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Political Debates around the German Question on the Platform of the Georgian Party Press of 1918

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Abstract: In 1918, Georgia declared its independent from Russia and established its First Independent Republic. Since this struggle for independence has remained a recurring theme throughout Georgia's history and continues to shape its national discourse today, it is relevant to examine how the young state attempted to secure its autonomy through diplomatic channels. Although Georgian–German relations during 1918–1921 have been studied from historical and diplomatic perspectives, their journalistic representation remains comparatively underexplored. This study examines how the Georgian party press constructed political discourse on Germany during Georgia's First Democratic Republic. It asks: how was Germany's political role represented in party newspapers in 1918? What arguments and rhetorical strategies shaped these representations, and to what extent did competing political ideologies converge or diverge? The analysis draws on archival documents and the 1918 issues of four party newspapers—"Unity", "Georgia", "Public Affairs", and "Labour" - alongside the government newspaper "Georgian Republic". Historical source analysis, comparative analysis, and discourse analysis are employed to explore how Social Democrats, National Democrats, Social Federalists, and Social Revolutionaries interpreted Germany's role in Georgia's pursuit of sovereignty. The study approaches the press as a discursive arena where political positions and expectations were articulated and contested. By foregrounding journalistic representation, it also illuminates the role of a free, pluralistic press in expressing competing political perspectives during Georgia's early independence

Keywords: Georgian party press of 1918, Independent Republic of Georgia, German issue, political debates.

INTRODUCTION

Georgian-German diplomatic relations remain highly relevant today. Just as a century ago, Georgia's choice is clearly defined - seeking to establish a dignified place within the European family. In 1918, when the outcome of the First World War was still uncertain, Georgia openly declared its support for Germany despite the unpredictable circumstances. The Georgian diplomatic corps' decision to adopt a German orientation was not accidental. Several significant factors shaped the pro-German sentiment among Georgians. First, the roots of Georgian-German diplomatic relations date back to the Middle Ages, offering a solid foundation of reliable experience. Second, Georgian diplomats were well-acquainted with German culture and its leading figures. They valued and appreciated the traditions and admirable qualities of the German people. Another pivotal factor influencing Georgia's choice was Germany's aim during the First World War to liberate countries occupied by the Entente (the alliance of Great Britain, Russia, and France during the war). Georgian diplomats viewed Germany as the only viable option for ensuring the nation's physical survival and escaping the Ottoman Empire's expansionist policies. Furthermore, they

believed in Germany's potential for a decisive victory in the First World War, anticipating that its discipline, steadfast faith, and stoic character would lead to the establishment of a new world order.

In conclusion, this study summarizes its primary purpose: to demonstrate that examining the past provides a solid foundation for constructively shaping the present. The historical reality of Georgian-German cooperation – marked by mutual trust and recognition of reciprocal necessity, as reflected in Georgian press sources – contributes to the deepening and enrichment of bilateral relations between the two countries. While obstructive factors will inevitably persist, we argue their analysis and consideration enhance the prospects for a more resilient and sustainable future.

An analysis of classified materials reveals how the carefully deliberated decision to select a protectorate country gained strength over time.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The study of historically significant topics provides an opportunity to uncover solutions to contemporary problems by examining the past. Accordingly, our research is grounded in the perspectives of several theorists who argue that studying history is the most effective way to re-evaluate and authentically reinterpret present-day data. This principle was exemplified by **Joseph Hill** and **August Kerber**, who integrated the categories of historical research.[i]

Walter Borg's viewpoint, which emphasizes the study of documentary narratives, the acquisition of empirical documents, and their analysis and evaluation to draw new conclusions about past events is particularly relevant to our work.[ii]

The scientist **Homer Hockett** also provides a compelling perspective on studying historical events. While direct observation is not possible in such cases, Hockett argues that the interpretation of past events must rely on the traces they have left behind. Guided by Hockett's theory, we focused primarily on primary sources, specifically newspaper publications, as the foundation of our analysis.[iii]

Building on these theoretical frameworks and employing a **pragmatic methodology that emphasizes the interdependence and interconnectedness** of events within a specific historical period, we undertook the identification, collection, classification, and processing of relevant **primary data** sources. The study is primarily based on primary historical sources, particularly newspaper articles from 1918, which constitute the main empirical material for analysis. Secondary literature is used to provide historical and contextual background and to support the interpretation of the findings derived from the primary sources. This approach ultimately clarified our findings and facilitated a balanced synthesis of the research publications.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Germany's economic interests were, in fact, a significant driving force behind its political interest in Georgia. With its highly developed industry, Germany required vast quantities of minerals and expanded markets for its products. Historian **Mamia Balakhadze**, in his book "*Georgian-German Relations*", examines the reasons behind Germany's interest in Georgian

railways and seaports, the establishment of the German-Georgian Mining Corporation, and the introduction of German currency into circulation. Balakhadze highlights Georgian-German trade and economic cooperation, which effectively turned Georgia into a strategic springboard for potential German expansion. He also points out that, unlike Tsarist Russia, which pursued policies of assimilation and Russification, Kaiser Germany, with its advanced culture and European perspective, did not intend to colonize Georgia. Instead, Georgia retained autonomous governance and independence.[iv]

Lasha Bakradze provides insights into the Georgian Committee in Germany and its activities, while also exploring the complexities of German-Georgian relations during the First World War. His book is particularly intriguing as it sheds light on the origins and development of these relations, which reached their peak in 1918, and explains why admiration for Germany was so widespread among the Georgian intelligentsia.[v]

Giorgi Astamadze offers valuable information about German delegations in his article "*Georgian-German Relations in 1918-1921"*. The analysis covers the missions of German generals Otto von Lossow and Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein. Through the Georgian press, readers are introduced to articles by Friedrich Schulenburg and Professor Ernst Zugmeier, whose perspectives were frequently published in leading Georgian newspapers. Astamadze notes that "The German Caucasian Expedition, which lasted until January 1919, played a positive role in stabilizing the country".[vi]

The activities of the Georgian Independence Committee have been comprehensively analyzed by researchers **Nugzar Zosidze** and **Enver Diasamidze** in their article "*The Georgian Independence Committee and Georgian-German Relations in 1914-1918"*. It reflects the efforts of Georgian patriots abroad, who were tasked with promoting the idea of Georgia's liberation. The researchers also delve into Georgian political orientation and highlight the strong Germanophile sentiment of the time. They note, "If Germany had won the war and Georgia had declared independence, the German government would not only have supported Georgia's sovereignty but would have actively defended it".[vii]

In 2019, **N. Doborjginidze, L. Tsagareli, O. Reisner,** and **G. Kavtaradze** published the joint work "*The Cultural Trace of Georgians in Germany"*. This comprehensive study details the German-Georgian partnership and the activities of Georgian students in Germany. It also highlights Germany's significant contribution to Georgia's education system, noting that hundreds of Georgian students were sent to Germany to gain education and experience. The authors state, "It has become possible to form a growing layer of marginal, educated civil servants". After studying in Germany, many young people returned to Georgia with renewed enthusiasm and sought to mobilize public efforts to advance culture and education.[viii]

One of the leading researchers on the Democratic Republic of Georgia, historian **Otar Janelidze**, dedicated his seminal work "*Essays on the History of the Democratic State of Georgia"* to the 100th anniversary of Georgia's independence. This book provides an in-depth examination of the three years of the First Republic's history, marked by both challenges and achievements, with one chapter focusing on Georgian-German relations. Janelidze discusses the Georgian preference for German protection and includes an address by Georgian luminary Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, in which he portrays German qualities as an example for Georgians to emulate. The book also identifies German-funded projects that positively impacted Georgia during this period.[ix]

Drawing on these research questions and the relevant literature, the **objective** of our study was defined: to explore the propaganda and debates surrounding Georgia's declaration of independence, as reflected in the print media of the leading Georgian parties in 1918. By examining these debates and areas of consensus, we sought to assess how effectively propaganda influenced society and shaped public opinion during this pivotal period.

THE GERMAN ISSUE AND NEWSPAPER "GEORGIA" ("SAKARTVELO")

In 1918, during the First World War, Georgia faced oppression from multiple sides. In such turbulent times, political parties expressed their views through their respective publications. The newspaper *"Georgia"* represented the National Democrats and conveyed their perspectives, particularly on foreign policy. This raises key questions: How did this party envision Georgia's future? What insights can we gain from analyzing the articles published in this newspaper?

Regardless of how Georgia's fate unfolded in 1918 - whether independence was restored or not - the issue of its future development remained a pressing topic. The process of reflecting on the nation's destiny and potential paths for growth had already begun. Special attention is drawn to the article "*The German Protectorate",* authored by A. Asatiani.[x] The article emphasizes that "the right political path taken" could determine the country's political and economic fate indefinitely. Thus, leadership should prioritize national interests over narrow party agendas. While this statement may appear general, it is followed by compelling reasoning.

The article explores three main directions: first, an analysis of Georgia's current situation and potential solutions (e.g., what kind of state should we strive to build?); second, a discussion of several reliable allies to identify the most suitable option; and third, an examination of the potential benefactor country, with an objective discussion of its role in Georgia's path forward.

The dire situation in Georgia is addressed candidly. Although the newspaper had previously discussed this issue, the article delves deeper into comparisons with other nations. It dismisses states where personal freedoms and human rights are disregarded, arguing that such countries, "where there is no personal freedom, civil equality," cannot serve as models for Georgia. Instead, Georgia's ideal partner is a nation where individuals are protected, "property is inviolable," and governance is rooted in law and justice.

The publicist elaborates on how nations like Greece, Serbia, Poland, and Ukraine, despite their independence, were unable to "stand firmly on their fettered feet" without calling on "foreign forces" for support. This reasoning leads to the identification of the country that assisted Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Finland – That country was Germany.

However, the article does not shy away from addressing the risks. It acknowledges the political reality that foreign aid is rarely altruistic and warns that an invited power, especially one like Germany striving to conquer Russia, could also turn against a weaker nation. To counter this, the article explores Germany's interests in these nations and what might make Georgia attractive to it. Drawing on examples, it expresses hope that "Germany has no interest in hindering the development of our country" but would instead seek

"advantages" in Georgia—such as access to manganese, copper, oil, cotton, and "opening roads" to the Middle East.

To substantiate his claims, Asatiani references the example of Bulgaria, a nation that, despite being conquered and underdeveloped for centuries, managed to achieve revival within 30 years with German assistance.

All of the author's arguments focus on highlighting the positive outcomes of an alliance with Germany. He avoids discussing negative examples or considering alternative protectors, asserting instead that Georgia's second golden age could only occur "by grafting German strength and discipline onto our national qualities".[xi]

From other party newspapers, we know this perspective was widely accepted in Georgia at the time. This likely explains why it was not heavily debated. On the contrary, every issue of *"Georgia"* published before the end of the war shows an unwavering interest in and support for Germany's actions.

THE GERMAN ISSUE AND NEWSPAPER ,,PUBLIC AFFAIR" ("SAKHALKHO SAKME")

The Georgian Social-Federalist Party was the second most influential political force in the country, playing a significant role in shaping public opinion. Their newspaper, nationalistic in tone, frequently emphasized the rights and duties of the nation. The party's leaders believed that human freedom was a fundamental aspect of public activity, with nationality as its cornerstone. The party leader and editor of the newspaper boldly advocated for the foreign policy relationships Georgia needed. "The nation demands to adopt the dignity, manners, knowledge, and experience of foreigners; the nation must absorb these into its essence and pass them on to its children".[xii]

However, Samson Pirtskhalava, the editor and leader of the party, approached the idea of a German protectorate with caution. In his writings, he sometimes accused the government of excessive naivety, asserting that German interests could undermine Georgia's state and military power. Notably, the newspaper's June editions provided detailed accounts of the agreement between Georgian Foreign Minister Akaki Chkhenkeli and German Major General von Losov, ensuring the Georgian public remained well-informed about government actions. The publication also devoted considerable attention to Bismarck's policies, German diplomatic traditions, and economic development.

A series of articles by the renowned Georgian public figure Vakhtang Kotetishvili stand out in the newspaper. Kotetishvili examined Germany's imperialist policy, describing it as dynastic and driven by trade interests. He argued that Germany's interest in Georgia was far from altruistic: "The Germans' attraction to Georgia is not caused in the slightest by love for their homeland; much broader and more complex reasons are involved".[xiii] In this regard, Kotetishvili aligned with Samson Pirtskhalava's views. While he acknowledged, like the Social Democrats, that Germany had significantly aided Georgia by thwarting Ottoman conquest plans, he also cautioned that German troops had their own objectives. He stressed the need for vigilance, stating, "Germany does not need our teachings; it will use our country for everything it wants".[xiv]

Archil Jananashvili, the chief publicist of *"Public Affair"*, offered another perspective, emphasizing Georgia's strategic importance. He argued, "Germany has its own goals in Asia and can pave its way to Asia unhindered only with the help of an independent

Georgia".[xv] According to Jananashvili, Germany's ambitions extended to India and Central Asia, with Georgia serving as a crucial corridor for these aspirations.

Following Germany's defeat, the leaders of *"Public Affair"* maintained their optimism, expressing hope that democracy would strengthen through the German revolution. The newspaper allocated substantial space to condemning imperialism and advocating for democratic principles. It also voiced strong opposition to war, state oppression, and unjust struggles, which, they argued, inevitably lead to violence. "It is imperative that today's society be revised, new relations be established, and the causes that could lead to clashes and struggles between people and nations in the future be fundamentally eliminated".[xvi] These sentiments, expressed by the Social-Federalists, resonate deeply with contemporary challenges.

THE GERMAN ISSUE AND NEWSPAPER "LABOUR" ("SHROMA")

The newspaper *"Labour"* served as the official organ of the Social-Revolutionaries, also known as the Georgian Esers. Its publications were substantial and highly informative, addressing all the critical issues facing Georgia.

From the outset, Leo Shengelaia, one of the editors of the newspaper and a party leader, published articles highlighting the significance of the "German question." His writings detailed the Ottoman threat and the implications of a German protectorate. Shengelaia described this alliance as forced but necessary, portraying it as the only viable means to save the Georgian people from physical annihilation.

"Germany has economic goals in the East, first and foremost, followed by strategic ones. Clearly, Germany will begin to implement a reconstruction policy in Georgia. At the same time, Germany aims to establish a unified strategic base in the Transcaucasus from which it can launch operations against the British," the Social Revolutionary Party explained to the public.[xvii]

Despite the prevailing political sentiment, *"Labour"* was unique in its willingness to openly voice suspicions about the German protectorate, suspicions that were not without basis. Since this research examines the propaganda and debates surrounding the issue, it is crucial to highlight an extensive article published in the September 4 issue. In this article, the editorial board sharply criticized Germany's demands and called on the government to exercise greater caution.

The article argued that Germany's demands for compensation in exchange for security guarantees rendered Georgia only nominally independent, while in practice, it had become a German colony. The agreement, which included the lease of the Port of Poti for 60 years and a total export-import embargo, was deemed a significant obstacle to Georgia's economic development. The Chiatura manganese deposits were also a point of contention, as the Social Revolutionaries feared that all profits would benefit Germany. They warned that Germany would extract whatever resources it could from Georgia: "The agreement concluded with Germany blocks Georgia's path to economic revival".[xviii] Like other political forces, the Social-Revolutionaries deeply lamented Germany's defeat and the dire consequences it brought for Georgia. Nevertheless, they remained hopeful about the prospects for democracy, viewing it as the key to the country's future salvation.

THE GERMAN ISSUE AND NEWSPAPER "UNITY" ("ERTOBA")

Since May, intensive publications on the German issue have been appearing in the Social Democratic party newspaper *"Unity"*. These texts highlight the significant importance of the German state's protectorate: "After Germany recognized our independence, there is no doubt that no one will leave our country in the hands of the Ottomans".[xix]

Particularly notable are the speeches of Noe Zhordania, the country's foremost authority and head of government. In several government meetings, Zhordania discussed Germany's objectives and obligations, assuring his audience of the state's goodwill. He drew parallels between the histories of Germany and Georgia, emphasizing their shared resilience. According to Zhordania, both nations have faced and overcome considerable challenges. He noted that there was a time when Germany's various regions were at odds with one another, but that phase had been surmounted, transforming Germany into one of Europe's strongest states.

"Unity" also openly addressed Germany's intentions and objectives. "Germany will try to make the entire Caucasus a base from here, so that the fight against the British will be easier".[xx]

A series of articles titled "In Germany" conveyed the impressions of the Georgian delegation. These accounts described German villages characterized by ideal order and cities with well-functioning infrastructure. The development of agriculture was particularly emphasized, with observations that no plot of land in Germany was left uncultivated or unexploited, underscoring the country's strength and wealth. "It feels like you have entered the territory of a people of strong culture. The forests and fields, arable and sown lands, are impeccably maintained, and agriculture flourishes everywhere".[xxi]

"Unity" also objectively addressed less favorable aspects of the Georgian-German relationship. One such issue was the fines imposed on Georgian peasants, which caused dissatisfaction among the population. The newspaper highlighted this as interference in domestic affairs, while delicately referencing Germany's promise not to interfere in Georgian matters. However, it also noted, "We contacted Germany not because of trivial matters, but because of vitally important ones".[xxii]

In studying the speeches of Georgian leaders, we find additional support for Germany in *"Unity"*. Georgian leaders analyzed Germany's actions and attitudes during the First World War and did not consider them imperialistic. They consistently stated that Germany's defeat would mean the defeat of democratic Europe and the regression of human culture. Georgian politicians issued universal calls for democracy to unite across the country and stand alongside Germany's democratic parliament in advocating for an international democratic truce.

As we can see, *"Unity"* does not engage in narrow partisan arguments. Instead, it presents facts objectively, supported by sound reasoning.

THE GERMAN ISSUE AND THE NEWSPAPER "REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA" ("SAKARTVELOS RESPUBLICA")

The government, through its newspaper *"Georgian Republic"*, objectively and accurately provided the public with all significant information. The newspaper, structured into official

and unofficial sections, reported on official meetings, public speeches, orders, and protocols, while the unofficial section analyzed and explained the events detailed in the official part.

In 1918, the German issue held a prominent place in the newspaper's articles. While the Social Democratic party newspaper *"Unity"* consistently dominated discourse on this topic, *"Georgian Republic"* offered a different perspective. Nearly every issue featured an article about Germany, reflecting the government's stance.

The newspaper did not entirely abandon its Germanophile sentiment, often expressing support for Germany and hope for its victory in the war. "Our international orientation has long changed. We have joined Germany and are entering the international family of free nations and states".[xxiii]

It is noteworthy that detailed discussions of the German issue appeared predominantly in the government newspaper. The government provided the public with comprehensive explanations for this alliance, emphasizing its necessity to physically save the nation and avoid the Ottoman Empire's conquest policies.

The Georgian Social Democrats consistently pursued international solidarity and direct relations with German Social Democracy. "We want to be free and independent; we want to maintain our statehood in international relations under German protection," reads one article in *"Georgian Republic",* which also emphasizes that Georgia aims to establish good-neighborly attitudes and friendly relations with other nations. This principle served as a cornerstone of the newly formed republic's international policy.[xxiv]

Many articles expressed support for Germany during the war. The Georgian government actively promoted Germany's strength and alignment with Georgia. Even after Germany's defeat in World War I, articles remained hopeful: "Even talking about the defeat of Germany is a fairy tale. Her enemies will never see Germany humiliated".[xxv]

The publications of "*Georgian Republic"* conveyed gratitude and appreciation toward Germany. The government reminded the public that Germany had neither interfered in Georgia's internal affairs nor threatened its sovereignty, language, or traditions. Instead, it protected Georgia, and the Georgian people, as expressed in the articles, would never forget this assistance.

CONCLUSION

The Georgian press of 1918–1921 documented the major historical and political developments of the period and served as a platform for intensive discussions, polemics, and political debates. Although its pages reflected significant ideological differences and political confrontations, the German question provided a point of convergence among political parties, despite their differing interpretations of Germany's role. As M. Balakhadze observes: "The summer of 1918 was a period of joint ideas, actions, and great hopes for the future of Georgia and Germany".[xxvi]

The press reflected public expectations concerning Georgia's democratic development and support for the government's political initiatives. Among the principal issues discussed were Germany's protective role, the deployment of German troops in Georgia, and the prospects for economic cooperation between the two countries.

A considerable proportion of the publications focused on political leaders' speeches and appeals delivered at founding meetings. These texts employed rhetorical strategies characteristic of political oratory, seeking to persuade audiences, articulate political positions, and influence public opinion. Their analysis provides insight into how political arguments concerning Germany were formulated and communicated through the party press.

The examination of political polarization and areas of consensus during the First Democratic Republic reveals that the German question became an important point of reference in debates about Georgia's foreign policy. European orientation was frequently presented as a strategic direction for the country's political future, although the degree of confidence in Germany and the interpretation of its protective role varied among political parties.

The Social Democrats expressed particularly strong support for Germany, while the Social Federalists displayed greater reservations. The National Democrats also approached the question of German protection cautiously, and the Social Revolutionaries expressed opposition on certain occasions. These differences indicate that support for Germany was neither entirely uniform nor free from political disagreement. Nevertheless, the party press reveals a degree of convergence regarding Germany's potential contribution to Georgia's sovereignty and international position. Even after Germany's defeat in the First World War, Georgian newspapers continued to publish expressions of solidarity and appeals for continued German support. As one contemporary statement published in the Georgian press declared: "Wherever and however Germany may be, Georgia will never forget its contribution and will always have hope that it will not deprive our country of advice and assistance in international politics".

Despite its brief existence, the First Democratic Republic of Georgia occupies a significant place in the country's political history. Its commitment to democratic state-building and its efforts to establish closer relations with Europe constituted important elements of its political orientation.

The analysis of the 1918 party press demonstrates the value of examining Georgian–German relations not only through diplomatic and political developments but also through their journalistic representation. The newspapers served as a space in which competing ideological perspectives, political arguments, and expectations concerning Georgia's future were articulated and debated. Their pages therefore offer valuable evidence of the role played by a pluralistic press in political discourse during the formative years of Georgian independence. This perspective also provides a historical basis for further reflection on the relationship between political journalism, national sovereignty, and Georgia's European orientation.

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