

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES AND THE BALANCE OF POWER AT THE BATUMI PEACE CONFERENCE, 1918

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Abstract. The Batumi Peace Conference of 1918 represents one of the crucial diplomatic events in the South Caucasus region in the post-World War I period, which significantly determined the issue of Georgia's state development and territorial integrity. The conference took place in May–June 1918, at a time when the Ottoman Empire still maintained strong military positions, while the South Caucasian republics—Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—were striving to achieve independent political status following the collapse of the Russian Empire. The main theme of the conference centered on territorial disputes, particularly the ownership of the Batumi, Ardahan, and Kars regions. The Ottoman delegation, relying on military superiority, sought to expand its borders and consolidate its political influence on the eastern coast of the Black Sea. Conversely, the South Caucasian delegation attempted to protect its interests based on the principles of international law and the right to self-determination. The course of the Batumi Conference clearly demonstrated that the region's political configuration was determined not only by the diplomatic skills of the parties but also by the international balance of power—the geopolitical environment where global powers (the Ottoman Empire, Germany, Great Britain, and Bolshevik Russia) confronted each other to expand their spheres of influence. Although the Georgian delegation was militarily weak, its diplomatic flexibility and constructive approach enabled it to obtain certain concessions and conclude a temporary agreement, which laid the groundwork for the declaration of Georgia's independence on May 26, 1918. The Batumi Peace Conference was not merely a meeting for the redistribution of borders; it was a struggle for the recognition of state sovereignty and the acquisition of international legal status.

Keywords: Batumi Peace Conference, territorial disputes, balance of power, Georgia, Ottoman Empire, diplomacy, independence, South Caucasus.

Introduction. The 1918 Batumi Peace Conference constitutes one of the most important episodes in the history of Georgia and the South Caucasian countries as a whole. At the end of the First World War, following the collapse of the Russian Empire, the new political realities emerging in the region laid the foundation for a new stage of struggle for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The primary objective of the conference was to establish borders and reach a peace agreement between the South Caucasian republics and the Ottoman Empire. In this process, several key issues became sharply apparent: territorial disputes over the Batumi, Ardahan, and Kars districts; the differing political interests of the parties; and the impact of the international balance of power on the dynamics of the negotiations.

The Ottoman delegation, relying on its military superiority, sought to expand its zone of influence in the South Caucasus, while the Georgian delegation strived to protect national interests and create a legal basis for independent statehood based on the principles of international law. The purpose of this article is to analyze the diplomatic process of the Batumi Conference as a manifestation of the international balance of power that determined the statehood and destiny of small nations. The emphasis is placed on how Georgia,

despite its weak military positions, managed to partially achieve the protection of its interests through diplomacy, and how the experience of the conference became one of the prerequisites for the declaration of Georgia's independence. Consequently, the Batumi Conference can be viewed not merely as a peace negotiation, but as an example of how geopolitical realities, the international balance of power, and diplomatic strategies influence the formation of state sovereignty and borders.

Methodology. In preparing this article, a multifaceted methodological approach characteristic of historical research was utilized, aiming both at analyzing factual material and understanding the political and diplomatic context of the events. The following specific research methods were deployed:

- **Historical-Descriptive Method** – Used to describe the events of the Batumi Conference with chronological precision and to present the dynamics of the process.
- **Comparative Analysis Method** – Employed to carry out a comparison of the diplomatic positions of the different sides (the Ottoman Empire, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) and to evaluate their respective objectives.
- **Socio-Political Analysis Method** – Utilized to evaluate the regional and global balance of power in order to highlight the influence of international factors on negotiation outcomes.
- **Documentary Research Method** – Forms the primary foundation of the article, incorporating archival materials, official documents, memoir sources, and the contemporary periodical press.
- **Interpretative Analysis Method** – Aims to evaluate the content and implications of diplomatic steps and negotiations within a broad historical and geopolitical context.

The systematic application of these methods ensures a comprehensive, complex analysis of the Batumi Peace Conference, allowing for the elucidation of both its immediate results and its long-term impact on the process of Georgia's state development.

Discussion/Results. The rapid capture of Batumi, Ozurgeti, the entire Meskhethi region, and Kars-Alexandropol by the Ottoman army finally convinced Transcaucasian politicians of the futility of continuing the armed struggle. Therefore, the issue of resuming the peace negotiations that had been interrupted in Trebizond was placed on the agenda. To achieve this, the first step was the declaration of Transcaucasian independence, which the Turkish side considered one of the main prerequisites for concluding an agreement. On April 22, 1918, at a session of the Transcaucasian Seim, the independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic was proclaimed. At the same session, Akaki Chkhenkeli's report on the necessity of resuming peace negotiations was heard, and he was tasked with continuing the negotiations and concluding a peace treaty with the Ottoman government (Abashidze, 1998, p. 169).

On April 23, Akaki Chkhenkeli sent a telegram to the Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish forces, Vehib Pasha, proposing the resumption of the temporarily suspended negotiations, this time in Batumi [Central Historical Archive of Georgia (CHAG), Fund 1818, Inventory 2, File 179, Leaf 183]. On April 28, he received a reply from Vehib Pasha expressing readiness to resume the conference.

On May 6, 1918, the Transcaucasian delegation arrived in Batumi. From Georgia, the composition included Akaki Chkhenkeli and Niko Nikoladze; from Armenia, R. Kachaznuni and Khatissov; and from Azerbaijan, M.D. Hajinski and Rasolzade. The Turkish delegation included Halil Bey, the Chairman of the delegation and Minister of Justice and Foreign Affairs; Vehib Pasha, the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasus Front Army, and others. Jemal Pasha, one of the active members of the Triumvirate, was also present in Batumi. The German delegation was headed by Major General von Lossow [Svanidze, 1999, p. 184].

On May 11, 1918, the first official session of the peace conference opened in Batumi. After Halil Bey, the head of the Ottoman delegation, welcomed the participants and congratulated them on the opening of the conference, discussions began regarding the admission of representatives of the Mountainous Republic

of the Northern Caucasus to the conference and the verification of their credentials. In fact, the entire first part of the conference, until the end of the session, was devoted to these issues. A final decision was made to grant participation rights to the representatives of the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus, who were represented by two delegates with voting rights [CHAG, Fund 1819, Inventory 1, File 17, Leaves 39-42].

At the very first session, the Ottoman delegation presented a draft agreement to the Transcaucasian delegation. This document, entitled "Agreement on Peace and Friendship between the Government of the Ottoman Empire and the Transcaucasian Federative Republic," was clearly of an annexationist nature, since according to the main provisions of the draft agreement (consisting of 12 articles), the legalization of the borders meant the loss by Georgia of those districts and territories that the Russian Empire had liberated from Ottoman rule as a result of the war of 1828–1829. This concerned the Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki uyezds (districts) [CHAG, Fund 1816, Inventory 1, File 73, Leaf 407].

The members of the Transcaucasian delegation considered working on the aforementioned draft unacceptable and once again clearly stated that the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk should be the basis of the new peace treaty. On the same day, Akaki Chkhenkeli informed the National Council in writing about the decision made and the situation created after the first meeting in Batumi. He emphasized: "The above-mentioned project is unacceptable: 1) it detaches Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, and almost the entire Erivan Governorate, where a compact mass of Armenians lives, from our body; 2) the Turks are interfering in the restoration of order here; 3) during the war, the railways and other economic levers pass into their disposal" [CHAG, Fund 1816, Inventory 2, File 23, Leaf 3]. The conference reached an impasse after the Ottoman delegation demanded the handover of the Julfa-Alexandropol railway. Despite the protests of the Transcaucasian delegation, on May 15, the Ottomans captured Alexandropol and demanded the opening of the road to Julfa (Aliev, 1972, p. 320).

During the conference, a new trend emerged demanding an end to this behavior and the predatory appetite of the Turks, as they proved unacceptable not only to the weak Transcaucasian republics but also to powerful Germany. From the second half of May, German representatives began to actively intervene in the conference, realizing the serious threat that the realization of Turkey's plans in Transcaucasus would pose to their country's political and economic interests. The interests of Georgia and Germany were aligned by the fact that Tiflis wished to use Berlin to its advantage as a guarantor of its independence, while Berlin needed Georgia as an outpost of its Eastern policy. Therefore, on May 14, 1918, the Executive Committee of the National Council of Georgia virtually officially confirmed the implementation of a pro-German foreign policy (Guruli, 1999, p. 88).

In addition to strengthening political influence in Transcaucasus, Germany also needed the region's natural resources. The manganese of Chiatura was of great importance. Before World War I, Chiatura accounted for 30–50% of the world export of this raw material. Germany's growing metallurgical and chemical industries, in turn, desperately needed Chiatura manganese, which supplied 60% of the country's industrial demand. Apart from Chiatura manganese, Germany was also attracted by Baku oil. In his memoirs, General Ludendorff writes: "If the German government can establish good relations with the Transcaucasian government, we will have the opportunity to obtain Caucasian raw materials independently of the Turks and, at the same time, control the entire railway line passing through Tbilisi. Moreover, if Germany wants to control the port of Baku, it must rely solely on its own strength" [Ludendorff, 1924, pp. 187-188].

During the peace conference held in Batumi, it became clear to the German delegation that the Transcaucasian Federative Republic would not be a reliable partner for the implementation of their political plans. Due to the presence of pro-British Armenia and pro-Turkish Azerbaijan in Transcaucasus, Germany's

only ally here was Georgia, as the interests of these two countries largely coincided. On this basis, it was German diplomacy that pointed out to Georgian politicians the necessity of dissolving the Transcaucasian allied state and declaring Georgia's state independence (Silagadze & Guruli, 1996, p. 50).

Regarding the necessity of a rapid declaration of Georgia's independence, on May 22, Akaki Chkhenkeli sent a letter to the Committee of the National Council of Georgia, in which he once again emphasized the necessity of this step [CHAG, Fund 1836, Inventory 1, File 132, Leaves 13-14]. On May 26, at 12:00, the session of the Transcaucasian government opened, which approved the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic. On May 26, at 16:00, in the same hall where the recent sessions had been held, the National Council of Georgia gathered and declared the country's independence. Thus, on May 26, 1918, Georgia regained its independence, which had been lost 117 years prior.

Four hours after the declaration of Georgia's independence, Halil Bey, the chairman of the Ottoman delegation, presented an ultimatum to the chairman of the Transcaucasian delegation, demanding that all requirements of the May 11 draft agreement be fulfilled within 72 hours (Sioridze, 2002, p. 242). In response to this ultimatum, the members of the Georgian delegation informed Halil Bey that the Transcaucasian Federation had dissolved, and consequently, the Transcaucasian delegation could no longer work in its existing composition at the Batumi Peace Conference, as decisions made at the conference would lack legal force in this case. The Ottoman delegation was forced to agree and await the resumption of the conference. After the Ottoman delegation rejected the mediation of the German delegation, the latter considered its presence at the conference pointless and left Batumi on May 26 on the ship *Minna Horn*. In reality, the German diplomatic mission arrived in Poti, where the signing of the agreement reached between the Democratic Republic of Georgia and Germany was to take place. The Georgian delegation also arrived in Poti (Avalishvili, 1990, pp. 83-84).

On May 28, in the port of Poti, on board the ship *Minna Horn*, after a three-hour exchange of views between the Democratic Republic of Georgia and Imperial Germany, an agreement was signed regarding the further regulation of relations between the two states. In addition to the main agreement, two more agreements and three conventions were signed [CHAG, Fund 1864, Inventory 1, File 28, Leaves 15-21]. It should be noted that this agreement was of great importance for Georgia, as it allowed the country to avoid the serious threat posed by the Ottoman side.

Of course, this first diplomatic step of the Democratic Government of Georgia was correct and justified in that given context. It can be said that it was the first victory of the newly formed Georgian diplomacy, but a more difficult test awaited it in Batumi, where the work of the temporarily suspended peace conference was to resume.

On May 31, the peace conference resumed its work in Batumi. Instead of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic, representatives of three states—Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—participated in the conference's work. The Georgian delegation included Noe Ramishvili (Chairman), I. Odishelidze, G. Rtskhiladze, V. Ghambashidze, M. Gvazava, and others. The Armenian delegation included A. Khatisian, M. Papajanov, R. Kachaznuni, and others. Azerbaijan was represented by Sultanov, Usubekov, and others [CHAG, Fund 67, Inventory 1, File 14, Leaf 164].

On June 4, 1918, in Batumi, an agreement on "Peace and Friendship" was signed between Georgia and the Ottoman Empire, according to which the border between these countries was determined in accordance with the state borders existing before the Russian-Turkish War of 1828–1829. Specifically, in addition to the Batumi, Kars, and Ardahan districts, the Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki districts were handed over to the Ottoman Empire. The June 4 agreement had an advantage over the May 11 draft agreement in that Georgia retained Abastumani and Atskuri [CHAG, Fund 1836, Inventory 1, File 73, Leaves 13-18].

Overall, the Treaty of June 4 was another dark page in the history of Georgia, as Georgian diplomacy suffered a major collapse during the peace conference held in Batumi. Taking advantage of the complex international situation created by the World War and the revolutions in Russia, the Ottoman government violated international law, ignored the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and imposed severe, shackling terms on the Republic of Georgia, by virtue of which 9,500 square kilometers with 350,000 inhabitants were severed from the unified territorial space (Zosidze, 1995, p. 44).

The ratification of the Batumi agreement was supposed to take place within one month, but this did not happen. The Georgian government took urgent measures using international legal norms to achieve a revision of the June 4 agreement. With German support, it was decided to review the results of the Batumi Conference (by convening a new conference), but the convening of the latter was initially postponed and ultimately did not take place at all, due to the defeat suffered by Germany and its allies in the World War.

For its part, the Ottoman government was well aware that at a future peace conference its territorial claims would be minimized and it would be forced to relinquish the occupied territories; therefore, it used a peculiar diplomatic tactic. Specifically, to create a future legal basis for the annexation of Batumi, Kars, and Ardahan, it decided to hold a referendum in these regions.

The Ottomans conducted the referendum in violation of the norms of international law [E. Meskhia, 1997, pp. 27-29; newspaper *Ertoba*, No. 154, 1918]. These violations can be assessed by how the referendum was conducted in the Batumi district, where only a small part of the population participated in voting, and that too "under bayonets" and through coercion. Here, out of 4,076 Georgians, only 413 participated in the referendum. Out of 1,062 individuals of Russian nationality, 467 participated, and 838 individuals of Greek nationality took part [newspaper *Ertoba*, No. 153, 1918]. Moreover, the Ottomans granted the right to participate in the referendum to those who happened to be in the city at that time, whether by chance or temporarily. Obviously, they did not care about the fate of the local population, so they voted in favor of Turkey.

The government of Germany joined the protest of the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, accusing the Ottoman government of violating the provisions of Article 4 of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (Documents and Materials..., 1919, p. 374).

After the falsification of the referendum results in Muslim Georgia, the liberation movement and the struggle against the Ottoman occupiers intensified even further. The coordination center of this movement was the "Committee for the Liberation of Muslim Georgia," which was established in Batumi in May 1918. This committee considered its mission accomplished only when, on June 7, 1920, the national forces of Georgia triumphantly entered Batumi, thereby ending the two-year period of the national liberation movement and the process of unifying a territorially fragmented Georgia.

Conclusion. The 1918 Batumi Peace Conference, as a historical event, represents a turning point in the formation of the political space of Georgia and the South Caucasus as a whole. Its course and results clearly reflect the complexity of international relations of that era, where the political fate of small nations depended on the balance of power among great states.

The course of the conference showed that the Ottoman Empire sought to use its military superiority to expand its political and economic influence in the region, while the Georgian delegation attempted through diplomatic negotiations to maintain a minimum of the country's territorial integrity and conclude an agreement that would create a legal basis for the state's future independence.

Despite the annexationist pressure from the Ottoman Empire, the Batumi Conference became the basis for the political experience that demonstrated to the Georgian political elite the real laws of international politics—namely, that achieving state sovereignty was impossible through military force alone, making the

development of a wise diplomatic strategy essential. Particularly noteworthy is the strengthening of Germany's role in the process, which temporarily provided the opportunity for the declaration of Georgia's independence and the containment of Ottoman aggression. However, the peace agreement of June 4 in Batumi virtually became a severe diplomatic defeat for Georgia.

These events made it clear that the young state of Georgia stood before an extremely difficult geopolitical reality, where survival depended on a flexible policy, obtaining international support, and protecting national interests under the conditions of a global balance of power. Diplomatic errors and political instability significantly determined this defeat. One of the major mistakes was the passivity of the Georgian political elite regarding engagement in the international mandate system, which would have meant external guarantees and greater security for the country. Unfortunately, Georgia failed to integrate into the mechanisms that formed the basis of the post-World War I international system.

Furthermore, the dominant party forces of that time failed to form a unified national front. The internal confrontation between democratic and social-democratic groups, as well as the persecution of opposition forces and the lack of ideal unity in society, significantly weakened the state's diplomatic positions. As a result, the Georgian elite failed to utilize the opportunity presented by the international crisis to consolidate the country's interests to gain Western support.

These circumstances—the harmful consequences of Brest-Litovsk, the lost initiative after the Armistice of Erzincan, internal political disintegration, and international isolation—became the complex factors that ultimately led to Georgia's diplomatic defeat at the Batumi Conference. However, at the same time, the Batumi Conference created a political experience that taught the Georgian political elite to comprehend the real mechanisms of international politics: small nations succeed in maintaining statehood only when they possess a firm diplomatic vision, political unity, and a clear strategy for international partnership. Thus, the Batumi Conference should be viewed as an event of temporary defeat but of a strategic lesson that contributed to the final formulation of the idea of an independent state.

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