

Russia Annexes Georgia

Georgian Patriarch's Letter to the 1922 Genoa Conference

In February 1921, the 11th Army of Russia led by Bolsheviks invaded Georgia, overthrew its democratically elected government, and installed a puppet regime of pro-Russian revolutionaries. Moscow had accused the Georgian government of oppressing pro-Russian political groups, and ethnic minorities. Subsequently, Georgia was annexed by Russia, and she spent next 70 years under the Bolshevik yoke.

The invaders systematically attacked Georgian culture, persecuted the Church, and severely punished those who opposed the Soviet regime. Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ambrose (Ambrosi),¹ elected to the throne in October 1921, witnessed first-hand the destruction of Georgia's spiritual and material wealth by the Russians. In spring of 1922, he appealed to the Genoa Conference held in Italy from April 10 to May 19 1922. The Conference, which included a delegation from the Soviet Russia, addressed post-World War I diplomatic and economic ties

¹ Catholicos-Patriarch Ambrosi (ამბროსი) was born Besarion Khelaia (ბესარიონ ხელაია) on September 7 1861. In 1905-1917, already a bishop, he was persecuted, exiled, deposed, and imprisoned by Russian imperial authorities. On October 14 1921, Archbishop Ambrose was elected Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, after Patriarch Leonid died of cholera.

among European powers. Since the Democratic Republic of Georgia was a member of the League of Nations before the Russian invasion, Patriarch Ambrose hoped the members of the League at the Genoa Conference would persuade Russia to restore sovereignty of Georgia and withdraw its troops.

The Genoa Conference heard the Georgian Patriarch's letter, expressed its concern, but took no action.² A local newspaper *Kappara* (sp?) published the text, which remained banned in the Soviet Union until the collapse of the regime in early 1990s. In 2008, Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs started publishing declassified documents from Soviet state archives. Its first bilingual Archival Bulletin included the original Russian text of Patriarch Ambrose's *Petition*.³

A Petition of the Patriarch of Georgia to the Conference

The Georgian delegation offers the text of the following document, the original of which was handed to the Chair of the Genoa Conference.

"In the name of the Lord, a servant of God Ambrosi, spiritual father and Patriarch of All Georgia, sends his greeting to the civilized humanity represented at the Genoa Conference.

In prehistoric times, tribes of the Kartvelian⁴ people, created their country at the footsteps of the Caucasus between the Black and Caspian Seas, small in size, but with a strong will of unity and blessed with creative faculties, known historically as Georgia, which throughout centuries has been the sole pioneer of Christian

² The League of Nations' involvement in the matter was limited to the adoption of two resolutions, in 1922 and 1924, which criticized Russia and supported Georgia's sovereignty.

³ *The Archival Bulletin*, No. 1, April 2008 <http://archive.security.gov.ge/saarqivo_moambe.pdf>.

⁴ *Kartvelian* or Georgian – *kartveli* means 'Georgian.' (All notes in the letter by the translator).

civilization and European humanistic principles in the Near East. At the end of the 18th century, the Georgian nation, weakened by the wars against external enemies, voluntarily asked Russia, a confessor of the same faith, for protection hoping that this protection would help to preserve her national and political existence. These motifs are clearly brought forward by the 1793 agreement between the Georgian King Irakli and the Russian Empress Catherine.⁵

However, unfortunately the hopes of our motherland came to disillusionment, and for 117 years she was a victim of fierce despotism and unbearable oppression by the Russian state.⁶

This is why in 1917, following the crumbling of the artificial unity of the Russian Empire, the Georgian people declared its independence and immediately started rebuilding its political, national, and spiritual life.⁷

Despite the fact that both external and internal enemies presented it with great obstacles, the Georgian nation has demonstrated its creative capabilities, and as an acknowledgment of her efforts, after three years, the civilized Europe recognized, and included her among the free and sovereign states.⁸

⁵ King Irakli II (Hercules II) of Eastern Georgia, signed the Georgievsk Treaty with Russia in 1793, hoping to save his people from physical extinction. The treaty called for a military alliance and common foreign policy; however, after about 10 years, the Russian Empire used it as a pretext to annex all of Georgia, depose its monarchs, and install a viceroy.

⁶ Russia abolished Georgia's ancient Patriarchate in 1811, and ruled the Church in Georgia via Russian exarches. Russians also looted Georgia's church property and heritage, according to some estimates, the damage to the Church in Georgia exceeded 140 million rubles in gold (by 1905 exchange standards). David Marshall Lang, *A Modern History of Georgia*, London: Wedenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 109.

⁷ The Orthodox Church in Georgia restored its autocephaly in March 1917, after the February 1917 revolution, which forced Czar Nicholas II to abdicate. The Russian Church did not recognize the Church of Georgia until 1943, when it had to do so as part of a deal struck with the Soviet government.

⁸ The League of Nations extended membership to the Democratic Republic of Georgia at the end of 1920, shortly before she was invaded by Russia.

Clearly, Russia, a former master of Georgia and an oppressor of smaller nations, could not tolerate this.

She [Russia] sent troops to the Georgian borders that invaded her territory to annex it – and on February 25 1921, once again a denigrating yoke of slavery was imposed upon the small and injured Georgia, the worst ever experienced throughout her many centuries old history.⁹

It is true that the aggressors are trying to demonstrate to all, both domestically and abroad that they have liberated and benefited the Georgian nation. However, as her spiritual father and the sole true shepherd, in whose hands gather the most gentle cords of her national aspirations, and to whom all her cries and complains directly reach, I know how 'happy' she is.

Without any exaggeration, we could argue that the experiments to which the Georgian nation has been subjected during the last year would inevitably lead to her physical and moral degradation.¹⁰

Property, which has been soaked in blood and sanctified with the bones of its ancestors, is taken from the people and distributed among the invading aggressors.¹¹ People's means of survival obtained through blood and sweat is taken away from them and sent abroad. They attack the mother language of the people, damage its national culture created by its ancestors, and even the most precious possession of the people, its faith, is being assaulted. Under a false

⁹ Throughout her history, Georgia experienced invasions by Greek, Roman, pagan Persian, Arab, Muslim Persian, Mongol, Turk-Seljuk, Ottoman-Turk, the Czarist Russian, and Soviet Russian empires. Currently, the practice is being continued by the Russian Federation. Historically, the Georgians accepted no imperial rule over their country as legitimate, and opposed the invading empires through military and a variety of peaceful means.

¹⁰ Patriarch Ambrose refers to communist reforms initiated by the Russians.

¹¹ Russia employed mobs of youth militia, most of them of non-Georgian ethnic backgrounds, members of young communist league, to implement its violent 'reforms.'

banner of freedom of conscience people are forbidden to exercise their religious needs.

Members of the clergy are being ruthlessly persecuted, our Church, the focal factor of eminence and excellence of the Georgian state throughout many centuries, is now deprived of all its rights to the point that despite all its efforts the Church cannot obtain the means to provide for its survival.¹²

To put it in few words, our nation is wounded, and is calling for help. [On her own] It cannot even properly rebuke the aggressors.

In such circumstances, I, as the chief pastor [of the Georgian nation] consider it to be my obligation to declare the following:

We, as representatives of the Church of the Lord, do not enter the debates regarding comparative merits of various forms of political life; however, we cannot disassociate ourselves from such aspirations of our nation as to create relatively supportive conditions for its material and spiritual development; and therefore, we are asking:

1. That the armed forces of Russia that have annexed Georgia leave the territory of Georgia without delay, and that Georgian property be protected from all kinds of violence, forced audits, and embezzlement by foreigners.

2. That the Georgian nation is given an opportunity to freely organize its life, and pursue it, as she decides to be appropriate, and to strengthen those forms of political and social life that fit best to her spirit, her aspirations, her customs, and her national culture.

¹² In the 1920s, Russia's puppet regime in Tbilisi initiated massive attacks on the Church. Sergo Vardosanidze, *Saqartvelos martlmadidebeli samotsiqulo eklesia 1917-1952 tslebshi*, Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 2001, pp. 59-154. (სერგო ვარდოსანიძე, *საქართველოს მართლმადიდებელი სამოციქულო ეკლესია 1917-1952 წლებში*, თბილისი: მეცნიერება, 2001).

We harbour strong hopes that the esteemed Conference, determined to address greatest problems of humanity, and to restore justice and freedom in this world, will not reject essential petitions by the small Georgia outlined above, and will liberate her from the denigrating yoke of slavery and domination by force, a victim of which she currently remains.

May God bless you, and your noble intentions and labour.

Unworthy Abrosi
Patriarch of All Georgia

From a Genoa newspaper '*Kappara*' (sp?) of May 5 1922.

After the text of the Petition became known to Moscow, Russia's puppet regime in Georgia started persecution of Patriarch Ambrose. He was arrested, patriarchal residence was confiscated, hundreds of churches and monasteries closed, confiscated or destroyed, church property looted, hundreds of clergymen arrested, exiled, and executed. The Russian pogrom of Georgia and its church in the 1920s reached its apex in August 1924, when the Russians ruthlessly suppressed anti-Soviet uprising in Georgia by executing more than 12 thousand people, and exiling more than 20 thousand to Siberia. Catholicos-Patriarch Ambrose was among those arrested, but the Russians could not dare to execute the popular pastor. He was sentenced to eight years of hard labour, but after the intervention of a Bolshevik leader Mikhail Kalinin,¹³ Patriarch Ambrose and several other clerics were released early in

¹³ Mikhail Kalinin, although not of Georgian extraction, spent years working in Georgia as a labour organizer prior to the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917. In the Soviet regime, from 1919 to 1946, he occupied a largely ceremonial but influential post of 'head of state,' and was commonly seen as a moderate. The formerly German city of Königsberg was renamed after him – Kaliningrad.

1926.¹⁴ Patriarch's health was broken; however, and he died on March 29 1927.

In 1995, the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in Georgia glorified His Holiness and Beatitude Ambrose, Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia (1921-1927), as saint, and appointed March 29 (March 16 by the Julian calendar) as the day of commemoration of St Ambrose the Confessor (წმინდა ამბროსი აღმსარებელი).

*Translation and commentary by
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¹⁴ The Soviet regime rightfully concluded that the August 1924 Georgian uprising was due to harsh persecution of the Orthodox Church in Georgia, and as a result, relaxed its persecution of the clergy and destruction of church property.