

## THE SOVIET UNION'S STATE POLITICS AND THE ISSUE OF BATUMI MOSQUE (“ORTA JAME”) REGISTRATION IN THE 1940S

**Nani Gelovani**

*Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor at Ivane*

*Javakhsivili Tbilisi State University*

*E-mail: nani.gelovani@tsu.ge*

*ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7046-1254>*

**Abstract:** The Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) and the combination of internal and external political causes (e.g., the necessity of utilizing religious issues in international politics) compelled the Soviet authorities to engage in dialogue with various confessions, primarily with the Russian Orthodox Church. It became necessary to establish an organ through which the country's leadership could implement religious policy.

In 1943, the Council for Religious Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church was established under the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union (1943-1965), which focused on issues related to the Russian Orthodox Church but also addressed matters concerning non-Orthodox religious organizations. However, despite certain contradictions, another special body was created to work with non-Orthodox organizations. By the decree No. 572 of May 19, 1944, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults established under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR was responsible for the Armenian-Gregorian, Old Believer, Greek-Catholic, Catholic, and Lutheran churches, as well as the religious associations of Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists, and sectarian organizations (including Adventists, Baptists, and other Christian sects officially permitted in the USSR).

The first result of the activities of the Central Apparatus of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in the field of religious policy was the decree №1603 of the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union, dated November 19, 1944, "On the Procedure for Opening Buildings of Religious Cults." This decree was followed by submissions from Muslims and Muslim organizations of various Soviet republics to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults requesting the reopening of mosques closed in the 1930s.

The paper discusses and analyzes the issues related to the reopening and registration of the mosque in Batumi – Orta Jame, based on documents preserved in the Central State Archive of Adjara, the National Archive of Georgia, and the State Archive of the Russian Federation.

**Key words:** Islam, Muslims, mosque, Orta jame, Batumi

\* \* \*

**Introduction.** The Batumi Central Mosque – "Orta Jame," a Muslim worship building, was constructed in 1866 on the site of the Ahmediye Mosque. It was named Orta Jame ("Middle Mosque") because it was located between two mosques, "Aziziye" and "Muftie." During the complex political processes that began in the 20th century, Batumi's mosque – Orta Jame held a special place.

In the 1930s, the Soviet government initiated a campaign of persecution against religious figures and the confiscation of mosques and other properties from religious communities. Mosques were converted into cultural and educational institutions, etc. During this period, there was only one mosque in Batumi – "Orta Jame." There are records that between 1935 and 1946 the mosque was closed and used for military purposes (Baramidze, Rumyantsev, 2009:201; Frenkel, 1879/2015: 62). However, a document preserved in the Natio-

nal Archive of Georgia mentions a mosque located at 6 Chkalov Street in Batumi in 1939, which was run by a "dark element," Hodja Ismail Efendi Mikeladze. He had begun preparations for the celebration of Bayram, raising 3,000 maneti from the villages, and "offered the congregation to declare November 12 (Uraza Bayram - N.G.) in the mosque, which those who met the hojja's request accepted" (Central Archive of Contemporary History, Fund 1547, Series 1, case 126, sheet 15).

From May 25 to 28, 1944, at the Muslim Congress of Transcaucasia, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Transcaucasia (1944-1991) was established, which was subordinate to the Muslim organizations of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, including the Batumi mosque "Orta Jame."

According to the decision No. 1603 of November 19, 1944, of the Council for Religious Cults Affairs – "On the Procedure for Opening Buildings of Religious Cults," an application for the opening of a mosque needed to be signed by at least 20 adult citizens from the local population, who had not had their electoral rights revoked by the court. This decision also allowed religious centers or their representatives to support or oppose the citizens' application for the opening of places of worship. After receiving the application, the representative of the Council for Religious Cults Affairs would address the executive committee of the corresponding regional council with the following questions: the average number of adult believers of the given religious cult in the settlement; what condition the building designated for worship gatherings was in; what the chairman of the executive committee's opinion was on the possible opening of the place of worship. After determining these circumstances, the representative would send their conclusion or decision to the central apparatus of the Council for Religious Cults Affairs.

**Methodology.** The research is based on the principles of "problem-based historiography," one of whose goals is to identify the set of research issues that are reflected and developed in subsequent stages of scientific research. The methodological foundation of the research also includes the principles of historicism, dialectics, synthesis and analysis, problematic-chronological, scientific objectivity, and consistency, which helped us in the study of documentary sources and historical facts, including establishing cause-and-effect relationships.

**Discussion.** It is known from archival documents that in 1945, the Muslim community living in the city of Batumi and its vicinity submitted an application for the registration of a mosque to the representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, but the believers' attempt ended in failure.

The representative of the Council in Adjara, Muhammad Vanilishi (according to archival documents - Vanlishi), wrote in the report sent to the representative of Georgia, D. Kuridze, in the second quarter of 1945: "In mid-April of this year, the second secretary of the Batumi District Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Comrade Abesadze, summoned the believing Muslims and threatened them with imprisonment if they did not withdraw their application, where the believing Muslims signed for the opening of the mosque" (Central State Archive of Adjara, Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 3, sheet 16a).

On July 15, 1945, the representative D. Kuridze detailed the problems related to the opening of the Batumi mosque in the informational report (№ 104/s) sent to the chairman of the USSR Council for Religious Affairs, I. V. Polyansky:

"It is known from archival documents that in 1945, regarding the opening of a mosque in the city of Batumi, I wrote to the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Georgian SSR, Comrade V. M. Bakradze, that the Council, as noted in letter No. 502, and I personally find it advisable to satisfy the request of the believers, but I received a categorical refusal.

Indeed, from the past, we know what it cost us to fight with the Muslim clergy of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Adjara regarding the removal of the veil and the closure of the madrasa. Of course, the

restoration of the past to any degree and the repetition of the past is absolutely undesirable, however, the question arises at this time whether the opening of one or two mosques poses a threat to us; I believe not. Otherwise, they would not have been opened in other republics of the USSR. ...

The representative of the Council for Religious Affairs in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Adjara informed me that a complaint from believers had been received against the Secretary of the Batumi District Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, Comrade Abesadze. He threatened the believers with arrest if they did not retract their statement about the opening of the mosque. I think that the issue of opening a mosque in Batumi will not be resolved positively without your intervention..." (GARF, Fund R-6991, Series 3, Cases 29, Sheet 59-60, 62).

The actions of the Secretary of the Batumi District Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, Comrade Abesadze, had such a significant resonance that in July 1945, the Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, I. V. Polyansky, drew attention at the Council's All-Union meeting in Moscow to the incorrect and "sometimes outright provocative actions" of individual local Soviet and party workers, citing Abesadze as one example of such actions" (GARF, Fund R-6991, Series 3, Cases 12, Sheet 21-22).

As it turns out, the Batumi mosque "Orta jame" was opened at the end of January 1946 without the appropriate registration. In a letter sent to I. V. Polyansky on February 8, 1946, the representative of the Council for Religious Affairs in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Adjara, M. Vanilishi, stated that the reason for the delay in registering the mosque was the believers' fear regarding signing the application, as there had been threats from some district leaders against the performance of religious rituals and the demand for opening the mosque. The representative M. Vanilishi wrote: "The representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Adjara informs you that for political reasons (until proper documentation is secured), we opened a mosque in Batumi at the end of January 1946. Now, registration is being delayed because believers are afraid to sign the application. I have taken measures to expedite the registration of the opened mosque" (GARF, Fund R-6991, Series 3, Cases 339, Sheet 29; 1946-02-08).

In the information report sent to the Chairman of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, I.V. Polyanski, in the first quarter of 1946, the council's representative in the Georgian SSR, D.A. Kuridze, extensively discusses the circumstances surrounding the accelerated opening of a mosque without prior registration, among which he mentions an article published in the newspaper "Koinisti" (Georgia) on December 14, 1945, by the real members of the Academy of Sciences of the Georgian SSR, Simon Janashia and Niko Berdzenishvili, entitled "On Our Legitimate Claims to Turkey." D. Kuridze writes:

"During the reporting period, in the city of Batumi, Adjara ASSR, a Muslim prayer house (mosque) was opened without prior registration and approval from the council, which means that the decision No. 1603 of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR dated November 19, 1944, was violated.

The circumstances are as follows: at the end of 1945 (November-December), members of the Academy of Sciences of Georgia, Janashia and Berzenishvili, spoke in the republican press about the demand for the return of historical lands seized by Turkey to Georgia. This issue was of significant political importance due to the statements made by the Muslim clergy, including the qadi of Adjara, Rasikh Beridze, who is also a member of the Muslim Spiritual Administration. However, at that time, there were no active prayer houses (mosques or madrasahs) for the qadis throughout Adjara, and therefore the party's regional committee proposed to our representative, through the Council of People's Commissars, to urgently fulfill the existing request of the believers regarding the opening of a mosque in Batumi (the request had been made long before, but the ASSR Council of People's Commissars had refused to implement it). Shortly after the opening of the mosque (it can be said at the same time), a very meaningful, informative, and patriotic letter by Beridze was published in the central press. It was precisely these circumstances that led to the unintentional violation

of the decision No. 1603 of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR. Currently, I have received materials for the opening of the aforementioned mosque, but they have been returned to Comrade Vanilish for final formalization" (GARF, Fund R-6991, Series 3, Case 339, 8, 15-16; 1946-04-13).

On March 27, 1946, M. Vanilishi sent a letter (No. 5c - 27/III-46) to D. Kuridze, the representative of the Council for Religious Cults Affairs in Georgia:

"... In the first quarter, a request was received from believing Muslims living in Batumi and its vicinity regarding the opening of a mosque in Batumi. With the sanction of the political leadership bodies, the opening of a mosque in Batumi was authorized by me prior to formalization, after which I instructed the believers to submit a request signed by 20 individuals, as there was fear among the Muslim believers (due to threats from the leadership of certain districts against the performance of religious practices and the request for a mosque) to sign the request, while recently signatures were gathered (though two individuals requested to withdraw their signatures). By March 20 of this year, I had everything ready, but due to the prolonged absence of the chairman of the municipal council, my deputy did not sign the conclusion regarding my submission, which is why we cannot formalize the opening of the mosque in Batumi during the accounting period" (Central State Archive of Adjara, Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 6, Sheet 5; Religious Communities, 2013: 89-90).

According to archival documents, the Adjara governor signed the relevant decree regarding the mosque's opening on March 19, 1946 (Central State Archive of Adjara, Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 6, Sheet 16).

According to a document stored in the Central State Archive of Adjara, on March 31, 1946, the Council of Ministers of the Adjara ASSR issued a decree ("Conclusion on the Opening of the Mosque in the City of Batumi, Adjara ASSR") regarding the opening of the mosque in Batumi:

"The Council of Ministers of the Adjara ASSR reviewed the request from believing Muslims in Batumi regarding the opening of a mosque and the conclusions of the representative of the Council for Religious Cults Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, former M. A. Vanilishi, and in accordance with the resolution of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR dated November 19, 1944 (No. 1603) "On the Procedure for Opening Buildings of Religious Cults," issued the following conclusion:

1. Considering that there is a significant number of believers in Batumi and its surroundings and no functioning mosque, the request of the group of believers for the opening of a mosque can be fulfilled.
2. The former building of the mosque is vacant.
3. This conclusion, along with the materials, should be sent to the representative of the Council for Religious Cults Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR in the Georgian SSR" (Central State Archive of Adjara, Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 6, Sheet 15).

On June 14, 1946, the issue of opening a mosque in Batumi was discussed in Moscow at a meeting of the USSR Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, where the representative of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Adjara, M. Vanilishi, and the representative of the Georgian SSR, D. A. Kuridze, spoke. M. Vanilishi publicly stated that local authorities—the regional committee and the Council of Ministers—are obstructing the mosque's opening, specifically the secretary of the regional committee and the chairman of the Council of Ministers of Soviet Georgia (from April 15, 1946, until December 1946), Valeri Bakradze. M. Vanilishi also emphasized the following facts:

"I have a very vague question that the Council has not yet clarified for me. There are various interpretations of the decisions and directives of the Council of Ministers, but I am not satisfied with them. The main population of the Republic of Adjara is Muslim. Previously, before the revolution, there were 138 mosques and 36 madrasahs, but now, according to the Council's instructions, when there are many believers, and even

most women are veiled, they do not appear before people and perform all rituals illegally. They have intervened several times, but I had to refuse, as the local leaders stated that it was unacceptable. This year, when scholars raised the issue of the territory of Georgia occupied by Turkish conquerors, our qadi, a member of the Muslim Spiritual Administration, wrote an article about the return of Georgian territory in the newspaper as a Georgian scientist. At that time, he wrote that there were mosques, etc. I tell the leaders—qadi writes that there are mosques, we are on the border, the enemy may understand that in reality there are no mosques, they still refused to open them, and a month later, the secretary of the party's regional committee invited me to open the mosque. I replied that I could not open it yet, as there is a necessary instance that needs to be passed. He said, no instance, it must be opened, and I was forced to open the mosque and inform the Council about it. The Council replied that this was wrong, that it was impossible to open it until the Council issued permission, and how could I not do what the secretary of the party's regional committee said. ... Muslims say that if we were Orthodox, then it could be opened, but it cannot be opened for Muslims. ... I do not have a mosque in any district. This causes dissatisfaction. ... The local authorities do not allow us. This is what the secretary of the regional committee, the Council of Ministers, says. I wrote to you about this, I spoke personally with Polyansky and wrote in reports, but there is no response. ... The majority of the population in Adjara is Muslim. I receive statements from all others—I received and formalized from Baptists, I received and formalized from Jews. The leaders tell me that mosques cannot be opened for Muslims. ... For a certain period, we granted permission, but I think we should not open them en masse, though it is better than having them completely illegal. A mosque is needed, even if one or two mosques are opened in the center of the district. Before the October Revolution, there were 138 mosques, now there is only one in Batumi, which has not yet been approved" (GARF, f. R-6991, Series 3, Case 38, Sheet125-128).

On September 10, 1946, the representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, M. A. Vanilishi, sent a letter (№18c) regarding the opening of the Batumi mosque to the chairman of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, I. V. Polyansky, and a copy of this letter was also forwarded to the representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Georgia, D. A. Kuridze. The letter states:

"Since January 1946, before the council's approval, with the concurrence of higher authorities, one mosque has been opened in the city of Batumi, which is currently operational. No other mosques are functioning in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Adjara. I completed all the documents related to the opening of the mosque according to the instructions by the end of the first quarter of the current year. The materials were sent to the council's representative in the Georgian SSR, comrade Kuridze. I have not yet received confirmation from the council. In my reports, I do not list this mosque as operational. Please provide me with guidance on how to act in the future regarding this mosque" (GARF, Fund R-6991, Series 3, Case 339, Sheet 51; 1946-09-10; Central State Archive of Adjara, Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 6, Sheet 26).

The Batumi mosque, Orta Jame, was registered as an active prayer facility in September 1946, following extensive correspondence described in archival documents, based on the letter from the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (№1408, 28.09.46) (address: Chkalova Street №6), by the representative of Adjara. However, the name of the mosque "Orta Jame" is not mentioned in the documents.

According to archival documents, "the mosque was built at the beginning of the 20th century, the building is made of stone and has a wooden carving on the entrance door. It does not have a minaret. The area is 383 square meters. It is not listed in the registry of monuments. It has been nationalized, and there is no contract. There are no other active mosques in the territory of Adjara. The mosque had a mullah, 66-year-old Memed Abuladze (a resident of the village of Khelvachauri in the Khelvachauri district) and a muezzin, 63-year-old Ismail Mikeladze (a resident of Batumi). Neither had religious education. On Fridays, up to 100

people attended the mosque, and during Muslim holidays (Ramadan Bayram and Qurban Bayram), up to 1,000 people of both genders participated” (Central Archive of Contemporary History, Fund 1880, Series1, Case17, Sheet 4-6, 12, 14).

On February 13, 1946, a general assembly of Muslim believers was held in Batumi, where Hasan Chaghalidze was elected as the chairman of the Batumi mosque administration (address: 25 Libqkhenti Street), and Memed Diasamidze and Osman Varshalomidze were elected as members; the latter was also tasked with performing the duties of the mullah. The members of the mosque's auditing commission were elected as follows: Hassan Bakuridze – chairman of the auditing commission (address: the village of Agara, the Ortabatumi community), Iskander Diasamidze, and Suleiman Bolkvadze. The accountant-mullah of the Batumi mosque was Memed Ali Diasamidze (a resident of the village of Urekhi in the Batumi district) (Central State Archive of Adjara, Fund R-977, Series1, Case 5, Sheet1).

On January 14, 1947, the government's representative M. Vanilishi addressed a letter (No. 10; 14.I.47) to the manager of the State Bank's Adjara office regarding the opening of a current account for the Batumi mosque (Orta jame), (Central State Archive of Adjara, Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 12, Sheet 5).

Since 1946, the “Orta jame” has been the only active mosque in Batumi.

**Conclusion.** In 1944, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults was established alongside the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union. This state body oversaw all registered non-Orthodox religious organizations, including mosques. Any religious activity without registration was prohibited. However, the registration of mosques in the Soviet Union faced significant bureaucratic, political, and practical challenges. On the one hand, the Soviet government aimed to create a manageable and loyal religious system, while on the other hand, registration was effectively restricted at the level of local self-government, including pressure on initiative groups of believers. A prime example of this is the mosque Orta Jame in Batumi, which was opened after almost a year of resistance from the local authorities. The result of this policy was that from 1946 to 1991, the “Orta jame” in Batumi was the only functioning mosque in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Adjara. The violations of Soviet legislation regarding the registration of mosques led to significant resistance between the declared policies of the Soviet state and its actual practices.

#### References:

- Baramidze, R. and Rumyansev, S. (2009). *Batumi Mosques (Past and present)*. Batumi – The Past and Modernity, Batumi: The Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University.
- Frenkel, A. S. (1879/2015). *Essays on Churuk-su and Batumi*. Tiflis: A. A. Mikhelson Printing House.
- Central Archive of Contemporary History: The National Archives of Georgia. Fund 1547, Series 1, Case 126.
- Central State Archive of Adjara. Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 3.
- GARF: State Archive of the Russian Federation. Fund R-6991, Series 3, Case 29.
- GARF: State Archive of the Russian Federation. Fund R-6991, Series 3, Case 12.
- GARF: State Archive of the Russian Federation. Fund R-6991, Series 3, Case 339 (1946-02-8).
- GARF: State Archive of the Russian Federation. Fund R-6991, Series 3, Case 339 (1946-04-13).
- Central State Archive of Adjara. Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 6.
- Religious communities. (2013): *Religious communities and organizations in Batumi in the 1940s-1950s (collection of documents)*. Tbilisi: Universali.
- GARF: State Archive of the Russian Federation. Fund R-6991, Series 3, Case 38.
- GARF: State Archive of the Russian Federation. Fund R-6991, Series 3, Case 339 (1946-09-10).
- Central Archive of Contemporary History: The National Archives of Georgia. Fund 1880, Series 1, Case17.
- Central State Archive of Adjara. Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 5.
- Central State Archive of Adjara. Fund R-977, Series 1, Case 12.