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A Historical Perspective on Soviet Language Policy: Educational and Cultural Projects for the Laz Population Living in Abkhazia (in the 1920s-1930s)

ABSTRACT

The Laz appeared on the territory of modern Abkhazia in the 1870s. As a result of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, by the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, all of southern Georgia (historical Tao-Klarjeti) and part of Lazeti – the Gonio-Makriali region – became part of the Russian Empire, and the center of the Ottoman Sanjak moved from Batumi to the city of Rize. At this time, intensive migration of Laz people began from the remaining Laz regions in the Ottoman Empire – Atina, Vitse, Arkave, Khopa – to the Black Sea coast of Georgia: on the one hand, towards Batumi, on the other hand, towards Samegrelo – towards Poti and Anaklia, and on the third hand, towards the port cities of Abkhazia: Sukhumi, Ochamchire.

After Sovietization, Abkhazia became an "interesting" testing ground for the implementation of Bolshevik language policy, and consequently, the Laz community became a target of this policy. It should be noted that the study of the Laz of Abkhazia was a taboo topic during the Soviet period, and recently this issue has become relevant for Abkhazian, Russian and European researchers, both from a historical-demographic-geographical perspective, as well as from the perspective of studying the consequences of the Bolshevik terror and linguistic-ethnic policy.

The aim of this study is to bring greater clarity to the overall picture of perspectives reflecting the real goals and results of the language policy implemented towards the Abkhazian Laz. In our opinion, the majority of studies are based only on historical documents or research, and almost nowhere do they take into account the main witnesses of the events themselves - the Laz people and their language, the narratives embedded in the texts. On the other hand, the linguistic foundations of language policy are not taken into account - the artificially ideologized confrontation of the "Marists" and the so-called "Indo-Europeanist" linguists by the Bolsheviks, the consequences of using science as a political instrument on the fate of individual peoples or languages. We will try to at least partially illustrate these issues through educational, cultural and scientific projects implemented for the Laz language in Abkhazia in the 1930s.

Keywords: *Language policy, Laz language, ethnic minority, migration, linguistic ideas.*

Introduction

The Laz community first began to appear on the territory of present-day Abkhazia in the 1870s. Following the Russo–Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the subsequent Berlin Treaty of 1878, the

entirety of southern Georgia (the historical region of Tao-Klarjeti) and part of Lazistan—the Gonio–Makriala district—were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Concurrently, the administrative center of the Ottoman sanjak was transferred from Batumi to the city of Rize. These developments prompted an intensive wave of Laz migration from those parts of Lazistan that remained under Ottoman rule — Atina, Viçe, Ark'ave and Hopa—toward the Black Sea regions of Georgia: on the one hand, in the direction of Batumi; on the other, toward Samegrelo, specifically the areas of Poti and Anaklia; and, thirdly, toward the port cities of Abkhazia, including Sokhumi and Ochamchire. Moreover, a Laz community also appeared in the valleys of Gumista and Eshara–Tskhara–Shubara.

The migration of the Laz along the Black Sea coast was a characteristic process in previous centuries as well. For instance, a compact Laz settlement in Anaklia was already established in the first third of the 19th century – preserved is a copy of a letter dated 22 February 1834 by Niko Dadiani, "Great Niko," the secretary of Samegrelo and author of "The Life of Georgians", addressed to Lieutenant Kaputsin, the commander of the Russian army stationed in Samurzakano. A fragment of the letter was recorded by "Great Niko" in his diaries: 46. 22 February. I addressed Lieutenant Kaputsin of the Mengrelian Regiment as follows: "I have received information regarding this matter, that a certain illness has appeared among the Tatars in Anaklia; therefore, I request that you send a regimental doctor…" (Dadiani 2022, 145). By "Tatars," the Laz inhabitants of Anaklia are meant, just as S. Makalatia uses the term "in Tatarstan" to refer to Lazeti. In describing the "Tsachkhuroba" festival, the ethnographer notes that people came to the shrine from all parts of Samegrelo, as well as from Samurzakano–Abkhazia and "from Tatarstan," that is, from Lazistan (Makalatia 1941, 365).

Thus, from the 1870s, the migration process intensified, this time towards Abkhazia, possibly facilitated by ,,Muhajirism". During the same decade, a mass deportation of the Abkhaz (alongside Circassians, Ubykhs, and other Western Caucasian tribes) to the Ottoman Empire occurred, while the Laz population residing there resettled in Georgia. Naturally, quantitatively, the two processes are incomparable. Tsarist Russia began actively settling Russians, Estonians, and Germans on territories vacated by the Abkhaz, a process later joined by Armenians arriving from the Ottoman Empire. These migrations not only transformed the ethnic composition but also resulted in changes to historical toponyms.

After World War I, when Turkey regained its territories under the Treaty of Kars, part of the migrated Laz population returned to the Ottoman Empire, while another part remained in Abkhazia and Samegrelo. This process was facilitated by the unresolved "land issue" in Sovietized Abkhazia. Until that time, the Laz had been tenants of local affluent Abkhaz and Mingrelian nobles or peasants, with 75% employed in tobacco cultivation and plantation work (Junge & Bonvech 2015, II, 58).

Following Sovietization, this system collapsed, and the Laz began demanding the transfer of land plots into their private ownership. The process advanced with difficulty, and between 1921 and 1928 the majority of the Laz population returned to Turkey—according to I. Chitashi's data, 4,500 Laz (ibid., 57). Despite this outflow, a substantial number of Laz still remained in Abkhazia—up to 5,000 according to the same Chitashi; however, some scholars consider these figures to be inflated, and based on the census data of 1921 and 1926, no more than roughly 1,000 Laz were actually residing in Abkhazia (Bagapshi 2019; Bugai 2011). In order to resolve the land issue, in 1930 the local Soviet authorities of Abkhazia allocated land plots to the Laz in two locations: in the Bzipi Valley and in the vicinity of Adzyubzha (in the direction of Ochamchire), on the territory of the collective farm ("kolkhoz") Mchita Lazistan ("Red Lazistan"). In this way, Laz ethnolinguistic enclaves were formed in Abkhazia. This ethnolinguistic group was so compact and self-isolated that, based on the rich linguistic material recorded in Laz villages of Abkhazia, Arn. Chikobava singled out and linguistically described the Vytsur–Arkabi and Atina Kilo–Kav dialects of Laz (Chikobava 1936). It can be stated that the Laz community added its own distinctive feature to the ethnically diverse landscape of Soviet Abkhazia, with an identity connected, on the one hand, to Laz origin and the Laz language, and on the other, to religious ties with Turkey. Historical links with other Kartvelian groups had weakened, although a faint narrative of a shared history persisted in collective memory. This is reflected in the ethnographic works of Z. Chichinadze (1927), T. Sakhoikia (1985 [1898]), and S. Makalatia (1941), as well as in the rich textual material documenting Laz speech recorded in the early twentieth century by linguists N. Marr (1910), Ios. Kipshidze (1911; 1938), Arn. Chikobava (1928; 1936; 1938), S. Jikia, and S. Zhghenti (1938).

After Sovietization, Abkhazia became a "testing ground" for the implementation of Bolshevik language policy, and the Laz community, accordingly, was targeted by this policy. The first attempt to provide a detailed account of the language policies of this period, based on archival sources, is the study by G. Gvantseladze et al., The Bolshevik Concept of Language Merging and Language Policy in 1930s Abkhazia (2024). However, given the focus of the study, the Laz issue is addressed only fragmentarily. It should be noted that research on the Laz of Abkhazia was a taboo topic during the Soviet era, but in recent years it has drawn attention among Abkhaz, Russian, and European scholars alike, both from historical, demographic, and geographical perspectives, and in terms of examining the consequences of Bolshevik terror and language–ethnic policies (Bagapshi 2019; Bugai 2011; Junge & Bonvech 2015; Aleksiva 2022; Sisoeva 2025).

The aim of the present article is to provide greater clarity on the actual goals and outcomes of the language policy implemented toward the Laz of Abkhazia, within the broader picture that, upon

examination, gives the impression of missing pieces. In our view, most studies rely solely on historical documents or previous research, and the following two aspects are considered in almost no studies: on the one hand, the linguistic dimension of research on the Laz issue, and on the other, the narratives embedded in the rich textual material documenting Laz speech. The linguistic preconditions of the Soviet language policy have also not been adequately considered – the artificially ideological opposition between the "Marists" and the so-called "Indo-Europeanist" linguists by the Bolsheviks, and the consequences of using science as a political instrument on the fate of individual peoples and languages. We will try to partially present these issues through the educational, cultural, and scientific projects carried out for the Laz language in Abkhazia during the 1920s and 1930s of the last century.

Methodology

Modern language policy in any country should be grounded in an analysis of historical experiences, mistakes, and shortcomings, with a reconsideration of planning in light of the current context. For a young state like Georgia, it is therefore especially important to assess the unfavorable legacy of the Soviet period accurately and objectively. It is important to note that the consequences of Soviet language policy continue to affect our country to this day. Any ethnolinguistic conflict begins with a language conflict, and the root of a language conflict lies in language planning. Accordingly, an analysis of specific aspects of language policy in Abkhazia during the 1920s and 1930s provides a clear understanding of the broader picture.

The language policy implemented toward the Laz of Abkhazia was, of course, dictated from Moscow and carried out in accordance with the rules of the general language policy. Scholarly literature notes that in the 1930s, language policy throughout the Soviet Union was based on Stalin's 1929 concept of zonal languages, which differed from Lenin's "Korenizatsiia"—the concept of self-determination of nations and languages. Moreover, it ultimately led to contradictions and initiated a simultaneous restriction or elimination of the rights of languages, whether or not they held autonomous status (Gvantseladze G. et al., 2024, 371–373). Naturally, the Leninist–Stalinist language policy had its most painful impact on the Laz language, which lacked titular status. Moreover, the Laz of Abkhazia shifted from holding the right to self-determination to being labeled an "unreliable" people—a transformation that culminated in their mass deportation to the Central Asian republics in the 1940s–50s. Accordingly, the fate of the Laz also became part of the agenda of Bolshevik terror. As noted in scholarly literature, any issue concerning the Great Bolshevik Terror must first be examined through the perspective of the imperial center—Moscow. In this view, groups were labeled as "hostile peoples" according to shifting geopolitical circumstances and perceived military threats. At the same time, it is

crucial to examine how the perspectives of the central authorities aligned—or conflicted—with those of the ruling elites in the peripheries (Junge & Bonvech 2015, I, 212). We would further note another important dimension: the Soviet imperial center's approach to language planning developed in parallel with contemporary linguistic theories, and the convergence of these processes played a decisive role in shaping Soviet language policy. We believe that without analyzing this aspect, the activities of Iskander Chitashi—the main ideologue and executor of the planning and development of the Laz language—will remain incomprehensible, as will his conflict with the Georgian authorities and Georgian scholars, his rise and fateful downfall, and, consequently, the Soviet history of the "sacrifice" of the Laz community and language in Abkhazia.

In this article, we will endeavor to present not only the ideological background but also the general linguistic and scientific context that accompanied the educational and cultural projects implemented for the Laz language. Beyond the textbooks and reading materials themselves, to grasp the context of the process, we will also analyze two letters written by Iskander Chitashi: one addressed to J. Stalin in 1934, and another to Comintern Chairman Dmitriev in 1937. Furthermore, we will assess the influence of the Laz language research conducted by Georgian scholars during the same 1930s on the process of language policy formation.

Research Outcomes

A. The "Korenizatsiia" Policy and the Creation of Laz Textbooks

The Bolsheviks' national policy—specifically, Lenin's policy of self-determination for nations and languages, also known as "Korenizatsiia"—envisaged that small ethnic groups living in the USSR would have courts, administrative bodies, economic institutions, and government offices operating in their native language, staffed by local people; It also aimed to develop the press, schools, and theaters in the mother tongue.

This policy, along with other components, aimed to provide "adequate" education and instruction to small nations. Under the pretext of defending the rights of minorities residing in Abkhazia, schools were opened for Abkhaz, Greek, Armenian, Estonian, German, Turkish, Laz, and Mingrelian communities.

Seven Laz schools operated in Abkhazia: in the Ochamchire district—Kindghi Primary School and Ochamchire Primary School; in Gudauta—the Greek-Laz Primary School; in Sukhumi—Pshaltilugh Primary School, Shubara Primary School, and Tskhara Primary School; and in Gagra—the Laz Primary School.

Despite the apparent benevolence, the situation in the Laz schools was alarming. One document

reads: “Gudauta District: Red Lazistan Laz Primary School – Class I – 8 pupils, Class II – 2 pupils, Class III – 3 pupils, Class IV – 8 pupils, total – 21 pupils. Instruction is conducted in the Russian language with translation into the Laz language. Due to the absence of a Grade IV textbook, the Grade II textbook is used. Georgian language is not being taught due to the lack of a textbook. The school has one teacher. The teacher Dursunish has 5 (books?) in the Laz language.”

The opening of the schools placed the issue of creating appropriate alphabets and textbooks on the agenda. Following the established practice of the era, and influenced by Niko Marr, Latin script was utilized for the new alphabets. Among the spoken units widespread in Abkhazia, the process of Latinization in the 1920s directly affected only the Abkhaz language, which had previously been based on Cyrillic script, and the Laz language, which was previously unwritten. A Mingrelian script based on the Georgian alphabet was also created, but the operational schools using it were abolished in Samegrelo and Abkhazia in the early 1930s. Nevertheless, several newspapers continued to be printed in Mingrelian in Samegrelo and the Gali district (Abkhazia) until 1938.

In Abkhazia, Latinization did not affect the Georgian, Russian, Greek, Armenian, Estonian, and German languages, since these languages already possessed their own writing systems with centuries-old literary traditions, and this, apparently, was the decisive factor. A Latinized alphabet was created only for the Laz language, and the Abkhaz alphabet was transitioned from Cyrillic to Latin. The alphabet was later printed as a separate book titled, “Alboni, Gech'kaphuloni mektebepesh 1-ani sinapisheni" [Alphabet – for the first grade of primary schools] (1935). However, naturally, immediately after the creation of the alphabet, Iskander Chitashi developed Laz language and mathematics textbooks for primary schools: “Chkuni Ch'ara” [Our Writing] (1932), “Okhesapushi Supara” [Arithmetic Book – in two parts, a Mathematics textbook] (1933), and “Ok'itkhirushi Supara” [Reading Book – for the second grade] (1937).

The alphabetical section of "Chkuni Ch'ara (Çquni Çhara, 1932) predominantly contains Laz words. The following section replaces ideological texts with didactic material. Side by side, we encounter: Inuva Mulun ("Winter is Coming"), Jalepe inuvas ("Trees in Winter"), Kinchishi okhorina ("Bird's House"), Mtuti obch'opit ("We Caught a Bear"), Ditskhironi bjachxa ("Bloody Sunday"), Mch'ita ordu ("Red Army"), Maartani Maisi ("First of May"), Hek, so va ren Soveti ("There, Where There Is No Soviet"). Short stories and poems describe the life of the Laz people at the beginning of the Soviet period, the establishment of "Red Lazistan" (Mch'ita Lazistani), and stories reflecting the activities of workers and peasants. Throughout the textbook, we occasionally find Bolshevik slogans that I. Chitashi has translated succinctly and skillfully.

For example: Skidas maduliepesh do makhachkalepesh ok'ak'atu! ("Long live the unity of

workers and peasants!") (The word Skidas translates as “May it live”); Lenini ren mteli duniash proletarepesh gianjghoneri! ("Lenin is the leader of the proletariat of the entire world!") (The word Gianjghoneri translates as “Guide/pathfinder”; from the word onjghonu “to send”); Ukitxu tsalonnas sotsializmi var ikoden! ("Socialism cannot be built in an uneducated country!") (Lenin)

The textbook includes a Laz-Russian-Turkish dictionary. The question naturally arises: why did the author need to add Turkish material? This fact once again confirms that the textbook had not only an educational purpose but also a propagandistic one, and was intended for the Laz people living in Turkey, a point we will address below.

The mathematics textbook Oxesapuşi Supara [Okhesarushi Supara], 1933 consists of two parts. The book is a Laz adapted translation of the textbook by the Russian mathematician and educator Natalia Popova: Учебник арифметики для начальной школы: 1-й год обучения – ч. 1 (Arithmetic Textbook for Primary School: 1st Year of Study – Part 1) and Учебник арифметики для начальной школы – 2-й год обучения (Arithmetic Textbook for Primary School – 2nd Year of Study). Some sections were added by I. Chitashi. This two-volume work is intended for the first and second grades.

The Alphabet book ,,Alboni’’, published in 1935, aimed to teach the Laz alphabet.

Okitxuşeni Supara [Ok'itkhusheni Supara], 1937 was intended for second-grade students. The short texts aimed to train students in reading.

Some of the words used in the textbooks (especially in the mathematics textbooks) were created by Iskander Chitashi himself—these forms are not found in N. Marr’s dictionary, nor in other Laz dictionaries or texts published later.

B. Political Goals of the Laz Educational Projects

The adoption of the Latin script for the Laz alphabet was motivated primarily by political and ideological goals rather than practical, educational, or cultural benefits. The Soviet Union used this strategy to deliberately fragment ethnoses and languages in order to achieve its political objectives. This strategy aimed to create opposition between traditional peoples and newly created "peoples," and between genuine languages and dialects that had been artificially declared as languages. The small total number of Laz people in Adjara and Abkhazia leads us to hypothesize that by creating a Laz script, the Soviet Union was also exerting ideological influence on the numerous Laz population living in Turkey. The message conveyed was: "You in Turkey have no script, no books, no newspapers, and no schools in your own language, but here, we are assisting even our small Laz population in developing their own culture. The political objective behind creating writing systems for both Laz and Mingrelian is also confirmed by the fact that these two closely related linguistic units were given scripts

based on different graphical foundations: The Mingrelian writing system was based on the Georgian Mkhedruli script, while the Laz system utilized the Latin script, similar to the system adopted for the Turkish language in Turkey at that period. This suggests that the decision-makers, one way or another, still considered the Mingrelians to be Georgians, but did not view the Laz people in the same way (Gvantseladze G. et al., 2024). The explicit designation of the Laz as an independent ethnos further confirms the goal of Soviet language policy: the Laz people primarily lived in historical Lazistan, meaning Turkey, while the Laz in Abkhazia were recent migrants. The true target was actually Turkey, where the Laz people and Lazistan were intended to serve as a staging ground for the Bolshevik revolution. This is clearly evident in the writings of Iskander Chitashi as well.

In 1935, Iskander Chitashi wrote a letter to Stalin discussing the condition of the Laz people in Abkhazia and the reasons for them leaving Georgia. These reasons included:

The poor arrangement of land (uncultivated or unsuitable land); Insufficient employment of the Laz people in artels, small craft workshops, and fishing; Failure to take into account the Laz way of life (cultural specifics); The absence of Party and Soviet services in a language they could understand; Agitation work conducted by the Kemalists encouraging their return to Turkey; The dominance of kulaks disguised as others... I. Chitashi names specific Laz individuals, former kulaks, and now party representatives who work to the detriment of Soviet authority and to the benefit of Turkey. In fact, a whole series of Laz people were surveilled, which subsequently affected their fate. The letter, on the one hand, confirms the need for a wide range of support measures for the Laz, while on the other hand, it clearly reveals antagonism toward the "Kemalist," that is, pro-Turkish oriented Laz. At the same time, it expresses dissatisfaction with the activities of the highest authorities of the Republic of Georgia (Junge & Bonvech, 2015, II, 58–63). Although after this letter, from 1935 onwards, the living conditions of the Laz, as well as issues of employment and education, indeed improved significantly, Chitashi still worries about the lack of education and the absence of complete information available to the Laz population in the Laz language. In 1937, he writes to the Chairman of the Comintern:

"…Soviet and party work is not conducted in a language understandable to the Laz, which exacerbates all the above-mentioned issues. No one speaks to the population in a way they can understand, does not explain the laws or measures, and does not inform them not only about Soviet but also foreign affairs. The absence of the press in the Laz language leaves its mark on all of this. In Adjara, all work is conducted in Georgian, while in Abkhazia it is in Russian, Abkhaz, and Greek—and the majority of the Laz do not know any of these languages. It is understandable why the situation of the Laz has hardly changed during the fourteen years of Sovietization" (Junge & Bonvech, 2015, II, 82–83).

All these events are analyzed by I. Chitashi against the backdrop of describing the Laz resistance movement. He identifies several stages:

First stage – the beginning of the national autonomous movement in historical Lazistan, Turkey, during the First World War;

Second stage – 1918–1920, the holding of elections and the formation of a provisional government with a pro-Soviet orientation;

Third stage – as a result of the policies implemented by Kemal Pasha, the center of resistance moves from Turkey to Abkhazia, and from 1923, the existing free movement regime allows the movement to transform into a national-revolutionary one, with communist groups in Lazistan and Abkhazia becoming the leading force;

Fourth stage – after the closing of the borders in 1928, the focus shifts to conducting educational and cultural activities for the remaining Laz in Abkhazia and Adjara, as well as encouraging them toward anti-Kemalist agitation (Junge & Bonvech, 2015, II, 80–82).

Immediately following the creation of the alphabet, I. Chitashi began publishing a Laz-language newspaper. In particular, from 1929, the five-day organ of the Abkhaz District Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia (Bolsheviks) and the CEC, “Mch'ita Murutskhi” (“Red Star”), was issued. In his autobiography, Iskander Chitashi writes: "During the summer holidays of 1929, I went to Abkhazia, where Laz emigrants were residing. Throughout the summer, I worked at the Bureau for National Minorities of the Central Executive Committee and was appointed editor of the Laz newspaper "Mchita Murutskhi"' (Aleksiva, 2022, 16).

The first issue of “Mch'ita Murutskhi” was published on Thursday, November 7, 1929, and the second issue appeared in December 1929. The newspaper was illegally transported to Turkey and circulated among the local Laz population. It was a political publication, promoting the ideas of Laz self-determination, separation from Turkey, and unification with Georgia with autonomous status. One of the newspaper’s editors, Muhamed Vanilishi, who published under the pseudonym “Sarpuli”, writes in his autobiography:

"Under the leadership of the Central Committee, I was engaged in illegal activities abroad. We established the center of this activity in Sukhumi... We carried out extensive work and published a small-format Laz newspaper called “Mch'ita Murutskhi” (“Red Star”), which consisted of only two issues and was also distributed abroad. The newspaper was published using the Turkish (Latin) alphabet, because the local Laz did not know the Georgian language and alphabet (Aleksiva, 2022, 146). [According to another account, “Mch'ita Murutskhi” continued to be published at long intervals until 1937.] According to Zurab Vanilishi, the son of Muhamed Vanilishi, who recalls his father’s

account, the newspaper was published for 5–6 years. Moreover, for distributing the newspaper, the Ata-Turk government sentenced Muhamed Vanilishi to death in 1937].

The Turkish government did not remain indifferent to this newspaper; it strictly monitored and obstructed its distribution. By decree signed by President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on February 26, 1930, the import of the newspaper into Turkey was prohibited. Later, by decision of the Soviet government, the newspaper was shut down.

During the same period, Iskander Chitashi left Georgia. Researchers in the study "Terror and Ethnos" do not agree with Chitashi's explanation for the newspaper's ban (attributing it to Turkish pressure) and interpret his action as an attempt to shield Moscow from criticism—especially considering that the local party leadership in Abkhazia supported the Laz and, in turn, regarded them as a force supporting their own autonomy against Georgia (Junge & Bonvech, 2015, 233).

I. Chitashi's dissatisfaction with the Georgian authorities' approach to the Laz issue is evident in both letters, but it is particularly pronounced in the one sent to the Comintern. In this letter, Chitashi seeks, through Comintern influence, to regain Moscow's support in order to reactivate work with the Laz in Georgia and Turkey. He directs the full force of his criticism toward the Communist Party of Georgia (Bolsheviks), accusing it of covertly pursuing a policy of "Georgianization" (Junge & Bonvech, 2015, 231).

Junge also notes that Chitashi's actions were partly motivated by personal ambition: he wished to maintain the image of the Laz people's "guardian angel," a title deliberately conferred upon him by Moscow at the time (ibid., 233). Scholars unanimously agree that Chitashi was not ethnically Laz; in fact, the Laz living in Adjara generally considered him to be of Russian, Jewish, or German origin. Nonetheless, the well-known Laz party activist and leader of the Laz in Adjara, Muhamed Vanilishi—whose voice carried considerable weight in the "center"—revealed that Chitashi's real name was Aleksandr Tsvetkov (ibid., 234).

In various autobiographical accounts written in 1930, 1933, and 1936, Iskander Chitashi identifies himself as Vitseli Tsitaishvili (Aleksiva, 2022, 15–18).

Evidently, the promotion of the Laz language and the establishment of a form of cultural autonomy for the Laz served both a clearly internal purpose—showcasing the benefits of Soviet governance—and an external one, functioning as a means of propagating and disseminating Soviet ideology in Turkey.

C. Iskander Chitashi against Georgian scientists

The available sources and documents provide mutually contradictory information about Iskander

Chitashi. He was a writer, educator, linguist, translator, and public figure—and, most importantly, a loyal member of the Bolshevik Party and an uncompromising executor of its directives. He studied at the Moscow Institute of Oriental Languages, where he attended the lectures of Niko Marr and later collaborated with him. After holding various party positions, he served as the head of a department within the Azerbaijan branch of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union.

It was while occupying this post that he was arrested and executed in 1938. According to the charges, he was an active member of a counterrevolutionary, insurgent, terrorist, and sabotage organization operating among the Laz population of Abkhazia. He was accused of engaging in subversive, destructive, and espionage activities in the interests of the Turkish intelligence service. Against the background of the letters mentioned above, the charges brought against Chitashi appear as a true "irony of fate." Yet, it was precisely these letters that ultimately determined his fate. Both documents were forwarded for action to the highest authority of the Georgian Communist Party—Lavrenti Beria himself. Each of them reveals clear dissatisfaction with the Georgian leadership. It is also noteworthy that Iskander Chitashi aligned himself with the party faction of Nestor Lakoba, the leader of the Abkhaz Communist Party, who, in turn, held an unfavorable attitude toward his Georgian party counterparts.

However, local disagreements could not have been the decisive factor in the direction of events, were it not for the new course adopted by Moscow —namely, the replacement of Lenin's policy of "korenizatsiia" with Stalin's program of "Zonal languages" and, ultimately, the planned merger of languages. In practice, a new type of linguistic policy began to take shape from 1935 onward, one that favored linguistic centralization over linguistic pluralism. It appears that Stalin's approach was grounded in the Japhetic theory of N. Marr, which at that time enjoyed official recognition in the Soviet Union and was concerned "not only with the past of language… In general, Marr was concerned not only with the origins of spoken language but also with the future of languages. For this reason, "the center of gravity of the theory shifts from dead languages to living ones… The purpose of the Japhetic Institute is clear: through conscious and deliberate technique, to ease humanity's path toward creating a unified social instrument for communication" (Bolkvadze 2018, 90). As subsequent studies have shown, similar ideas regarding a universal human language were expressed by Stalin as well, which greatly encouraged Marr—so much so that he frequently cited passages from Stalin's speeches to support his views. Moreover, Marr had argued for the necessity of zonal languages even before Stalin did, particularly in his discussions on the creation of a unified Caucasian language (Bolkvadze 2018, 95). As noted above, Iskander Chitashi was a student of Niko Mari and fully embraced the Japhetic theory—both in its general framework and in its specific application to the Kartvelian languages. He

maintained that Laz is closely related to Megrelian and, together with it, forms the “hushing group” of the Japhetic languages, while also exhibiting connections to Svan;

Together with this language and the hissing group representative, the Georgian language, it constitutes the Sibilant group of Japhetic languages in the South Caucasus. However, because this theory was based on the glottochronographic method and the idea of language layers intermingling, Niko Marr immediately opposed the historical-comparative method established in Indo-European studies. This latter method was officially condemned in the Soviet Union, and its adherents were labeled as followers of bourgeois linguistics. Georgian scientists found themselves among the ranks of the latter: including A. Shanidze, Arn. Chikobava, V. Topuria, and others. T. Bolkvadze's work, "The Georgian Triangle of Soviet Science", meticulously examines the minutes of the Tbilisi State University Party Committee meetings, including those from 1934, where the issue of the aforementioned scholars' reliability was discussed. Based on this analysis, T. Bolkvadze concludes that "a merciless struggle was waged against the Indo-Europeanist counter-revolutionary linguists, who used the historical-comparative method and not Marr's paleontology or four-element analysis" (Bolkvadze 2018, 71).

It may be stated that, since its foundation, the Georgian university maintained a clear distance from N. Mar’s theoretical framework. This intellectual distance became even more pronounced after 1926, when Arn. Chikobava began his research on the Laz language within the principles of the historical–comparative method. Between 1926 and 1928 he collected extensive Laz linguistic material, working primarily in Sarpi and the Batumi region; for the same purpose, he dispatched the student L. Tsulaia to document the Athinuri and Arkabuli speech varieties of the Laz communities in Abkhazia. Later, in 1935–37, S. Zhghenti conducted fieldwork in the Laz settlements of Eshkhera–Tskhara–Shubari and Adziubzha.

Thus, while Chitashi and his Bolshevik patrons pursued their party-driven agenda, Georgian linguists were engaged in systematic, academically grounded research on the Laz language. Their findings were presented in two major monographic works by Arn. Chikobava: A Grammatical Analysis of chan with Texts (1936) and the Chan–Megrelian–Georgian Comparative Dictionary (1938). These works effectively established the modern theory of the genetic unity of the Kartvelian languages. More precisely, they advanced the view that Chan (Laz) and Megrelian constitute two dialects of a single language—Zan. This conclusion is supported by comprehensive analysis of phonological systems, root structure, and morphological and syntactic patterns (Chikobava 2008 [1936]). Accordingly, based on linguistic criteria—including regular phonetic correspondences—Laz and Megrelian demonstrably preserve a dialectal relationship to one another.

Arn. Chikobava's scientific indignation is evident in Chitashi's 1937 letter sent to the Comintern. Specifically, the Marrist Iskander Chitashi attempted to present the research of Georgian scientists, branded as "counter-revolutionary Indo-Europeanists," as an additional argument for how "Georgian nationalist" scientists obstruct the issue of the autonomy of the Laz people as an independent nation. He argued that they try to present the Laz people as being of Kartvelian origin, that their language is a dialect of some invented language, Zan, and that it originates from a common proto-language. Chitashi refers to this theory as hypothetical and mythical. He also accuses Georgian historians of presenting the history of the Laz people as part of the history of Georgia (Junge & Bonvech, 2015, II, 80).

It appears that, on the one hand, Iskander Chitashi tries to present himself as a follower of Niko Marr's doctrine, thereby positioning himself in opposition to Georgian scholars who studied the Laz language using the historical–comparative method. On the other hand, as the "protector of the Laz people" and a defender of their rights, he "exposes" Georgian scientists and the Georgian government for pursuing a nationalist policy, arguing that in the process of forming the Georgian nation, the Laz, Megrelian, and Svan people are considered a single people together with the rest of the Georgians, meaning that the "Georgianization" of the Laz people is taking place (Junge & Bonvech, 2015, II, 80).

Thus, I. Chitashi displayed clear anti-Georgian sentiments both in academic discourse and in his party or educational activities. This entire narrative was well known to the leadership of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Georgia, Lavrenti Beria, who, in parallel, maintained excellent relations with the leader of the Laz people of Adjara, Muhammed Vanilish, who stood alongside Chitashi in 1929 in the matters of creating a newspaper and textbooks (Junge & Bonvech, 2015, 229).

However, both the Muslim Adjarians and the Laz people of Adjara were characterized by a pro-Georgian orientation, and their self-identification was shaped differently than what Chitashi attempted by inciting anti-Turkish and anti-Georgian orientation among the Laz people of Abkhazia.

Iskander Chitashi's like-minded associate and fellow combatant, the well-known Laz public figure, writer, and scientist Muhammed Vanilish, despite their common cause and shared views, did not agree with Chitashi's anti-Georgian ideas. He later co-authored the historical-ethnographic essay "Lazeti" (1964) with Ali Tandilava, which is the first attempt at a scientific study of the history and ethnology of Lazeti.

Unfortunately, I. Chitashi's anti-Georgian narrative towards the Laz people of Abkhazia created distrust, which led to the mass unjust deportations of the Laz people to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1944-53. Their repatriation occurred soon after, due to the direct intervention of the Laz patriot Muhammed Vanilish, but they found healthy socialization with the local population difficult and were gradually assimilated into the Abkhaz and Georgian (Megrelian) populations.

Today, according to the 2014 census data from the Abkhaz side, there are 128 individuals of Laz descent (assimilated into Abkhaz) in Abkhazia; they have forgotten the language (Bagapsh 2019). Unfortunately, the Georgian side does not possess similar statistics among those displaced from Abkhazia due to the military actions in 1991–92.

Conclusion

The educational and cultural reforms implemented for the Laz people living in Abkhazia during the 1920s and 1930s were part of the linguistic policy that the USSR government pursued towards small nations across its entire territory. A special alphabet was created for the Laz people, schools were opened, textbooks were developed, and a Laz-language newspaper was published. The course of events made it clear that these reforms and projects were political in nature, serving as a means of propaganda and aimed at "charming" the Laz people living in Turkey. The government planned to expand the USSR's borders within the limits defined by the Treaty of Berlin, and for this, it needed the support of the local population—in this case, the Laz people of Lazistan.

The inspirer and defender of the educational projects for the Laz language was the well-known public figure, linguist, and dedicated Communist Iskander Chitashi, who successfully managed the task of creating the Laz alphabet and textbooks, thereby winning the hearts of both the Laz people and the Soviet government. However, over time, along with his anti-Turkish stance, his anti-Georgian sentiment became apparent. This sentiment was based on both his linguistic ideology—Marristism opposing Indo-Europeanists—and a party rivalry with the leader of the Communist Party of Georgia, L. Beria. Ultimately, however, this peripheral opposition was managed from the center, Moscow.

Stalin's vision of language policy was already based on the ideology of the merging and blending of languages and nations, and the fate of small ethnic groups and languages in the process of implementing this was understandable. Unfortunately, the process of marginalization of the Laz people of Abkhazia began in the late 1930s, which was followed by deportations to Central Asia. Although the process of tracing and returning the Laz people began soon after, due to the intervention of Muhammed Vanilish, the rehabilitation of the Laz people in Abkhazia proved painful. Over time, some of them assimilated into the Abkhaz community, and others into the Georgian (Megrelian) community. In the 1960s, the Laz language could still be heard in Ochamchire, and fortunately, this speech was recorded and published in texts by Irene Asatiani, serving as the last breath of a Laz community with a centuries-old history in Abkhazia.

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