

LOCAL EXPERIENCE OF INTERFERENCE OF CULTURES (BATUMI ON THE THRESHOLD OF 19TH – 20TH CENTURIES)

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For centuries, dialogue between cultures, between different nations, has received considerable attention. Especially when nations of different nationalities and cultures live in one specific location, within one country. The purpose of this article is to show an excellent example of coexistence of people of different nationalities with different cultures on the example of Batumi, Georgia. The article also focuses on the importance of common cultural, economic, civil activities in the 19th – 20th centuries, which contributed to the peaceful coexistence of the population. The article also focuses on the governing style of the then tsarist regime. In order to pursue political interests, the tsarist government tried to prevent the creation of an independent state in the region, thus constantly strengthening and confronting nations with different cultures and ethnicities.

Keywords: Confession, Religion, Culture, Nation

МІСЦЕВИЙ ДОСВІД ІНТЕРФЕРЕНЦІЇ КУЛЬТУР (БАТУМІ НА ПОРОЗІ XIX–XX СТ.)

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Упродовж тривалого часу питанням діалогу між культурами, між різними народами науковцями приділялася значна увага. Особливо, коли представники різних національностей і культур живуть в одному конкретному місці, в одній країні. Мета цієї статті – показати приклад співіснування людей різних національностей з різними культурами на прикладі Батумі, Грузія. У статті також зосереджено увагу на значенні спільної культурної, господарської, громадянської діяльності в XIX–XX ст., яка сприяла мирному співіснуванню населення.

У статті також зосереджено увагу на стилі правління тодішнього царського режиму. З метою реалізації політичних інтересів царський уряд намагався не допустити створення в регіоні незалежної держави, постійно зміцнюючи та протиставляючи нації з різними культурами та етносами. Російський імперський режим намагався використовувати національні чи релігійні

відмінності для протистояння між християнам і мусульманам, іудаїстам і григоріанцям, башкирам і калмикам тощо. Південно-Західна Грузія, Аджарія, Батумі – регіони, в яких на рубежі XIX–XX ст. сформувався визначний етнічний субстрат, що на своїй території об'єднав мусульманський, християнський та григоріанський світи – дуже визначний культурний колорит. У статті показано шляхи нейтралізації далеких і підступних планів царської Росії щодо Батумі. Доведено, що історичний досвід Батумі вочевидь свідчить, що конфесійна різноманітність ніколи не створювала відчуження між націями, навіть коли державні структури намагалися цього досягти. На порозі XIX–XX століть плідна діяльність місцевої інтелігенції була спрямована на нормалізацію міського життя та діалог культур з метою створення конфесійної моделі, характерної лише для Батумі, яка вразила європейців. Цей досвід не втратив свого значення і сьогодні.

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Dialogues between confessions, which have become so current in the twenty-first century, were important in the previous epochs as well, especially in countries in which, due to the peculiarities of the historical development, coexisted with different religions and confessions within one region and one city. In order to adjust to the conditions created by everyday life and avoid permanent contradictions, it was necessary to work out the approved models of coexistence, enabling people to lead normal creative lives. Meantime, certain traditions guaranteeing tolerance, mercy and neighborly relations had been formed.

Coexistence took place in certain areas, where the outer forces tried to use national or religious differences to oppose Christians and Muslims, Judaists and Gregorian, Bashkirs and Kalmiks etc.

South-West Georgia, Adjara, and Batumi are the regions in which at the boarder of the 19th–20th centuries, a distinguished ethnic substrate was formed, which in its own area united Muslim, Christian and Gregorian worlds- a very distinguished cultural color. But the colonial authorities of the Tsarist Russia, for strengthening its interests in certain regions, always tried to oppose confessions to each other: Georgian Christian to Georgian Muslim, Armenian to Tatar, and Russian to Georgian.

Its devoted allies in the sphere were certain national parties or organizations such as the Russian nationalist organization “Union of the Russian people,” and the pro Turkish organization “Sedai Milet.” The aim of our report is to show the ways of neutralization of

the far going and insidious plans of the Tsarist Russia in Batumi reality. What kind of forces helped to establish philanthropy, neighboring relations, mercy and love in the multinational and multiconfessional town.

We'll start with the fact, that when the Russian and Georgian united army, on August 25, 1878, Occupied Batumi, the officers and soldiers of the army prayed in the Greek church of Saint

Nicolas, which was the only Christian church in the whole town.

The following churches were already functioning in 1895 in Batumi: Saint Michael's Orthodox Church, Orthodox Church of Saint Virgin's Protection, Saint Nicolas Greek Church, Catholic Church of the Savior, Armenian – Gregorian church, Azizie big mosque, mosque Ortacamii and Mufticamii (1. All religious communities had their own parish schools. At the end of the 19th century in Batumi, the following theological schools were functioning: Batumi church–parish school, Batumi girl's church–parish school (Greek), Armenian – Catholic parishes school. A lot of Medreces were in Batumi and Adjara as well¹.

According to the schedule of 1897 in Batumi lived: Orthodox – 15,495, Raskolniki – 137, Armenian–Gregirians–6,150, Armenian –Catholics – 662, Roman Catholics – 1,385, Muslims – 3, 156, Judaists – 1,179, other confessions – 10.

This diversity in Batumi was one of its characteristic features. This was a widely talked topic among foreign travelers or scientists visiting Batumi at that period. For example, Pierre Beloni visited Batumi in 1911. He remarked: “Batumi is the sort of town, where the representatives of every confession have their own cult facilities. They are located near to each-other. Here you can see the Georgian orthodox, who pray in their own churches, also, in their own church, pray the Russian orthodox. The Russians built in Batumi one of the most beautiful magnificent cathedrals called “Soboro” by the residents. Not far from it is located a miraculous temple of the Catholics, which is full of Batumi catholic parish. Near to this temple, the Greek Orthodox Church is located. Next to it is the Greek parish school. This school frequently holds different arrangements and assembles the representatives of different nations living in Batumi. Two streets after the Greek Church, there exists an Armenian Gregorian church, which has several parish schools. There are three mosques in Batumi so there is no deficiency of prayers. During the 5 months of my visit in Batumi, not a single conflict occurred, but as I was informed, such conflicts were quite frequent in the past”².

Officials of the Tsarist Russia hampered the nations living in Batumi to develop their own culture. They permanently tried to prevent their political union against the metropolis. But Batumi historical experience shows that among representatives of the nations living in Batumi, cultural arrangements, meetings, sharing of opinions, and discussions on different problems were a common experience. A physician from Batumi A. Erickson offered valuable information. This information was a reference to the events of 1888 – a teacher

¹ Adjara State Museum. Fund of Scripts, N 771.

² Ibidem.

from Batumi Nickoloz Derjavin held an interesting meeting, in which the Georgians – Varlam Bakhtadze participated as well as Nodar Vashakidze, the Armenians – Ashot Bagdasarian and Anton Grigorian, the Greeks – Christo Iliadis and Kostas Efremidi, the Russians – Anatoli Bistrov, Evgeniy Kharitonov and Yuriy Rostovcev, the Georgian Muslims – Husein Bejanidze and Ibraim Gurgenzidze, the Jews – Moshe Liberman and Ioseb Zemtsev. At the meeting, they discussed the rapprochement of different people living in Batumi, and the importance of their cultures for this activity. It was also said that it was necessary to hold cultural arrangements, in which the representatives of all the nations would participate. It was necessary to work out the special cultural program, where the dance and song items of the representatives of every nation will be included. This would enable rapprochement of the cultures. In the initiators' opinions, the representatives of all the nations ought to have a clear idea about each-others' cultural abilities.

The following information by Erickson about a big concert held in the seaside park of the town, on June 6, 1889, with the participation of all the nations living in Batumi, is worth examining.

The concert was led by David Shapatava and Simon Khokhlov. At the beginning, they talked about the importance of culture in rapprochement of peoples. In Erickson's opinion, the culture phenomenon was the best way of getting people acquainted with each-other. Culture reproaches traditions and helps people understand each-other's pasts etc. Such arrangements were often spotlighted in the press, but not always from a positive angle. Authors of some letters arising out of certain political positions tried to awake the skepticism towards the cultural dialogue going on. In their opinion, the dialogue between the confessions wouldn't take place. For example, on the 18th February 1893, a newspaper entitled "Chernomorski Vestnik," published the article of S. Drand about the different cultures of nations living in Batumi, in which the author aggressively observed the cultures of different nations, and remarked that in Batumi, it was impossible to hold the dialogue of cultures, as there lived radically different people whom had no connections with each-other. The concerts held with their participation were of no significance and did not help people understand each-other's cultures.

On March 2, 1893, the same newspaper published a very interesting article written by Greek Stefane Haringidi, titled "Culture is the most powerful instrument for rapprochement of cultures." In this article, the author spoke out against all skeptics, who thought culture was not important in the rapprochement of peoples. In his opinion, culture was of a paramount importance in the friendship of people. Culture gets people acquainted with one another, with every nation having its own original unique cultural heritage. For example, let us take the Georgian people, their songs and dances speak about the fact that they are the oldest, most civilized nation, the history of which goes back to the distant past. The Greek culture is also unique and incomparable, which introduced diamonds into the treasury of the world culture. The Armenian culture is wonderful and beautiful as well; we can say the same about the cultural heritage of the Jews, which have absolutely unique handwriting. All the nations have brought their merit in the development of world culture,

with the greatest part of these nations living in Batumi. It can be said that in this town, meetings with different cultures really existed. The more cultural arrangements that were held, the better it worked for the cultural promotion of the town³.

The local officials did not like the attitude of the society of the town, thus they tried their best to oppose the Georgian Christians and Muslims, but they failed to do so, as the cultural relations of the Georgian brothers were firm and steady. A wonderful example is the First Circle of the Stage Amateurs, established by Ketevan Juruli, was later transformed into the dramatic theatre by David Kldiashvili. The members of this circle were Georgian Muslims and Christians.

A member of the Batumi self-government, the well-known public figure Ivane Meskhi, had a very interesting recollection – he recalled that the active members of the circle of the theater amateurs, established by Juruli, were the Georgian Christians and Georgian Muslims. The fact that the Georgian Muslims participated in the work of the circle was very pleasant. This arrangement was obviously very important for strengthening the Georgian cultural traditions, as a result of Tsarist Propaganda. Six Muslims participated in the circle established by Ketevan Juruli. One such incident occurred: A play “My Mother-Land” was being staged. The rehearsals took place in the small building located in the yard of the civic college. At the end of the play, a child was to recite a poem of the patriotic character. It should have been a Muslim child, but it was very difficult to manage this at that time. Thus, Hasan Davitadze – the active member of the circle, saved the situation by offering his own son to recite the poem. Thus, the poem was recited by his 8-year old son, Abdul. The public liked the play very much⁴.

There is one more case worth mentioning: In Batumi on a tour arrived a Georgian team from Tbilisi. A famous artist, Vaso Abashidze, was on the team. One day he saw, that a fellow standing on the stage was artistically reciting a fragment form of the “Knight in the Panther’s Skin.” Vaso was interested in the fellow reciting the divine passages of the immortal Shota. When he understood that the fellow was the Georgian Muslim Ismet Mikeladze, he ascended onto the stage, hugged the fellow, and said that the brotherhood of the Georgian Christians and Muslims is immortal and no black power can interrupt it⁵.

The union of different confessions and the dialogue of cultures was a combined effort to unite people. In Batumi, it was a guarantee. For example, in 1881 in Batumi, the first school for the dissemination of literacy (reading and writing) was established. The school was financially limited. In March of 1883 (in Batumi), the administration hall held a meeting with the participation from representatives of Christian, Muslim, Greek and Jewish societies. In the meeting they spoke about the importance of the work of the Georgian school. They decided to arrange a charity concert for supporting the school, with participation from different nations. In their opinion, cultural relations were a factor that provided guarantees of the rapprochement of nations living in Batumi. At the meeting, the

³ Adjara Central State Archive. Georgia 204.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Adjara Central State Archive. Georgia 206.

gratitude speech was made by Georgian Muslim Enver Bibin Ogli. He thanked the Greeks and Jews and remarked that cultural relations have a great power in rapprochement of peoples and strengthening friendships. He said that our culture comes from one and the same root and has a common future.

Next to speak was Muslim Suleiman Beridze, who remarked that he sent his two children to a Georgian school. The school suffered from hardships and cultural arrangements had to support it. The same opinion was shared by Greek Nimis Galis, and Georgian Jew Iusa Papiashvili. It was followed by the fact that on the 20th April of the same year, in the Batumi administration hall, a concert with the participation of Georgians, Jews and Greeks was held. A lot of people attended the concert and the money that was raised at this concert was given to the school to solve its financial problems⁶.

A very significant event happened in 1888, when Batumi was visited by the well-known Zheck singer and conductor, Josef Ratil. After the concerts that were held with great success, Ratil attended the concert given by the local chorus. The chorus was conducted by Arson Giorgadze. Both Christian and Muslim singers sang in the chorus and the songs that were performed by the singers made a great impression on Ratil. He was interested in what was common between the Christians and Muslims. He was explained that they were one and the same people and there was only one difference between them – religion.

After speaking with the members of the chorus, Ratil remarked that it was impossible to degenerate the people, with such rich voices, tunes, and language⁷.

In 1890, Batumi was visited by the genial Italian singer Ernesto Rossi. The concerts held by him were met with enthusiasm. The town administration gave a concert in Ernesto Rossi's honor. Different representatives of the town participated in the concert including Georgian, Greek, Jewish, Armenian and Russian performers. When a group of Georgian Muslims performed the dance "Gandagana," the delighted Italian ascended onto the stage and said that for the first time in his life he saw such a perfect dance with beautiful elements and music. When the concert was finished, the representatives of different nations of the towns greeted Rossi. They spoke about the role and importance of the culture in confirming friendships among people. Jew Isaak Khutsishvili remarked that in Batumi the Jews of different origin had good relations, but they had especially warm and close relations with Georgians, as they had passed a long route together in times of trouble. They together with the Georgians formed the Georgian Statehood and culture. This made them unique and worth to be followed. In his speech, Ernesto Rossi expressed his gratitude for the warm meeting and said that Batumi was a diverse town and the culture was a phenomenon uniting these nations. He said that it was very pleasant to see the representatives of different nations standing together on the stage and trying to show in the best way possible everything their people had created. He especially liked the dance of the Georgian Muslims⁸.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Adjara Central State Archive, Georgia 164

⁸ *Черноморский вестник* (Батуми). 1893. 2 марта (№ 86).

The dialogue held in the Batumi council in September of 1912 was dedicated to the intercultural relations. This meeting was led by the head of the town Ivane Andronikashvili. At the meeting, the speeches were given by members of the council - Greek - H. Grigoriadi, Armenian - S. Akinian, Jew - N. Bialuzki, Georgian Muslim Iusuf Konselidze, Russian - A. Trofimov, and the Georgians - I. Sabaxtarishvili and S. Eliashvili. They spoke about the condition of culture in the town. They remarked that cultural arrangements with the participation of different nations were seldom held but it was necessary to improve the existing situation. The orators unanimously agreed that Batumi was the centre of cultural dialogues and these traditions had to be strengthened. The idea about the formation of the international ensemble belonged to Ivane Andronikashvili. In the ensemble, representatives of different nations would be united. The participants of the meeting liked the idea, and with the support of the head of the town in December of 1912 at the City Council, the town chorus was formed. This chorus performed songs and dances and representatives from all the nations were united in the chorus. They sang the songs of different peoples. It must be said that the soloists of the dance "Gandagana," together with the Georgians, were Greek Maria Dimitriadi and Georgian Jew Esma Janashia. They held the first concert on the 11th February 1913, in the administration hall of the town self-government. They were met by a delighted public. After the concert, the representatives of the town made speeches and called that day historical⁹.

Thus, the historical experience of Batumi obviously shows that the confessional diversity never created alienation between the nations, even when the state structures tried to achieve this. Common human ideals, education and cultural activities of intelligentsia, a strong sense of philanthropy and mercy, guaranteed the cultural dialogue. The intelligentsia of different nations realized these progressive targets in Batumi, irrespective of nationality. Confession was the bearer of humanism, philanthropy, mercy and common human values and thus, people were able to reproach and not separate. People loved each other and established friendship among the different confessions. Batumi was a perfect example of this fact. In the threshold of the 19th-20th centuries, the fruitful activities held by the local intelligentsia were directed towards normalization of the town life and dialogue of cultures in order to create a confessional model, characteristic only for Batumi, which amazed the Europeans. This experience has not lost its importance even today.

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⁹ Ibidem.