Published: December 15, 2001
Last Updated: April 21, 2016

GEORGIA I. THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

GEORGIA

i. THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

Located at the eastern tip of the Black Sea to the south of the Caucasus Mountains, Georgia experienced continuous, decisive, political relations and cultural contacts with Persia from the Achaemenid period until the early 19th century (Figure 1).

Sakartvelo, or land of the Georgians, as the Georgians call their country, has been inhabited by proto-Georgian peoples and their descendants since the first millenium B.C.E. The Georgians call themselves Kartvelebi, a name which recalls their mythological ancestor, Kartlos. The English term “Georgians” derives from the Persian Gorj and Arabic Korj and was misinterpreted as being derived from St. George, the country’s patron saint (Lang, 1966, p. 18). The formation of the Georgian nationality was given impetus by the creation of states in western Georgia (Kolkhida) in the 6th century B.C.E., and then by the establishment of a single Iberian state in the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E. The formation of the Georgian nationality was completed between the 6th and 10th centuries, when Georgian became the common language and a more or less uniform culture predominated.

At a crossroads of great empires to the east, west, and north throughout their

history, the Georgians absorbed and adapted elements from the cultures of diverse peoples, while at the same time defending their political and cultural independence against all comers. The Georgians are today distinguished by a unique cultural heritage. Their language, spoken by about four million persons, belongs to a small group of languages, the Kartvelian (or South Caucasian) family, which has not been conclusively shown to be related to another language or language family, past or contemporary. Georgian is an old written language, its earliest surviving text being a mosaic inscription found in Palestine, near Jerusalem, and dating from the first half of the 5th century (Rayfield, p. 3). The dialects of Kartli and Kakheti form the basis of the literary language.

Georgian cultural institutions have also helped to preserve the Georgian nationality, but at the same time they have brought the Georgians into close communion with their neighbors. The Georgian Church, in particular, has been intimately connected with the development of the Georgian people ever since the adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the first half of the 4th century. It belongs to the Eastern Orthodox spiritual world, but certain differences in liturgical rules distinguish it from other Orthodox churches. The Georgian Church was subordinate to the Patriarchate of Antioch until the 5th century when it became autocephalous. It remained so until 1811, when, following the annexation of Georgia by Russia, it came under the jurisdiction of the Russian Holy Synod, a relationship that lasted until 1943 (Suny, pp. 84-85, 284). The Georgians' sense of identity has also been nourished by their literature. It has preserved a record of specifically Georgian intellectual and spiritual aspirations and has served as an intermediary between Byzantine Greek, Persian, Arabic, and Armenian literatures (e.g., Greek and Armenian translations of Arabic works might be made from their Georgian versions, and often a text might survive only in Georgian). These foundations of ethnic community were reinforced by the Georgians' almost continuous struggle for independence which they waged against neighbors and invaders from afar.

Geographically, the northern border of Georgia is formed by the Greater Caucasus mountain range, while to the south the border is marked by the Lesser Caucasus range, which runs parallel to the modern Turkish and Armenian political frontiers. Together with other ranges they create many natural barriers that have been responsible, at least partially, for the country's cultural diversity and frequent absence of political unity. Yet, these formidable mountain systems also made it possible for Georgian kings and nobles to erect

effective defenses against foreign invaders. Georgia is watered by many rivers and streams, which empty into the Black and Caspian seas. The most important river is the Kura (Mtkvari), which rises in eastern Turkey and flows across the plains of eastern Georgia into the Caspian Sea.

Georgia offers striking variations of climate within an area of some 26,900 square miles (69,800 km2). The differences between climatic zones are determined primarily by altitude and distance from the Black Sea. In the Kolkhida Plain, along the Black Sea, subtropical conditions prevail with high humidity, heavy rainfall, and an average mid-summer tempature of 22° C and an average mid-winter temperature of 5° C. The eastern plains exhibit the typical features of a continental climate with temperatures in the summer between 20° and 24° C and in the winter between 2° and 4° C. The Greater Caucasus range helps to moderate the country's climate by holding back cold air from the north.

The population of Georgia, as of 1993, was approximately 5.4 million, a figure that represents an increase of 8.6 percent since 1979. Growth was particularly evident in cities (16.7 percent), whereas the rural population registered only a modest gain of 0.3 percent These figures reflect one of the significant demographic trends of the Soviet period—the sustained urbanization fed by a steady migration of people from the countryside to the city. In 1939, 30 percent of the population was urban; by 1970, 48 percent. Tbilisi, the capital and largest city, had 1.2 million inhabitants, or 23 percent of the total population, in 1989. The ethnic composition of Georgia's population reflects the country's history as a meeting point of diverse civilizations. Georgians constituted the majority of the population with 70 percent in 1993, Armenians 8.1 percent, Russians 6.3 percent, Azarbaijanis 5.7 percent, Ossetians 3 percent, and Abkhazians (see ABḴĀZ) 1.8 percent (Dzhaoshvili, 1968, pp. 33-36; Library of Congress, pp. 177-81).

The evolution of Georgia's political and legal institutions down to 1991 bore witness to nearly two centuries of Russian and Soviet domination, which began with Russia's annexation of the kingdom of Georgia in 1801. For only a brief period of independence (1918-21) after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 were Georgians able to experiment with their own constitutional structures before becoming part of the Russian-sponsored Transcaucasian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic in 1922. Then, in 1936, when this republic was dissolved, Georgia became a union republic. The constitution of the new Gergian Soviet Socialist Republic and its political institutions were modeled on

those of the Soviet Union, and the Communist Party exercised the real power and was the only political party allowed to operate until the late 1980s.

As Moscow's control over the union republics weakened in the late 1980s diverse political parties sprang into being in Georgia and challenged the Communist Party's monopoly of power. The new electoral system they imposed in 1990 made possible the first genuinely multiparty elections in the Soviet Union, which led to the repudiation of the Communist Party and a declaration of independence in 1991. In the following year the parliament restored the consitution of 1921 of independent Georgia to serve as a guide to the political restructuring of the country. One of the most serious problems confronting the new Georgian republic was the status of its minorities. When in December 1990 the national government abolished the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, where Ossetians formed a majority of the population (66 percent to 29 percent Georgians in 1989), the Ossetians revolted and have continued to demand outright independence or union with the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic of the Russian Federation. Competing nationalist aspirations have also divided the Georgians from the Abkhazians, who were afraid that the new nationalist Georgian government intended to dissolve the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic and destroy their cultural identity (18 percent Abkhazians, 44 percent Georgians, 16 percent Russians in 1989). In contrast, the Ajarian Autonomous Republic (10 percent Ajarians, 80 percent Georgians, 10 percent Russians), in southwest Georgia, gave the Georgian government few problems. Although the Ajarians were converted to Islam during the period of Ottoman rule between the 17th century and 1878, they are of the same ethnic stock as Georgians, speak Georgian, and think of themselves as Georgians (Dzhaoshvili, 1968, p. 51).

The Georgian economy between the 1920s and 1991 became thoroughly integrated into the Soviet system. Under this arrangement Georgia could count on a ready market for her agricultural products, manufactured goods, and raw materials, but she paid high prices for machinery and other industrial goods purchased from the other republics and received low prices for her agricultural products. Integration into the Soviet system of centralized economic planning and direction also meant that fundamental decisions about policy and development were made in Moscow, not Tbilisi.

Agriculture is a major branch of the Georgian economy, providing employment for about 27 percent of the work force (1991). The most important crops are grain, wine, tea, and citrus fruits. Animal husbandry is also

important, accounting for 25 percent of agricultural production (Library of Congress, p. 199). Until 1992, when privatization began, most of the agricultural land was under some form of state control as collective or state farms. Markets outside Georgia were crucial to the well-being of agriculture, as a substantial share of its annual production was exported to other Soviet republics before 1991.

Georgian industry grew steadily during the Soviet period, and by the 1980s it employed almost one-third of the country's work force. Like agriculture, it was tightly linked to the Soviet economy as a whole. Both light and heavy industry were dependent on the other republics for raw materials, machinery, and energy, and, in return, they supplied them with chemical fibers, cast iron, synthetic ammonia, and silk thread.

Georgian society was affected in myriad ways by the advent of Communism. Among the most enduring consequences of the Soviet era were changes in social structure. Before 1917, the peasantry constituted the predominant social class in a country that was primarily agricultural, a situation reflected in the census of 1926 (peasants and small artisans 78.9 percent of the population, professionals and civil servants 8 percent, workers 6.9 percent; Dzhaoshvili, 1968, p. 42). Soviet economic policies, epitomized by the five-year plans, drastically affected the proportion of various classes in the population. The collectivization of agriculture and the forced development of industry led to the steady migration of people from the countryside to the burgeoning cities. As a consequence, the urban working class grew steadily (31.7 percent in 1959). An increasingly complex economy and administration system brought a steady growth of teachers, engineers, doctors, and agronomists and of officials and employees of state, party, and civic organizations (24 percent in 1959; Dzhaoshvili, 1968, p. 43). These trends continued down to 1989 and were reflected in the increasingly urban nature of Georgian society.

Religious life in Georgia, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, came under severe pressure between the 1920s and 1980s. The Georgian Church suffered continuous persecution and saw its parishes and clergy drastically reduced. It owed its survival, at least in part, to its historical identification with Georgian national aspiration. The Georgian Orthodox Church is the largest of all denominations with a membership of about 65 percent of the country's population. Other religious groups are Muslims (Azarbaijanis, Abkhazians, Ajarians) with 11 percent of the population, Russian Orthodox (10 percent), Armenian Apostolic (8 percent), and small Jewish urban communities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

W. E. D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People*, London, 1932; repr., London, 1971.

C. Burney and D. M. Lang, *The Peoples of the Hills*, London, 1971.

F. F. Davitaya, ed., *Soviet Georgia*, Moscow, 1972.

G. Deeters, "Die kaukasischen Sprachen" in *HO* VII, Leiden, 1963, pp. 1-79.

V. Sh. Dzhaoshvili, *Naselenie Gruzii: Ekonimiko-geograficheskoe issledovanie* (The Population of Georgia: an economic-geographical investigation), Tbilisi, 1968.

Idem,, *Urbanizatsiya Gruzii: Genezis, protsessy, problemy* (The Urbanization of Georgia: genesis, processes, problems), Tbilisi, 1978.

"Gruziny" (The Georgians) in *Narody Kavkaza* (Peoples of the Caucasus) II, Moscow, 1962, pp. 207-370.

N. A. Gvozdetskii, *Kavkaz: Ocherk prirody* (The Caucasus: a sketch of nature), Moscow, 1963.

A. Harris, ed., *The Indigenous Languages of the Caucausus* I. *The Kartvelian Languages*, Delmar, N. Y., 1991.

S. D. Inal-Ipa, *Abkhazy (istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki)* (The Abkhazians [historical-ethnographical sketches]), Sukhumi, 1965.

B. A. Kaloev, *Osetiny (istoriko-etnograficheskoe issledovanie)* (The Ossetians [A historical-ethnographical investigation]), Moscow, 1967.

D. M. Lang, *A Modern History of Soviet Georgia*, New York, 1962.

Idem, *The Georgians*, New York, 1966. Library of Congress, Country Studies,

Armenia, Azarbaijan, and Georgia, Washington, D.C., 1995, pp. 151-230.

O. Lordkipanidze, *Nasledie drevnei Gruziĭ* (The legacy of ancient Georgia), Tbilisi, 1989.

F. N. Mil'kov and N. A. Gvozdetskii, *Fizicheskaya geografiya SSSR* (Physical geography of the USSR), 5th ed., Moscow, 1986, pp. 286-352.

N. Nizharadze, *Sovetskaya Adzhariya: Ekonomiko-geograficheskaya kharakteristika* (Soviet Ajaria: An economic-geographical description), Batumi, 1961.

D. Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia*, Oxford, 1994.

K. Salia, *History of the Georgian Nation*, Paris, 1983.

R. G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed., Bloomington, 1994.