication wires were cut so that Georgians were not able to ask for help in Tbilisi. (This gives reason to think that provocation was pre-planned). Georgian Red Army was completely destroyed, everyone considering the leaders were killed and corps were mutilated. People were hidden wherever they could. Leaders of the NCSO were arrested. Looting lasted till March 22, until the armed crowd learned that a new Georgian Red Army was moving on them. These facts were actively hidden from people by Soviet Government, as they considered that in created reality, Georgians and Ossetians had to live and have again to live together. This was the reason they justified hiding the truth.

On March 22, Georgian Army managed to return back to Tskhinvali. Rebels escaped in mountains, as local people were also scattered villages were almost empty. 1918 rebellion of Ossetians was extinguished by the Georgian government, though situation remained tense. Georgian Government acutely responded to Ossetian Rebellion. Georgian Parliament was divided in two parts: one part, National Democrats, was more radical. Their attitude was well expressed by G. Veshapelli who stated that “In Georgia there are only Ossetians and not the Ossetia, in Georgia we can speak about Ossetians and not the Ossetia”. (1918) On the other side Social-Democrats were more mollified. Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Noe Ramishvili stated that for pacification of the Republic of Georgia it was necessary to reconcile of all national elements of Georgia. Alexander Lomtadze, representative of Social-Democrats stated: “If we satisfy Ossetians, like Georgian Peasants, we may find them as more diligent citizens. Our politics towards ethnic Ossetians should be exactly the same as towards ethnic Georgians. By this policy, we’ll be able to handle the order. No, we can’t choose another way. In the state, all citizens should feel themselves as children; no one should feel itself as a step-child.” (Lomtadze, 1918)

### **1919-1920 Years**

In December 1918 new National Council was elected in South Ossetia. Council shared Bolshevik ideology and did not recognize the power of the Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia. They override its laws and acted as a unique independent government in South Ossetia. In January 1919 NCSO passed the law for creation of “Temporary Emergency Court” project that was not approved by the ministry of justice of the Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia. Due to this reason NCSO refused to participate in elections of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia and Gori province unity. At the same time we should take into consideration that ethnic Ossetians living in Tbilisi had completely different attitude. They considered that the only correct way obtaining democracy in Ossetia, was with cooperation to independent democratic Georgia.

Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia gathered numeral documentations declaring separatists will to reunite South Ossetia with Russia. In May 1919 the NCSO left their headquarters and moved to the mountains where they lead propaganda for supporting rebellions in Java. Majority of local peasants went against it. From the article printed in Magazine “Ertoba” (Unity), dated June 5, 1919, we see that peasants were afraid that the council members and their supporters would mess up the situation and then escape in mountains, so they’d be left to overcome all trouble from the Georgian government

side. So Ossetians declared that had no problems with Georgians, lived with them in cohabitation and considered them as brothers.

In June and July of 1919 NCSO created and represented to Georgian government the “Project of Constitution of the canton of South Ossetia”. By this document South Ossetia was in fact becoming the independent state inside another independent state. Government of the Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia did not like and rejected the project, but instead offered the project of Administrative Arrangement of South Ossetia that meant creation of “Java Province”. Proceedings in this province would take place in on national Ossetian language but all relationship with the Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia would be in Georgian language. Delegation of NCSO rejected the offered project. As the reasons for rejection they declared following: “Java Province” should have been called the “province of Ossetia” or “Ossetian Province” and the center of the province should have been the city Tskhinvali. At that time a special commission was created to find out if the ethnic Ossetians were willing to separate from Georgia, but commission considered separation impossible.

At the same time Bolsheviks were actively working for organizing rebellion against Democratic Republic of Georgia. The case of rebellion was actively discussed on the Caucasian Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers and Peasants Party (Bolsheviks). The government of Georgia exposed the rebellion plan and organization committee members were arrested, rebellion was neutralized.

Culmination of confrontation came on 1920. At that time Soviet power was already established in North Ossetia. Red Army directly reached the borders of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Georgian government sent troops to South Ossetia. Reason for sending was the defense of Rocky pass. Despite this fact, on May 8, 1920, Rocky region declared Soviet Power. As Ossetians were afraid that Georgian government would attack them, they asked Moscow to take diplomatic measures. Moscow accepted Ossetians will. An aggressive note sent by G. Chicherin (RSFSR Foreign Affairs Commissioner) was the complete ignorance of all norms of International Relations, while at that time (May 7, 1920) Russia had already signed peace agreement with the Democratic Republic of Georgia. According to this agreement South Ossetia was considered as the part of Georgia. In the response to Chicherin, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia E. Gegechkori, politely reminded Chicherin this fact and asked him to remove Red Army forces from the territory of Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia. Caucasian Bureau of the Central Committee was forced to respect international resolutions and tried to cancel armed revolts, but the heads of revolutions did not obey the Committee. They considered South Ossetia as the part of RSFSR.

### **Conclusion**

In three year time Ossetians created three rebellions against Georgia, and Georgian Army severely punished them for it. Fairness requires describing facts objectively. The reason of Ossetians 1920 rebellion was the National Self-Determination and joining so called South Ossetia (and in facts Georgian Territory of Shida Kartli) to Soviet Russia. They got armed for reaching their goal and asked for the support to the neighboring country Soviet Russia. By this, in fact they declared war against Democratic Republic of Georgia. This fact was in par-

allel of Red Army forces attacking Georgia from Azerbaijan site.

Georgia is the country full of ethnic minorities and no one ever doubted that their rights should be defended and they should be equally treated as ethnic Georgians. Yet the majority rule is also a democratic principle, majorities should not be oppressed due to minorities as well. At that time the will of majority was living inside Independent Democratic Republic of Georgia and not Soviet Union, so Ossetians had to respect the majority rule. This is not for discharging the severe behavior of Georgian Army in South Ossetia in 1920, they should have been more tolerant towards people but the leaders lacked experience and on the scales was the existence of Democratic Republic of Georgia. This rebellion was the huge and irremediable mistake towards both Ossetian and Georgian nations but for sure the most part of responsibility comes on the side that began it. (Toidze, 1991) (Menteshashvili, 1989)

Rebellion of 1920 was directed against Georgia's existence. Democratic Republic of Georgia existed for a short period of time and the heritage they received was severe. Ossetians like other ethnic minorities and majorities of Georgia would have economic and other problems for sure but the government on one side fighting for outside enemy and on the other side fighting against internal separatism would not be able to settle them such short period of time. Social problems of people were successfully used by Bolsheviks who were recruiting those dissatisfied people against the state.

During Soviet rule the facts of Georgian and Ossetian cruelty towards each other was well hidden. The reason for it was that soviet government was taking reality into consideration. And the reality was that Georgians and Ossetians had to live together. Ossetians had and have to live with Georgians on Georgian territories. Georgia can't remove territories settled by Ossetians and ethnic Ossetians must enjoy all the rights and freedoms for their national and cultural development. Realizing the reality the Soviet Government was trying to conceal exacerbating details. The idea that the truth should be hidden even if it is for avoiding new conflicts is not acceptable anyway, people have right to know the truth even though it is sometimes bitter and shameful but discharging the conflict is of course necessary. Soviet government didn't care neither for Georgians, nor for Ossetians. It was only trying to keep control on the territories it had occupied and history had proved that. Later, by supporting separatism in South Ossetia, Russia again utilized well experienced methods for weakening Georgia. It had never cared for the Ossetian people. Unfortunately both Ossetian and Georgian sides often yield to Russian provocations and do not share the experience of the past.

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