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(According to the Georgian Émigré Press)**

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## **Russification of Language and Culture in Soviet Georgia (According to the Georgian Émigré Press)<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

After the Sovietization of Georgia in 1921, the Russification language policy effected culture as well. The process took place in two directions: centripetal and centrifugal. The first case implied linguistic and cultural assimilation, while the second one, on the contrary, — the strive to preserve the native language and culture. After the Sovietization of Georgia, the political elite was forced to emigrate to Europe. They published Georgian-language newspapers in various European cities for years as part of the struggle for independence.

The article aims to collect relevant empirical material based on the digital corpus of the press of the Georgian emigrants of the 20s-30s of the 20th century and to answer the following questions through the method of sociolinguistic analysis: 1) How did Georgian-Russian language contacts take place? 2) To what extent was Georgia ready to accept the Russian language in all areas of cultural life? 3) In what directions was the protection of the Georgian language provided?

The period of Soviet occupation was difficult for Georgian culture. Under the colonial-repressive regime, when even the use of the word “Georgia” was prohibited and a deliberate Russification of the Georgian nation was underway, people working in the cultural sector had to deal with the strictest censorship to preserve their national identity.

The results of the research conducted as part of the present paper will give the opportunity to find out under what pressure the Georgian language and culture had to function during Russification.

*Keywords: Georgian language, culture, russification.*

### **Introduction**

After the Sovietization of Georgia in 1921, the language policy of Russification effected culture as well (Lewis, 2019; Grenoble, 2003; Comrie, 1981). The process took place in two directions: centripetal and centrifugal. The first case implied linguistic and cultural assimilation, while the second one, on the contrary, — the strive to preserve the native language and culture. (Marshall, 1992; Young, 1976; Kreindler, 1985).

As noted in the specialized literature, the USSR was one of the most ethnically heterogeneous

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empires containing over 100 ethnic groups speaking more than 130 languages (Marshall, 1992, pp. 34-35). Considering the circumstances, Helene Carrere d'Encausse, a French political scientist, remarked that “political linguistics represent Moscow's most successful accomplishment” (Carrere d'Encausse, 1979, p. 165). Who benefited from it is debatable. According to official legislative records, the objective of the Soviet Union was not the direct cultural assimilation of ethnic groups. However, the language policy of the empire had already been its indirect cause. The expectations that Soviet citizens would accept the Russian language in all areas of life were ultimately aimed at the dissemination of Russian culture and the emergence of a new Soviet identity.

Moscow began to prepare the grounds for the russification of the languages of the non-Russian Soviet peoples and nationalities immediately after their sovietization in 1922 (Bruchis, 1988, pp. 228-229). The claim of the Soviet sociolinguist Yunus Desheriev is noteworthy as well. He stated that in terms of its social function, in the Soviet Union the Russian language was “the second language of communication and cooperation in all areas of activity”. Russian was the language of business correspondence and the medium of instruction in higher educational institutions, which gave the language the international status within the empire (Desheriev, 1966, pp. 80-81).

One of the active propagandists of the national language policy of the Communist Party, Khanazarov, pointed out that in the Soviet Union the number of people who do not study in their native language is increasing; The number of students whose national language and the language of schooling do not coincide grow from year to year (Khanazarov, 1982, pp. 183-184).

American linguist Lenore Grenoble believes that a major change in the Soviet language policy began in the mid-1950s. Grenoble links it to the Khrushchev era, when the Russian language was officially declared to be “the second national language”. Clause 19 of the Education Reforms of 1958–59 stated that education in the mother tongue was no longer compulsory and the instruction in Russian had to start from the earliest grades. This represented an open political move toward Russification of every country in the union (Grenoble, 2003, pp. 57-58).

We have a different perspective on Lenore Grenoble’s above-mentioned remark considering that the process of Russification in Georgia began much earlier, during the country’s annexation. Since the 70s of 19<sup>th</sup> century, teaching the Georgian language and the history of Georgia was initially abolished in seminaries and theological schools. A little later, an influential Russian civil servant, the trustee of the Caucasian educational district, Kirill Yanovsky, begins his work with a strict policy against the Georgian language and, with a circular issued in 1885, not only completely expels the Georgian language from schools but also forbids using Georgian in communication. For two centuries, Russifiers attacked all the institutional segments of Georgian culture that defined our national

ideology: Georgian school, church and theater. The main target was the Georgian language.

## **Methodology**

The paper aims to collect relevant empirical material based on the digital corpus of the press of the Georgian emigrants of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and to answer the following questions through the method of sociolinguistic analysis: 1) How did Georgian-Russian language contacts take place? 2) To what extent was Georgia ready to accept the Russian language in all areas of cultural life? 3) In what directions was the protection of the Georgian language provided?

The period of Soviet occupation was difficult for Georgian culture. Under the colonial-repressive regime, when even the use of the word “Georgia” was prohibited and a deliberate Russification of the Georgian nation was underway, people working in the cultural sector had to deal with the strictest censorship to preserve their national identity.

Identifying illustrative material from the press of the research period and discussions around them will give us the opportunity to find out under what pressure the Georgian language and culture had to function during Russification.

## **Problems of Russification in the Georgian Émigré Press**

After the Sovietization of Georgia, the political elite was forced to emigrate to Europe. They had published Georgian-language newspapers in various European cities for years as part of the struggle for independence. It was the Georgian Émigré Press that intensively covered the problems and challenges faced by the Georgian language and culture within the framework of the language policy of Russification of the Soviet Union.

After the conquest of Georgia by the Soviet Russia, the Georgian language lost its importance as the Russian language became the language of various fields and business correspondence. In this regard, the newspaper “Brdzolis Khma” (Echo of the Struggle) publishes a letter with the following content under the title “Cultural Situation of Soviet Georgia”:

*“The Georgian University has been closed down. Instead, several institutes have been established where lectures are given either in Georgian or in Russian. One more wave of Russification can be observed. Preference is given to Lenin's language. The Georgian language is no longer used. Today, an illiterate person often has to take an interpreter with him to the institutions, as the heads of various departments there are mostly Russian”* (Newspaper “Brdzolis Khma”, 1930).

A certain part of the Georgian society, and especially the representatives of the emigration, constantly drew their attention to the importance of national values, the role of which was relevant for

the Georgian reality. The establishment of ideologies was significant for the cultural life of Georgia during this period, which, in turn, was caused by the strongly expressed negative attitude of the Soviet regime towards the Georgian language. The newspaper “Tetri Giorgi” (White Giorgi) published in Paris in 1927 reads as follows:

*“After Georgia fell into the hands of the Russians, the character of our cultural march changed fundamentally. With its bureaucratic-centralist tools, Russia destroyed the foundations of national development and existence of the Georgian people: the state, national education, language, traditions, morality. The disarmed Georgian nation had turned into a powerless subject of Russian influence, being carried blindfolded along an unknown path, like a rudderless ship at the mercy of the waves. Georgia has turned into a mirror reflecting the ugly life and culture of Russia, more precisely, lack of culture. Our literature, art, and politics, in a word, almost all branches of national creativity acquired a more or less Russian character”* (Tetri Giorgi, 1927).

After Sovietization, cultural changes took place in Georgia including the popularization of a new socialist culture. Trade unions participated in cultural events to create a sense of unity and purpose among communities. However, it is important to note that the trade unions were tightly controlled by the Soviet government and they were employed to implement government policies rather than protect public interests. The Georgian trade Union, like the trade unions of other Soviet republics, was subordinate to the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, which was the supreme governing body in the USSR.

During the 1920s there were instances of cooperation and exchange of ideas between British Trade Union and Soviet Trade Unions. Some leaders of British Trade Union visited the Soviet Union and tried to find common ground, especially on issues such as language and culture. It should be noted that similar to the approaches of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, the British Trade Unions were characterized by Soviet rhetoric and opposed to national values. For more accurate and detailed information on this issue, we can read the statement of the British Trade Unions on the status of Georgian culture and language, published in 1925 in the Georgian emigrant newspaper “Akhali Sakartvelo” (New Georgia) under the title “Trade Union Delegation about Georgia”. It reads:

*“The delegation of the British Trade Unions issued the following statement about Georgia:*

1. *The Soviet regime ensures to the greatest extent the protection and peaceful revival of the country, the development of its culture. It is quite understandable that the Georgian bourgeoisie feels embittered, as it lost its property. The nation as a whole is completely self-sufficient and it wants peace and wishes to transform its life on a new economic basis.*

2. *Since the Georgian language occupies a dominant position in schools and administration, since books and newspapers are freely published in the national language in Georgia, since everything is being done to advance the national culture of this people, any talk about the Georgian nation suffering under the yoke of Moscow is nonsense and is made up by the capitalist enemies of the Soviet state”* (Newspaper “Akhali Sakartvelo”, 1925).

Finally, although the British Trade Union Congress was initially opposed to the principles of the Social Democrats, eventually ideological differences and the increasingly autocratic Stalinist regime of the Soviet Union led to a strained relationship between them.

The establishment of the communist regime in Georgia prepared the ground for the widespread dissemination of the Russian language in all areas. Considering all the above mentioned, it becomes clear that the concern for the rights of the Georgian language was fake as evidenced by the contradiction between various legal and normative documents (Tchaava, 2021; Tabidze, 2005). The communists openly fought against the Georgian language and tried to assign the functions of the state language to Russian instead. “Destroyed Culture” is the headline of the article dedicated to this event in the newspaper “Brdzolis Khma”. It reads:

*“The experiments of the invaders have been going on for 10 years - “the end of the cultural revolution is not in sight! Georgian school, press and literature, every branch of art – thinking and faith are subject to the Russian communist dictatorship. The main goal of the Georgian school today is communist upbringing of Georgian children. Our entire Georgian school is completely destroyed and a communist training camp is built in its place. Georgian school textbooks providing the spiritual nourishment of Georgian children are filled with unfamiliar communist materials. There is the glory of Russian October and the waving of communist red flags to make Georgian children forget the public holiday, May, 26, and the national, Georgian flag. The Georgian University is divided, fragmented and separate “institutes” are headed by communist directors. According to today's collectivization, the education programs are subordinated to the Russian communist higher education system”* (Newspaper “Brdzolis Khma”, 1931).

A representative of Georgian culture, theater artist, critic and playwright Sergo Amaglobeli makes a bold statement in the local Georgian newspaper “Tribuna” (Tribune) under the heading “The National Question and Practical Politics” and calls for the preservation of the Georgian language and culture:

*“We don't want to oppress others, we fight for our own freedom, we don't persecute other people's languages, we protect our own language from persecution. Whoever wants to serve the hard-working people of Georgia should give an account of their willpower, their legitimate need. It is his/her*

*duty to respect our language, our culture. We must show our enemies and well-wishers that we are the servants of the true freedom of the people and we will not allow anyone to make Georgia a land of their domination”* (Newspaper “Tribuna”, 1922).

Despite the difficult situation, the Georgian cultural and political elite did not intend to stop fighting against the Soviet regime for the protection of the Georgian language and the restoration of national values, as is clearly evidenced by a letter published in the newspaper “Tetri Giorgi” under the title “Cult of the Language”:

*“Despite the brutal regime of the Bolsheviks, despite the presence of a strong Russophile policy in Georgia today, despite the brutal terror and repression against all those forces and events that serve the national ideal, the creation of a cult of its culture and language - throughout the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century there has never been a spirit of Georgian protest as strong and armed as today. Today, behind the stage of communist Georgia, a great national-cultural sea is raging. Writers and artists grow and develop pearls of national values using metaphors and colors”* (Newspaper “Tetri Giorgi”, 1932).

One example of neglecting the Georgian language is a letter published in the same newspaper in 1933 under the title “Communist Party”, which describes the decline and weakening of the state language in the cultural activities of the institution:

*“An evening concert was held in the club for tannery workers (18 Sept. 1932). When the singers sang in Russian and then in Armenian, there was complete silence in the hall. But when Maro Tarkhnishvili, a famous singer, appeared on stage and started to sing “Urmuli” in her beautiful voice, some listeners became noisy in the hall and the offended singer immediately left the stage. Similar facts can be encountered almost everywhere. Bolshevik national policy is at full power”* (Newspaper “Brdzolis Khma”, 1933).

When the policies of the Russian Empire were replaced by the Soviet communist regime the national-minded cultural and political elite of Georgia found themselves in a new extreme situation. The publication of magazines and newspapers covering national ideas was banned, and educational institutions became supporters of communist ideology. Unlike the previous period, when printed media covering the national themes were very diverse, they appeared to be completely prohibited in the Soviet system.

*“If we closely look at the Georgian press today, we will see that during several decades of its existence we have never had a press so devoid of its type and uniqueness as it is today. Present-day Georgian press is a branch of Russian newspapers; it lives and feeds only on messages and letters published in “Pravda” and “Izvestia”. Earlier, the Georgian press, whether it was good or bad, always had its own opinion and point of view. Our press was a mirror of our national life. Today, all*

*the front pages of the main Georgian newspaper are taken-translated from Russian. Its Georgian language is completely inappropriate and distorted. Georgian communists are afraid of making such remarks in their letter for which they will be punished and banished. Fear reigns everywhere and has killed everything that is authentic and national. And this is the picture in all spheres of life and creativity of our people. Today the Georgian people are experiencing great difficulties nationally, politically and economically”* (Newspaper “Brdzolis Khma”, 1936).

## **Conclusion**

Russification as a manifestation of Soviet imperialism took place in two directions: a) Under conditions of forced bilingualism, the state made subordinate national minorities turn to the Russian language, which laid the foundation for the linguistic chauvinism of the Russian nation in relation to different languages and b) the local bourgeois nationalism of the non-Russian peoples that were part of the empire, and the struggle for the preservation of national identity became more intense. Soviet language policy is also a constant fluctuation between these two poles.

Lenore Grenoble's point of view that among the countries included in the Soviet Union, Georgia stood out with high literacy rates is noteworthy. Georgians have had forced and centuries-long intense contact with Russia and yet, the Georgian people had a well-established sense of ethnic identity, which further intensified their struggle for national self-determination (Grenoble, 2003, p. 116). It's one thing what the intentions of the Soviet Empire were within the framework of the language policy of Russification, but it's another what we got as a result. According to Grenoble, in the Caucasus the capital cities maintained a strong non-Russian identity and in terms of Russian language use they demonstrated very low assimilation rates. For example: in 1959 in Tbilisi 42% of the population spoke Russian as a second language, while in 1989 it dropped to 32.7% (Grenoble, 2003, p. 135).

The reactionary language policy of the Soviet Union did not weaken the struggle for national identity in Georgia, but on the contrary, intensified it. The Georgian political émigré elite also made their significant contribution to these processes.

It's natural, that the Georgian cultural and political spectrum was aware of the difficulty of fighting against the Soviet regime, and therefore, it was important to highlight national values in their program and establish them in society.

Thus, the analysis of the collected materials of the Georgian émigré press confirms that the Soviet regime exercised complete control over Georgia. On the one hand, it seemed to assign a predominant role to Georgian culture and the state language, but at the same time, it gave instructions for the wide and free use of the Russian language. This was a confirmation of the provocative nature

of the language policy pursued by the communist regime - they directly and indirectly created space for the establishment of the Russian language.

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