

WAS GEORGIA READY FOR INDEPENDENCE?

Paul B. Henze

History cannot be relived, but it is worth studying for what we can learn from it that can be applied to the present and the future. This essay explores several lines of thought in respect to Georgia's independence, both its frustrated attempt in 1918, and its recent successful transition to independence as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nothing said here is intended as a definitive judgment. The purpose of the essay is to stimulate discussion, debate, and reflection.

Georgia as Part of the Russian Empire

Georgia's absorption into the Russian Empire was a several-stage process. Russian interest in Georgia began at the end of the 16th century when the tsars became increasingly concerned with expansion into the Middle East.¹ The Georgian principalities, under pressure from the Ottoman and Persian empires, fell into disarray in the 18th century. The united Kingdoms of Kartli and Kakheti accepted Russian protection in 1783. Less than two decades later protection turned into absorption.² During the first quarter of the 19th century all Georgian lands became part of the Russian Empire. It was a classic colonial process. Like the other major states of Europe, Russia invested a great deal of military, political, and economic energy in expansion of its colonial empire.

The major difference between Russia and other colonial powers was that Russia expanded into contiguous territories rather than overseas. This was Georgia's misfortune, but there was also a positive side. As part of a large, modernizing state, Georgia was able to participate in a process of development that might

have been much slower and both politically and economically more difficult if it had fought to maintain a precarious independence. Georgia received more investment during Russian imperial times than many more distant parts of the empire, including regions of Russia itself. By the end of the 19th century Georgia had reached a stage of economic development—spurred by the discovery of oil in neighboring Azerbaijan—that did not differ greatly from that of other southern European countries. The population increased rapidly and the natural vigor of the Georgian people expressed itself in a rapid increase of literacy and flowering of literature and art. Georgia's ancient cultural traditions made it relatively invulnerable to the most negative features of Russification. There was, of course, an oppressive side to Russia's domination of Georgia. The Georgian Church lost its independence, Georgians were required to play a supporting role in Russian military conquests in the North Caucasus and in campaigns against the Ottoman Empire—reinforcing a historic legacy of hostility toward Islam. By the end of the nineteenth century, many Georgians concerned with progress and reform attracted the suspicion of tsarist authorities and suffered oppression, prison, and exile.

Nevertheless, as Georgia's population steadily grew, the quality of life improved. Infrastructure was greatly expanded—railroads were built, highways extended, electricity introduced. Contacts with Europe increased steadily and were not all mediated through Russia. During the last four decades of the Russian Empire, Georgia began to attract significant investment from abroad. As a result of the last Russo-Turkish war in 1876-78, the ancient Georgian region of Ajaria was reunited with Georgia and Batumi soon grew from a sleepy village into a major port linking Georgia to the wider world.

¹W.E.D. Allen, *Russian Embassies to the Georgian Kings, 1589-1605* (Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1970), 2 vols.

²W.E.D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People* (London: Routledge, 1902).

Prerequisites for Independence

Unlike some of the other imperial powers, however, Russia did comparatively little to prepare its colonies for self-administration, let alone independent existence. Nevertheless, as Russian society became more open after the reforms of the mid- and late 19th century, Georgia shared in these developments and political groups began to form. Thus, to the question—Was Georgia ready for independence when the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917?—*an unequivocal answer can be given: yes.* Georgia compared favorably with the countries of eastern Europe that became independent from the 1820s onward—Greece, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria, all as a result of European and Russian pressure on the Ottoman Empire; and it also compared favorably with those that gained independence with the collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires as a result of World War I—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.³

Like all these countries, and to a greater degree than some, Georgia had developed *politically* to the point where it had a lively political life and was capable of self-government. *Economically* it had reached a level of development which could sustain independence and provide the foundation on which increased prosperity and social development could be based. *Psychologically* the fast-moving course of events from March 1917 to the spring of 1918 brought Georgia to a stage where the major portion of its population was enthusiastic about independence and ready to accept the responsibilities of existence as a full-fledged member of the international community.

The situation was not clear-cut, of course. Many factors came into play. I will mention only a few of them. Russia did not administer Georgia as a national entity. Georgians had not thought much about independence during the 19th century. The dominant Mensheviks until a very late stage of their evolution saw themselves as part of an all-Russian (and even worldwide) socialist movement for political liberalization and reform.⁴ Most Georgians had found

³The same comparison can be made in favor of Georgia in respect to Middle Eastern countries which became independent from the 1920s to the 1940s: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq.

⁴Ronald G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press/Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1988).

their place in the Russian Empire, taken advantage of opportunities it offered for cultural and economic development, and tended to see Russia as a guarantor against designs on the Caucasus which Ottoman Turkey might still harbor. Russia's collapse shocked Georgians into realization that their geopolitical situation had drastically changed.⁵ While the sizable Georgian aristocracy had become partly Russified, nationalism had grown among the lower classes in Georgia, but the bourgeoisie was still underdeveloped. Armenians to a great extent constituted the urban bourgeoisie of Georgia.

History, Russian divide-and-rule politics, as well as political and economic evolution during the 19th century, laid the basis for potential ethnic problems in Georgia. None of these was more serious than those with which newly independent East European countries had to contend after World War I: Jews, Ukrainians and Lithuanians in Poland; Germans in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania; Hungarians in all the countries surrounding truncated Hungary; Turks and other Muslims in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. And if one compares Georgia in 1918 with the overwhelming majority of the countries that became independent in the great wave of decolonization that occurred in the two decades after World War II, there can be no doubt that by these standards Georgia was fully qualified for independence in 1918.

Experience in the Soviet Empire

But it was not to be. It was Russia that was not prepared for the independence of any of its colonial possessions. World War I caused three empires to collapse: the Russian, the Ottoman, and the Austro-Hungarian. The evil genius of Lenin brought the Russian Empire back to life as the Soviet Union, thus doing great damage to Russia and delaying its evolution into the modern world by 70 years. Meanwhile Austrians and Turks abandoned all thought of recreating their empires and concentrated on developing modern nation-states.

Destruction of Georgian independence by Russia was accomplished by a combination of conspiracy and military force. Independent Georgia was fortunate in having coherent leadership under Noe Jordania and his

⁵Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921* (Oxford: George Arnold, 1950).

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

colleagues, but the task of steering the country through the conflicting forces that surrounded it at the end of World War I was beyond their skill and ingenuity. For a brief period Germany appeared to provide a solution and the period of German occupation of Georgia stands out as a time of hope. But Germany was in the process of being defeated. The efforts Germany made at Brest-Litovsk to protect Georgia's independence came to nothing. A century of Russian rule left the countries of the South Caucasus incapable of cooperating effectively to mutual advantage. Bolshevik Russia undermined each in succession. Revolution in Turkey worked to Georgia's disadvantage, though the new Turkish republic later evolved as a positive factor for Georgia. By the beginning of 1921 the tide of history had turned hopelessly against Georgia. Nevertheless the country put up strong resistance to Russian military conquest and seizure of power by the communist party was never approved by a majority of the Georgian people.

What did Georgia gain and what did she lose from 70 years as a Soviet Socialist Republic? There was further development of infrastructure and industry, but it was a dubious gain—all such development was according to Russian and Soviet priorities imposed from Moscow. Thus Georgia found itself in 1991 with a distorted economic structure and unprofitable industries without a market. Agriculture, too, suffered from collectivization and priorities set for Moscow's advantage. Georgia lost the ability to feed itself. Agroindustry operated under priorities that did not correspond to Georgia's needs. Georgia suffered from being a frontier region of the Soviet Union, where enormous investment was made in military installations that absorbed local resources for support and contributed nothing to the Georgian economy. Georgians took advantage of Soviet stress on education and training, however, to gain the highest level of literacy in the Soviet Union and produce a population well equipped with basic knowledge and skills. They also took advantage of opportunities for cultural development and historic preservation. Their church resisted Soviet suppression of religion long enough to emerge strong and effective as collapse of the Soviet system neared.

Georgians lost most of their contacts with the outer world during the Soviet period. They lost the opportunity to participate in international affairs except as Soviet proxies. Georgian men had to fight in Soviet wars and serve in Soviet armed forces that had no

relationship to the basic interests of Georgia. Georgians who were judged enemies of the Soviet system were repeatedly purged, exiled, and killed. Georgians thus gained no experience in true self-administration or in open political life. They became skilled in manipulation of the Soviet political system for temporary advantage, and parallel exploitation of the economic system. They learned how to survive.

On the Threshold of Independence

The qualified gains Georgia made during the Soviet period became less and less valuable as the Soviet Union neared collapse. In 1990 Georgians found themselves enthusiastic about independence but lacked a civil society and leaders with skill in politics and knowledge of how to lead and govern. The country had a deteriorated infrastructure and industry that was barely functional. Every aspect of economic and financial life had to be revised, rethought, and reformed. Was Georgia prepared for independence in 1990-91? *Psychologically*, yes, but in almost all other respects it was less well prepared than in 1918.

Georgians proved, however, to have great reserves of endurance, intelligence, and resourcefulness. They were able to live through a period of crisis as serious as any part of the former Soviet Union had to face. They withstood efforts by incompetent adventurers as well as Russian neo-communists and militarist-nationalists to divide the country and plunge it into civil war. Coping with crisis, Georgia produced leaders ready to take great risks to set the country on a positive course of development. Strong Georgian sentiments and traditions had not been destroyed by the Soviet experience. They had not been destroyed in Edward Shevardnadze even by service as the Soviet Union's Foreign Minister.

If Georgia was not well prepared for independence in 1990-91, it had another enormous advantage over 1918: its international situation was far more favorable. There was no Turkish threat to fear as in 1918. Turkey was fully supportive of Georgian independence and quickly became one of Georgia's closest and strongest friends. Europe and America were not crippled by a long war or equivocal about Georgia, as they were in 1918. Georgia received both sympathy and support from all major Western countries, including reunified Germany. In 1918 the international system was so weakly developed that Georgia could not rely on the kind of assistance it received, and continues to receive, from the United Nations, the World Bank, the

International Monetary Fund, the European Union, and other important functional organizations which Georgia has joined.

Prospects for Maintaining Independence

So Georgia's prospects for maintaining its independence are enormously better at the end of the 20th century than they were 80 years earlier. The country has already stabilized itself politically to the point where it is judged as the most successful of post-Soviet states. It is also judged the most democratic. In recent years it has had the highest rate of economic growth of any ex-Soviet country. It has made excellent progress reforming its agriculture and a good beginning on its industry. Its relations with both other ex-Soviet states and its neighbors to the south and west are strong and largely devoid of tensions. Are there threats to Georgian independence? Unfortunately, Russia remains a threat.

Though many of Russia's younger leaders show strong evidence of commitment to turning Russia into a full-fledged, responsible member of the community of nations—i.e., a non-aggressive nation-state—and though there is little evidence of virulent nationalism surviving among the Russian people as a whole, there are groups in Russia that are unreconciled to the loss of the Empire. In other ex-imperial countries survivors of this kind have dwindled to an insignificant minority who are no more harmful than people who believe that the world is flat. But in Russia such people are still plentiful and vocal. They seem unable to understand that Russian power has evaporated. The disastrous Soviet misadventure in Afghanistan followed by utter failure in Chechnya has left the Russian military forces crippled. They are unlikely to recover for at least a decade.⁶ Nevertheless we still hear loud voices from Russia advocating restoration of Russian control over her former colonies and reestablishment of the Russian/Soviet Empire.

⁶ Anatole Lieven, *Chechnya, the Tombstone of the Russian Army* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Neo-Imperialism in Russia

No region arouses more resentment among unreformed Russians than the Caucasus, and no region of the Russian Federation today is more problematic than the North Caucasus. It is Georgia's misfortune to be located directly to the south and to be infected by some of the same instability, which Russians abet. Russia has yet to develop a comprehensive policy toward the North Caucasus. Nor does Russia have an honest policy toward the independent nations of the South Caucasus. For lack of anything better, it slips into the old divide-and-rule approach.⁷

Officially, relations between Yeltsin's government in Moscow and Georgia are being conducted according to recognized international procedures. But there are many disquieting aspects to the situation that raise serious questions: is Yeltsin's government honest about its official position vis-à-vis Georgia? Is it fully in control of all the elements formally responsible to it: the military, the FSB (successor to the KGB), the Foreign Ministry, other ministries? There are several disquieting problems:

- Despite repeated promises, Russia has brought no significant pressure on the breakaway Abkhaz leaders to enter into serious talks with Georgia. Russia continues to supply Abkhazia with essential goods and services without which it could not exist in its present condition.
- Russian military installations in Georgia continue to operate extraterritorially, without Georgian supervision, and at times contrary to Georgian national interests.
- Russia has failed to investigate repeated incidents of terrorism against Georgian officials, including President Shevardnadze himself when evidence implicates Russians in these actions. Georgian citizens sought for suspicion of involvement in such incidents enjoy asylum and freedom of movement in Russia.

⁷ Paul B. Henze, "Conflict in the Caucasus", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, no. 19 (1996):389-402; "Conflict in the Caucasus", *Eurasian Studies* (Ankara), (Spring 1994):69-84.

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

The most regrettable thing about Russian behavior toward Georgia is that it is difficult to see how harassment of Georgia and attempts to destabilize the country benefit Russia.⁸ Russia would gain much more from following the example of other ex-imperial powers toward their colonies: *constructive engagement*. Russia would gain from cooperative economic relationships with Georgia. It would gain from professional and intellectual contacts and exchanges as well. Interrelationships between Georgia and Russia are deep and extensive. Russia has more to lose than Georgia does from a posture of negativism and hostility.

Could Russia Reconquer Georgia?

There is very little likelihood that Russia could reconquer Georgia. Russia is too weak. Its capabilities are limited to harassment, interference and "spoiling." Georgia must remain alert to protect itself. It must continue to seek the support of the international community in bringing pressure on Russia to adopt a more constructive policy toward the Caucasus—not simply in the interest of Caucasians, but in the interest of *Russians themselves*. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has repeatedly stressed, a Russia that devotes its energies to re-acquisition of an empire, will condemn itself to permanent second- or third-rate status among the nations of the world. A Russia that concentrates its energies on evolving into an open, democratic society committed to improving the well-being of its people, has the resources to repeat the experience of former totalitarian countries such as Italy, Germany, and Japan.⁹

⁸The same is true of Russian behavior toward Azerbaijan, where the same pattern of harassment, threats, and suspicion of at least indirect involvement in destabilization efforts and assassination attempts against leaders is evident. Russian policy toward Armenia, on the other hand, has encouraged some of the most unproductive aspects of Armenian behavior and done little to ease Armenian tensions with its neighbors. The most flagrant example of Russia's use of Armenia for short-range, negative political purposes, is the continuing supply of large amounts of weaponry to the country. All this is reminiscent of the Russian approach to the Caucasus since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

⁹Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure, The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Scribner's, 1989); "Brzezinski on the Breakup of the USSR", *World Monitor*, November 1990; "Russia: Neither our partner nor

Georgia was capable of existing as an independent nation and responsible member of the international community in 1918 when it first declared independence. Its reabsorption into the Russian/Soviet Empire delayed its political development and did comparatively little for its economic development, but the country has been psychologically ready for independence throughout the twentieth century.

Georgia has one of the oldest continuing civilizations in the world. It was one of the first nations to adopt Christianity. It has shown a remarkable capacity to endure confusion and hardship and survive to flourish. It deserves a place in the civilized community of nations. The Soviet experience left Georgia with physical and human problems that continue to require energy and time to overcome. The international climate at the end of the 20th century is vastly more favorable to Georgia's situation than it was in 1918-21. Georgia can look forward to the 21st century as a time of greater development of its national life than ever before in its long history.

This essay was delivered at the Noe Jordanie Conference, co-sponsored by the Harriman Institute and convened on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the Georgian Declaration of Independence of 1918, and held in Tbilisi, 26-28 May 1998.

patient," *Washington Times*, 22 December 1995; *The Grand Chessboard, American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (NY: Basic Books, 2997); "On to Russia," *Washington Post*, 3 May 1998.

André Liebich, *From the Other Shore. Russian Social Democracy after 1921*
(CambridgeHarvard University Press, 1997)

Reviewed by Frederick Corney

A cottage industry of scholarly publications has ensured that the Mensheviks have not ended up in Trotsky's "dustbin of history." Indeed, the Mensheviks and Menshevism have acquired a particularly coherent profile in Soviet, post-Soviet and Western historiography. Scholars often pay lip service to the recent genesis of the revolutionary parties and the accompanying weakness of party identities, to the mercurial nature of popular support for these parties, and to the alienating effects of the long periods of exile of most of their leaders. Still, most studies nonetheless treat the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary period in Russia as a battleground of competing and largely coherent political parties. In the case of the Mensheviks and Menshevism, this interest was fuelled by a political argument most energetically driven first by the Cold War and then by glasnost-inspired reevaluations of the Soviet past: a belief in paths not taken in 1917, in viable, coherent alternatives prematurely and brutally crushed by the soon-to-be Stalinist regime. The Mensheviks have become in Western historiography (and increasingly among post-Soviet historians) the alternative *par excellence*, the "conscience" of the revolution. Forced into the emigration, they are center-stage as the Greek chorus to the unfolding tragedy of Soviet Russia.

In this prodigiously researched and ambitious book, Liebich offers a rather different approach. His focus is the intimate and often fractious Menshevik "family" of intellectuals, most notably the Menshevik Internationals who gathered around Iulii Martov in the emigration. Fleeing persecution, this group would move from Russia, to Berlin, Paris and finally New York City in a tragic odyssey that would span four decades but never bring them home again. The title notwithstanding, however, a full third of this book is devoted to the pre-emigration period. Liebich offers a wonderfully indeterminate picture of Menshevik identity at the very top of the party, a picture surely even more applicable to the rank-and-file which saw "no sense to the ideological wrangling [among the leaders of the RSDRP]" (54). He resists the traditional historiographical practice of sketching his Mensheviks

along clear "factional lines of continuity" (59) from the prewar to the postrevolutionary period, preferring instead to blur the lines between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. He notes that the stance adopted during the First World War was a more reliable indicator of "subsequent individual and factional self-definition" (60). As such, he suggests that problems exist with traditional approaches that deal unproblematically with the Mensheviks and Menshevism as coherent and identifiable categories (and, by implication, he raises questions about the categories of Bolshevik and Bolshevism as well).

This intentional indeterminacy informs and benefits this work. It helps explain his unusually moderate picture of Menshevik persecution under Soviet power, the Mensheviks, he argues, enjoying a "curiously privileged position" (88) presumably deriving from the often close relationships leading Mensheviks had shared with leading Bolsheviks. His close readings of the often bitter and fractious quarrels within the Menshevik family abroad leave the impression that these Mensheviks did not represent any realistic "alternative" to the Bolshevik path at any time (notwithstanding Liebich's concluding remarks hoping for a revival of *alternativnost'* as a "fruitful heuristic device" (329) for historians of Soviet Russia). Finally, their own conviction that their very legitimacy depended on the vitality of their ties inside Soviet Russia, combined with a deep identification with certain aspects of the Soviet project, ensured that their readings of events inside Soviet Russia were not always apposite. Stalin's revolution bewildered them and Stalin the man "remained a mystery to them" (251), even generating in these old revolutionaries a certain "nostalgia for the old Bolshevik Party, for the party of Lenin, and perhaps even for the party of Trotsky" (251). As Liebich implies, their commentaries on events inside Soviet Russia revealed more about them than about the object of their study. His analysis of the often difficult relationship between the shifting events inside Soviet Russia and the fundamental philosophical and ideological views of these émigrés is fascinating.

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

After two decades in the emigration, they would again find themselves split, this time formally and irrevocably, over Soviet Russia and the viability of the socialist project. Led in its final years by idiosyncratic and often difficult survivors, the Menshevik family became preoccupied with how it would be remembered by posterity.

While Liebich undercuts the traditional reasons for studying these Mensheviks, his work nonetheless contains very good reasons why they should not be ignored (beyond the fact that his story is fascinating and engaging in its own right). First, despite his stated reluctance in a footnote (p. 346) to evaluate the Menshevik influence on Soviet historiography, he does so on several occasions. He documents Menshevik efforts in focusing international attention on the gulag; he traces quite specifically to individual Mensheviks the application of the term "totalitarian" to Soviet Russia; he notes the development of the "discipline" of kremlinology, Boris Nicolaevsky's "trademark," which, as he notes, would "become the tool of an entire profession" (302). Liebich thus unwittingly makes the case for a much more systematic analysis of the Mensheviks' role in shaping the very terms and categories long used to conceive of Soviet society. Second, the role of European Social Democracy and especially of the Labor and Socialist International in helping to shape these categories also deserves more systematic scrutiny, particularly as it was, in Liebich's own view, the "principal multilateral forum for the promotion of Menshevik views" (166) from the Hamburg Congress in 1923 to the fall of France in 1940.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, while Liebich's work is very much an analysis of the Menshevik view of Soviet Russia, it is also occasionally suggestive of the self-identification project in which these émigrés were engaged. "There is a tendency," he writes at one point, "toward introversion in every exile group, if only for reasons of collective self-preservation and identity" (103). Indeed, the very categories of Menshevik and Menshevism might be viewed rather as an extended process of self-definition that was intimately linked with a similar process of Bolshevik self-definition in Russia after 1917. In some ways, the Mensheviks might be seen as the "imagined community" par excellence. The author, for example, argues that the readership of the Menshevik journal *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* "may be seen as the real constituency of the

RSDRP after 1921-22" (129), and that the journal would ultimately become "the only manifestation of the party's existence" (100). In such an approach, certain issues which are dealt with only tangentially or anecdotally by Liebich would acquire enormous influence: the polemics both inside and outside of Soviet Russia over the term "Menshevism" (more could be done with the Menshevik trial of 1931, for example, in this vein); the creation and institutionalization of the Menshevik archive; the embrace of these Mensheviks initially by European Social Democracy and later by the American academy, which can be seen as a formative factor in this process of (re)creating Russian Social Democracy as a principled stand against Bolshevik maximalism. That this term can serve apparently without irony as the subtitle for this study of a small group of émigré intellectuals says much about their success (with the support of other actors) in profiling themselves as a coherent and articulate political entity larger than the sum of its parts. It is testament to the power and influence of this group, and broadens our notions of what political power is and how it might be exercised.

This complex and ambitious work is essential reading for anyone interested in these intellectuals both before and after the revolution. That it is also highly suggestive of other ways of thinking of the Mensheviks and Menshevism is testament to the reach and significance of the arguments contained therein.

Frederick Corney is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Florida. He is completing his book manuscript entitled, "Writing October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1927."