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GOERGIA’S DEFENSE POLICY IN 1918-1921

Abstract: *On 26 May 1918, the National Council of Georgia proclaimed the country’s independence and established the Democratic Republic of Georgia. This event constituted not merely a political, but also a military-strategic turning point in the nation’s history. The new state emerged amid the global upheaval of the First World War and the dissolution of empires, at a moment when the Caucasus had become a theatre of intersecting great-power interests. Under such circumstances, the formulation of a coherent defense policy became the principal precondition for the Republic’s survival. For the Georgian government, defense policy meant safeguarding territorial integrity, preserving independence, and ensuring the security of society. Scarcity of resources, the post-war economic crisis, and pervasive regional tensions significantly impeded the formation of the army and the national defense system. Nonetheless, between 1918 and 1921, Georgia developed military-political structures which, even with minimal means, succeeded in maintaining statehood for nearly three years. Georgia’s defense policy rested upon two fundamental pillars: on the one hand, the creation of independent armed forces; on the other, securing international support from Western powers. The interdependence of these directions formed the core of the Republic’s military strategy. Yet regional instability, the rise of Russian Bolshevism, and the wavering of British strategic interests ultimately weakened the sustainability of Georgia’s defense system. As a result of the Russian occupation, Georgia lost its independence in 1921.*

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Introduction

Relevance of the Issue

The study of Georgia's defense policy during 1918-1921 is highly relevant, as it is essential for understanding both the military-political history of the Democratic Republic and the assessment of the contemporary security environment. This period represents the formative stage of modern Georgian statehood, during which an independent defense system – comprising a regular army, border protection mechanisms, and institutionalized military relations – was created for the first time.

A significant fact is that the security challenges of 1918-1921 structurally resemble those of the present: threats emanating from the northern neighbor, political instability in the South Caucasus, Turkey's increasing regional activity, and – most critically – the necessity of securing international support. Past experience should compel us to modernize national military capabilities and defense readiness.

Research into the 1918-1921 Republic profoundly influences national identity, as this period witnessed the formation of a national army that left a lasting imprint on public consciousness.

Research Methods

The study of Georgia's 1918-1921 defense policy requires an interdisciplinary methodological approach, since the topic simultaneously encompasses military, political, diplomatic, and socio-cultural dimensions.

Historical document analysis allows for the reconstruction of the military institutions formed between 1918 and 1921.

Comparative analysis of regional states (Armenia and Azerbaijan) permits an evaluation of whether Georgia's defense policy was effective.

Military-strategic analysis assesses the army's structure, mobilization system, and resources.

International relations analysis concentrates on relations with the Entente, military diplomacy with Germany and Britain, and the pressure exerted by Bolshevik Russia.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on theoretical perspectives concerning state-building, the formation of military institutions, geopolitical approaches, and the security dilemmas of small states.

Realism in international relations provides the most suitable framework for explaining the foreign and military policy of the Democratic Republic. According to Hans Morgenthau's² classical realism, the primary objective of the state is survival and the maximization of power within an anarchic system of competing forces.

² H.J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York 1978, pp. 13-15.

Kenneth Waltz's structural realism further suggests that the distribution of capabilities among great powers determines the strategic choices of small states - something fully verified in Georgia's case: geopolitical confrontation with Russia, the search for security guarantees from Germany and Britain, and the instability of the international system after the First World War. This raises the question of why Georgia failed to secure stable international guarantees despite intensive military-diplomatic efforts³.

Small-state security theory also aligns with Georgia's situation. It posits that small states depend on external protectors, alliances, diplomatic balancing, and small but mobile armed forces. The primary dilemma of small states is their inability to maintain strong defense systems independently. According to this model, sustaining a small, resource-limited army in a complex geopolitical environment was impracticable, thereby necessitating reliance on major powers.

Balancing theory (Stephen Walt, Glenn Snyder)⁴ asserts that small states seek security through external balancing – by obtaining support from great powers. This explains Georgia's attempts to cooperate with Germany in 1918, Britain in 1919-1920, and later France in 1920-1921⁵. The theoretical insight is that Georgia's failure stemmed not from incorrect choices but from the absence of long-term strategic interest by any great power in the region.

Formation of the Defense System (1918-1919)

The foundational development of the Democratic Republic's defense policy began immediately after the declaration of independence. In June 1918, the Ministry of War was created and headed by General Giorgi Kvinitadze until 1919. The Ministry consisted of several significant structural units, including departments of general affairs, personnel, the General Staff, military-sanitary services, and veterinary services⁶. Its responsibilities included organizing the army, establishing discipline, and drafting military regulations. Notably, military intelligence was weakly institutionalized, holding only a subsectional status.

The initial nucleus of national defense was the National Guard, founded in 1917 by the Social Democratic Party. Initially created for internal security and governmental protection, it subsequently evolved into a core component of the armed forces until the full establishment of regular units.

Although the Republic inherited some military personnel from the Imperial Russian Army, integrating them into the new system proved challenging due to ideo-

³ R.J. Art, K.N. Waltz (Eds.), *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics*, New York 1983, pp. 45-46.

⁴ S.F. Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence*, London 2013.

⁵ D.M. Lang, *A Modern History of Georgia*, London 1962.

⁶ G. Kvinitadze, *My Memoirs of the Years of Georgia's Independence*, Tbilisi 1998; *The Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921)*, Tbilisi 2023, p. 27.

logical divisions, material shortages, and political disagreements. Consequently, the government placed special emphasis on military education and the preparation of new officer cadres. In 1919, a military school was created to train both former Imperial officers and young Georgian recruits. In the same year⁷ the Military Council was established as an oversight body, though it was dissolved a year later and replaced by the Defense Council, which adopted decisions by majority vote.

Financially, the Ministry of War constantly faced severe constraints. A large share of the national budget was allocated to administrative structures, leaving military expenditures far below necessary levels. Nonetheless, the government prioritized maintaining a minimal but organized defense force. A mobilization statute was developed that envisaged the gradual introduction of conscription and the formation of a reserve⁸.

Special attention was devoted to border protection, particularly in western Georgia, where Turkish military units continued to hold positions in 1918. These circumstances made the establishment of a regular army vital for ensuring territorial integrity and strengthening state sovereignty internationally.

Thus, the defense policy of 1918-1919 was transitional in nature. The country was constructing its defense architecture from the ground up, with very limited financial, technical, and human resources, yet it persistently sought to form an army and a coherent security system. Defense policy remained closely intertwined with foreign relations, as the government recognized that national security could not rely solely on domestic capabilities⁹.

External Factors and Diplomatic Challenges

Georgia's defense policy in 1918-1921 cannot be understood without reference to the international context. The government faced a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment in which military and diplomatic balances changed with extraordinary speed.

On 26 May 1918, during a session at the Palace of the Viceroy in Tbilisi, the Act of Independence was proclaimed. After 117 years of interrupted statehood, Georgia restored its sovereignty. On the same day, in Poti, Georgia concluded an agreement with Germany, which amounted to de facto recognition. German envoy von Lossow assured the Georgian authorities that Germany would assist in negotiations with Russia. This rapprochement caused skepticism among the Entente powers, but Germany soon obtained Russia's acquiescence to Georgia's independence. A political treaty between Germany and Georgia was nearly finalized, but internal developments in Germany and its subsequent defeat in World War I prevented its signing¹⁰.

⁷ *How Georgian Military Intelligence Worked in 1918-1921 - Interesting Facts About the Special Services of the Democratic Republic*, <<https://www.allnews.ge/>> (06.02.2021).

⁸ *The Armed Forces of ...*, *op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

¹⁰ *History of Georgian Diplomacy*, Vol. II, Tbilisi 2004, p. 378.

After Germany's departure, Britain became active in Georgia, aiming to stabilize the region and contain Turkish influence. British support, however, remained largely political and not military. Britain sought a buffer zone against Bolshevik Russia but did not intend to provide formal defense guarantees to Georgia. Consequently, Tbilisi had to rely on its own limited resources.

Georgia also faced threats from Turkey, which had annexed several Georgian historical territories under the 1918 Brest-Litovsk Treaty. Initial relations were shaped by the Batumi Treaty (June 1918)¹¹, which imposed territorial concessions on western Georgia. This treaty reflected the high price Georgia had to pay for independence. The negotiations in Trabzon revealed the difficulty of preserving territorial integrity while confronting great-power ambitions¹².

Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, a new Turkish political center emerged – the Kemalist movement – whose interests clashed with Georgia's western borders and Adjara. The Georgian government attempted to avoid open conflict through diplomatic engagement, given the impossibility of waging war on multiple fronts simultaneously (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Democratic Republic of Georgia and Conflict Zones in 1919-1920

Source: *The Atlas Bookshelf*

Russia remained the principal threat. After the Bolshevik takeover, the Soviet government aimed to reincorporate former imperial territories. The 7 May 1920

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 233.

¹² National Archives of Georgia, *Documents of the Ministry of War of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921)*, Tbilisi 2018, p. 10.

Russo-Georgian Treaty formally recognized Georgia's sovereignty and legalized Bolshevik organizations on Georgian territory. Yet this agreement proved temporary; Russia soon violated it and annexed Georgia.

Along with the above, we must also take into account the Georgian-Polish relations, which became even more active after the First World War. Along with the above, we must also take into account the Georgian-Polish relations, which became even more active after the First World War (although this relationship has deeper historical roots). At the end of World War I, Polish-Georgian military cooperation intensified from the Battle of Tebevli in 1918, when Transcaucasia faced an Ottoman invasion. Armed resistance to the invaders was mainly provided by recently formed Georgian, Armenian, and Pontic Greek units. At the same time, a special unit of volunteers – a separate Polish brigade in the Caucasus – was created in Transcaucasia from Polish officers and soldiers of the disbanded Russian Caucasian Army under the command of Colonel Stanislaw Rosnowski. This brigade ensured order and law in the city of Tbilisi (the center of the Transcaucasus)¹³. The Polish Guard played a major role in the formation and strengthening of the country at the beginning of the state restoration of Georgia. Unfortunately, when the independence of the Georgian state was declared on May 26, 1918, two days later an agreement was signed between Germany and Georgia in Poti, according to which soon after (June 1), under German pressure, the Georgian government issued an order to disband the Polish brigade and sent the troops to Odessa at its own expense. When Polish leader Jozef Pilsudski offered the Georgian government compensation for the expenses incurred, the Georgian government refused. The relations between Georgia and Poland did not end there. These relations continued from the end of the summer of 1918, when international ties between the two countries increased and strengthened. After the Georgian state lost its independence and was annexed by Bolshevik Russia, Poland gave refuge to many Georgian refugees, former military personnel of the Georgian army were accepted into the Polish armed forces, including Generals Zakaria Bakradze, Aleksandr Chkheidze, Ivane Kazbegi, Aleksandr Koniashvili, etc.¹⁴.

Georgia's foreign policy centerpiece was securing Western support. Its delegation to the Paris Peace Conference (1919) – led by Noe Zhordania and Evgeni Gegechkori – sought formal recognition from Western powers. Despite sympathy, the Western states prioritized containing Bolshevism in Russia and declined to intervene militarily on Georgia's behalf¹⁵.

Relations with Armenia also became strained. After independence, territorial conflict erupted between the two republics, driven by the ultranationalist Dashnak Party's claims over regions with sizeable Armenian populations¹⁶. The

¹³ H. Bagiński, *Wojско Polskie na Wschodzie 1914-1920*, Warszawa 1921, pp. 167, 411-416.

¹⁴ A. Rukkas, *Georgian Servicemen in the Polish Armed Forces (1922-1939)*, "The Journal of Slavic Military Studies" 2001, Vol. 14, Issue 3, pp. 93-106.

¹⁵ F. Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia 1917-1921*, Tbilisi 2016, p. 162.

¹⁶ A. Andersen, G. Partskhaladze, *Armeno-Georgian War of 1918 and Armeno-Georgian*

Lori area of Borchalo district became the principal point of contention. Armenia launched military operations against Georgia, prompting general mobilization on 18 December 1918. Georgian forces achieved significant victories, including the Shulaveri operation, but British-brokered ceasefire prevented the restoration of pre-conflict positions, and Lori was designated a neutral zone.

Thus, external factors – Britain’s limited involvement, Turkey’s territorial aspirations, and Russia’s neo-imperial revanchism – created an environment of isolation that became one of the principal causes of Georgia’s military defeat in 1921.

Internal Threats and Strategic Decisions

Defense policy was also challenged by significant domestic threats. Georgia’s ethnic diversity produced periodic separatist movements in the Ossetian region and Abkhazia. Many of these uprisings were linked to Bolshevik networks. The 1920 Ossetian rebellion in Shida Kartli posed serious danger to central government authority, requiring extensive mobilization and weakening national defense just as Russia prepared for invasion¹⁷.

Socio-economic crisis further aggravated vulnerabilities. Post-war economic collapse, inflation, and agrarian problems strained the state’s finances. Budget deficits forced reductions in military spending, limiting reserve forces and hindering procurement of weaponry.

Despite challenges, the government attempted to construct a coherent strategic management model. The 1919 military statute defined army governance, deployment of regiments and brigades, the role of the commandant, and mobilization procedures. The General Staff was established to coordinate military operations.

Strengthening national consciousness became an important component of defense policy. Press publications called for patriotic service, and schools and universities held military-civic activities. Although the army was small, society demonstrated strong moral readiness for national defense.

Internal security structures were developed within the Ministry of Internal Affairs to protect railways, government institutions, and communication lines. The National Guard gradually evolved into a state institution, though persistent party influence impeded full professionalization.

Leadership instability also weakened the defense system. Between 1918 and 1921, Noe Zhordania appointed and dismissed Giorgi Kvinitadze three times. Kvinitadze opposed the disproportionate empowerment of the National Guard and argued for strengthening the regular army. On 16 February 1921, he was again appointed Commander-in-Chief¹⁸.

Territorial Issue in the 20th Century, Asteroid Publishing 2015.

¹⁷ V. Guruli, M. Bakhtadze, *History of Georgia XX century*, Tbilisi 2003, p. 66.

¹⁸ National Archives of Georgia, *Documents ...*, *op. cit.*

By late 1920, Georgia's military capacity had significantly eroded. The Russo-Georgian Treaty provided only an illusion of peace. In February 1921, the Red Army invaded Georgia under the pretext of supporting an “uprising of western Georgian workers”. Fighting began near Shulaveri and Sadakhlo and rapidly spread throughout central Georgia¹⁹.

The defense of Tbilisi was one of the most heroic episodes in Georgian military history. Along the Kojori-Tabakhmela line, Georgian forces withstood enemy attacks for three days. Officers and volunteers displayed exceptional bravery. Nevertheless, on 25 February, Tbilisi fell. The government retreated to Batumi, hoping for British intervention, which never materialized. By late March, Batumi was occupied, and the Democratic Republic of Georgia ceased to exist (Fig 2).

Georgia's failure resulted from a combination of factors: geopolitical isolation, absence of strong international support, internal destabilization, and regional tensions – all compounded by overwhelming Russian aggression. Yet the military and state structures created during this period laid the foundation for the revival of the national army at the end of the twentieth century.



Fig. 2. The Soviet Russia military intervention into DRG in 1921

Source: The Atlas Bookshelf

Conclusion

Georgia's defense policy during 1918-1921 constitutes a unique example of a state with minimal resources yet strong political determination. In three years of independence, Georgia sought to build a national security system almost from nothing.

¹⁹ V. Guruli, M. Bakhtadze, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

Defense policy rested upon two principles: the formation of sovereign armed forces and the acquisition of external support. Although the Republic achieved significant progress in military administration, financial discipline, and structuring of the National Guard, its overall military potential remained insufficient to resist large-scale Russian aggression.

External factors – particularly the passivity of Britain and other Western states – played a decisive role in the tragic fall of Georgia. Yet the historical significance of this period lies in the creation of the idea of an independent Georgian defense system, which later became an essential component of national identity. The defense policy of the Democratic Republic may be described as the will to preserve independence under severe constraints, and as the first attempt to establish a modern Georgian military structure.

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