

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN BATUMI 1910–1914

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Abstract: Batumi possesses an exceptionally advantageous transit location and a distinguished deep-water harbour on the Black Sea. Under Ottoman imperial rule, the city's development proceeded at a very slow pace. The particular natural conditions of Batumi attracted the attention of Russia - which had penetrated Transcaucasia from the early nineteenth century - from the outset. The seizure of Batumi constituted one of tsarism's principal strategic objectives in the wars waged against the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century; however, Russia was able to realise this ambition only following its victory in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878. By the decisions of the Congress of San Stefano and subsequently the Congress of Berlin, Batumi was transferred to Russia with the status of a *porto franco* - a free trade port. From this point onward, Batumi entered a period of rapid development, driven by the transit of Baku petroleum to world markets via the city. The construction of the railway, the development of the port, and the commissioning of the Baku–Batumi oil pipeline provided a powerful impetus to Batumi's industrial and commercial growth. The city's population likewise expanded rapidly, primarily through an influx of the working class. All of these factors contributed to Batumi's transformation, from the early twentieth century onward, into a major centre of revolutionary activity. Changes in global petroleum markets and the political and economic processes unfolding within the Russian Empire exerted a considerable influence on the city's condition.

From the 1910s onward, the approach of the First World War once again heightened international interest in Batumi. The intensification of foreign intelligence activities further exacerbated an already complex socio-political situation in the city. The present study examines the socio-political processes unfolding in Batumi on the eve of the First World War.

Keywords: Batumi; petroleum export; political parties; Social Democrats.

Introduction: The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constitute a particularly significant period with regard to the social and political development of Georgia, its regions, and its cities. Batumi's transformation into the "oil gateway" of Baku determined not only the character and pace of the city's economic, social, political, and cultural development, but also exerted a profound influence upon the broader development of the Batumi region and, it may be said, of western Georgia as a whole. The construction of the Baku–Batumi railway line and the development of a high-capacity port further consolidated these achievements. However, from the beginning of the twentieth century, shifts in the global petroleum market began to exert an adverse effect on Batumi's economic development. More significantly, the city experienced serious setbacks: industrial output declined, manufacturing enterprises closed, and unemployment rose. These difficulties were compounded by political processes unfolding within the Russian Empire, which drew large numbers of workers to Batumi. Wages fell substantially, working hours lengthened, and housing conditions for workers became catastrophic. As a result, political organisations and parties emerged in the Batumi region and became actively engaged in the public life of the area. Particularly noteworthy are the Social Democratic Party, the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, the National Democrats, and their respective activities.

By the late 1900s, the period of crisis within the Russian Empire had come to an end, and from the 1910s onward an economic revival commenced - a tendency equally characteristic of Batumi. In the sphere of industrial development, enterprises connected with petroleum export retained their leading role, though they were no longer able to operate at their former capacity. Other sectors also developed. In general, Batumi's development remained closely tied to its function as a port and transport hub.

Economic recovery also stimulated a revitalisation of socio-political life. Among the political parties, the Social Democratic Workers' Party and its Batumi Committee distinguished themselves by their influence in society and their organisational capacity, effectively directing the political movements that took place in Batumi between 1910 and 1914.

The years 1910–1914 constitute the pre-war period preceding the First World War. Accordingly, within the Batumi region - as a frontier territory of the empire - the intensification of foreign intelligence activities, particularly those of Turkish and German services, was clearly perceptible. This further heightened tensions in the Batumi region, which found itself at the centre of competing imperialist interests. The rival imperialisms of Russia and the Ottoman Empire - and not theirs alone - confronted one another directly in this arena. In addition to a complex domestic economic and political environment, external factors exerted a substantial influence on the course of socio-political life in Batumi during the period 1910–1914.

Sources and Literature Review: The present study is grounded in archival documents from the relevant period, press materials, and memoir accounts. Use has also been made of scholarly collections on the history of Batumi published in recent years, as well as historiographical data.

Methodology: In accordance with the problematic issues examined in the study, various research methods have been employed: source analysis, logical analysis, comparative analysis, comparative-historical analysis, systematic analysis, and others.

Discussion: At the turn of the twentieth century, competition among large-scale capitalists in Batumi assumed an acute character. Small enterprises were definitively eliminated. Capitalist production, equipped with advanced technology, attained a high level of development. The manufacture of export containers for petroleum, and the export trade itself, passed largely into the hands of major monopolies.

In terms of the number of large factories and their workforces, Batumi ranked behind only Baku and Tbilisi within Transcaucasia. Batumi and its surrounding region were incorporated into the Russian Empire during a period of active capitalist development, which enabled it to advance at a rapid pace and soon to become one of the major industrial centres of Transcaucasia. Notwithstanding Batumi's economic progress, the working and living conditions of the labouring population at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were extremely harsh. It was precisely during this period that a large influx of peasants seeking employment descended upon Batumi, creating a surplus of labour. Competition further deteriorated their circumstances. The newspaper *Kvali* reported: "The factory owner surveys this multitude of impoverished people of so many different origins and naturally hires them cheaply - and why should he not, when workers beg him: just hire me and give me whatever you like - the workers compete with one another, and as a result their condition has been reduced to the lowest depths" (*Kvali*, No. 17, 1899).

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, various political parties and movements emerged on the public and political stage in Georgia, of which the Social Democratic Workers' Party became the most significant force.

Social Democratic circles were founded within Batumi's industrial enterprises - the Rothschild and Mantashev refineries - whose workforce consisted of workers who were "almost entirely Georgian... displaced from villages and seeking refuge in Batumi." The establishment of a unified Social Democratic organisation in this milieu and its active operation therefore held considerable importance for the further develop-

ment of the revolutionary and liberation movement in the Batumi region and throughout western Georgia. The organisation's intellectual members, led by I. Jughashvili, drafted and disseminated proclamations and other clandestine literature.

At the opening of the twentieth century, a group assembled around the newspapers *Iveria* and *Tsnobi* Purtseli (A. Jorjadze, G. Laskhishvili, S. Pirtskhalava, and others) emerged onto the political scene. They elected a directing committee and commenced efforts to establish a party. In 1903, publication of the newspaper *Sakartvelo* (Georgia) began in Paris. In April 1904, the editorial board of *Sakartvelo*, with the participation of young Georgians studying abroad, convened a conference in Geneva and founded the Georgian Socialist-Federalist Revolutionary Party. The Socialist-Federalists demanded Georgian autonomy within a Russian state organised on federal principles. The Batumi delegate Al. Gabunia was an active participant in the Geneva Conference. Memed Abashidze, one of the leaders of the national movement in Muslim Georgia, maintained close ties with the organisation. The Batumi Socialist-Federalists became a genuine political force, charged with contributing to the struggle against the monarchy.

In addition to the Social Democratic and Socialist-Federalist organisations, the Batumi region was home to organisational branches of the Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs), the Jewish political organisation the Bund, and the Armenian Dashnaktsutyun party. Representatives of the People's Union (Khalkhis Kavshiri), the Peasants' Union (Mitsatmoqmedta Kavshiri), and the Cities' Union (Kalakebis Kavshiri) were also active in the region (Gogolishvili, 1996: 41–45).

At the beginning of the 1900s, the Socialist-Revolutionary organisation in Georgia did not exist as an independent party. In Batumi it operated as a local group in close association with the Socialist-Federalist organisation, and in ideological terms was regarded as a constituent part of the Socialist-Revolutionary (SR) Party as constituted in Russia.

The Armenian nationalist organisation Dashnaktsutyun operated in the Batumi region. Its members were concentrated primarily around the Batumi branch of the Tiflis Commercial Bank and provided assistance to Armenians arriving from the Ottoman Empire in finding accommodation and employment, acquiring weapons, and departing from the ports of Poti or Batumi for Kars, Artahan, and other destinations (ASMHF, f. 4, d. 10: 45). The Dashnaktsutyun party was social-democratic in orientation and primarily expressed the nationalist interests of the Armenian working class.

The activities of the General Jewish Labour Union - the Bund - pertained primarily to the condition of the Jewish proletariat. The Bundists operated principally among workers in Batumi's industrial enterprises. Through their propaganda they sought to foster sympathy for Jews within Russian society; they maintained an alliance with chauvinist circles within tsarism, and endeavoured to foment discord between Muslim and Christian Georgians (ASMHF, f. 4, d. 1520: 18).

From the beginning of the twentieth century - and particularly during the period of Russia's first bourgeois-democratic revolution (1905–1907) - "the main driving forces of Batumi's revolutionary processes were the political parties then active in the city." The ethnic and social diversity of Batumi's population gave rise to a multiplicity of political parties representing various national and social interests (Gogolishvili, 2019: 73–74).

Following the defeat of Russia's first revolution, and despite severe political repression, the political parties of the Batumi region continued their activities from underground. At that time, only two parties remained active: the Social Democrats and the Federalists. They exploited every available opportunity to resist the regime. From the 1910s onward, the revolutionary movement within the Russian Empire once again intensified. In the Batumi region as well, "political tension increased from 1913 onward, a development linked to the approaching First World War" (Adjara, 2024: 303).

The assistant to the head of the Kutaisi Gendarmerie Directorate informed the Military Governor of the Batumi region regarding the activities of political parties: "In Batumi there exist the Social Democratic and Federalist parties. Their activity consists primarily in the importation and distribution of illegal literature from abroad... Confrontations between them are frequent. The population is more sympathetically disposed toward the Social Democrats" (SEA, f. 13, d. 198: 81).

A report dispatched on 20 June 1910 to the Viceroy of the Caucasus noted the terrorist acts attributed to the Social Democrats. Notwithstanding the authorities' efforts to cast the party's activities in a negative light and to charge it with various criminal offences, it is evident that the party's authority among the population was growing appreciably. From 1911–1912 onward, a revitalisation of socio-political life became discernible. The press of the Batumi region was reinvigorated. Articles exposing the government were published; the authorities persecuted newspapers, conducting searches in editorial offices, arresting editors, expelling them from the region, and closing publications deemed undesirable. One such publication was the *Batumis Gazeti* (Batumi Newspaper), directed by Spiridon Chelidze (Essays on the History of South-Western Georgia, III, 2008: 342).

The *Batumis Gazeti* systematically and extensively, and with impartiality, covered the pressing problems of the socio-political, socio-economic, and cultural life of the Batumi region - and of the city of Batumi in particular. It was precisely on account of this editorial stance that the authorities showed it no favour (Karalidze, 2012: 68). The newspaper was ultimately banned on 13 July 1914 (Sakhalkho Purtseli, 1914: No. 46).

The shooting of workers at the Lena goldfields in 1912 provoked a mass intensification of the workers' movement throughout the empire. Considerable unrest was also felt in Batumi (*Batumis Gazeti*, No. 116, 1912). The authorities actively intensified surveillance operations; arrests and exilings of workers on charges of "unreliability" became more frequent (ACSA, f. 1, d. 454: 35).

In 1913, political tension in the Batumi region intensified sharply, in direct connection with the approaching war. From the early twentieth century onward, the antagonism among Europe's great powers had been deepening steadily. Armed conflict between the Entente and the Triple Alliance was becoming inevitable. "The foreign policy of the Russian Empire - like that of Germany, England, France, Austria-Hungary, and Italy - was not directed toward the avoidance of war. The great powers sought to resolve the most complex international problems through the creation of military-political blocs. Europe was hurtling toward world war" (Guruli, 2021: 193). All official correspondence among government functionaries - both from Batumi to the centre and in the reverse direction - concerned relations with the Ottoman Empire and the imperative of immediately suppressing the intensifying activities of Ottoman emissaries. Batumi found itself at the centre of the attention of the world's major powers, as evidenced by a growing number of visits. A staff headquarters was established under the Military Governor of the Batumi region, charged with surveillance over all foreigners arriving in the city. This headquarters maintained an extensive network of agents comprising, alongside individuals of various occupations, representatives of the regional administration, police officers, and members of the gendarmerie. The headquarters was preparing for an emergency situation. Although foreign agents were subject to surveillance, control over certain individuals proved impossible - particularly those who crossed into the region illegally from the Ottoman Empire. Turkish, German, and Austrian agents were engaged in intelligence activities in Batumi. Foreign actors succeeded in bribing officials within the Batumi regional administration itself. The Viceroy, outraged by these reports, obliged the Governor to employ only politically reliable personnel.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire warned the Viceroy of the Caucasus to take decisive measures to suppress subversive Ottoman activity in the Caucasus.

It is naturally the case that such exceptional attention on the part of the supreme authorities to the Batumi region was prompted by the fact that the region shared a direct border with the Ottoman Empire.

As the First World War drew closer, the situation throughout south-western Georgia became extremely tense. From 1913 onward, the revolutionary movement in Batumi also intensified sharply. According to David Kipshidze - a member of the Socialist-Federalist Party active in Batumi at that time - "the broadly unfolding civic activities and vigorous civic initiatives taking place in Batumi also constituted a 'cultural war'" (Kavtaradze, Mania, 2013: 65). The same David Kipshidze wrote: "The Georgian people are awakening, marshalling themselves for a cultural war..." (Kavtaradze, 1992: 118).

The year 1914 in Batumi was marked by an intensification of revolutionary activity. The authorities responded to the prevailing situation by prolonging the state of emergency. The Batumis Gazeti wrote: "The workers' movement grows day by day; a strike swiftly spreads from one factory to another... Signs of life are everywhere, and life itself is on the path of renewal" (Batumis Gazeti, No. 8, 1914).

Conclusion: The 1910s constitute a particularly significant period from the perspective of the socio-political development of the region. In the Batumi region, political organisations and parties were established that became actively engaged in the public life of the area. Rallies, demonstrations, and strikes organised on the initiative of political parties brought political tensions in the Batumi region to an extreme pitch. Most significantly, the question of resolving acute social problems arose with full urgency. These processes unfolded in the Batumi region as well, where they were especially pronounced in the city of Batumi itself.

On the eve of the First World War, the situation in the Batumi region became still more tense. The competing interests of Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and the major European powers once again converged at this point. The Ottomans and their European allies dispatched a large number of emissaries to conduct intelligence operations. The intensification of foreign activities coincided with a revolutionary movement strengthened by severe socio-economic grievances. It is notable that Georgians opposed this acute socio-political situation with an immense effort directed toward the restoration and consolidation of national consciousness.

The activities of foreign emissaries did produce some results; however, Georgians countered this with a determined and sustained effort toward the restoration and reinforcement of national awareness.

Thus, by the 1900s the population of the region had developed a clear understanding of the significance of progressive and democratic values - a realisation that became the foundation for the intensification of social and political movements in the city and for growing demands for social justice.

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