

Democratic socialism: The Georgian Experiment

By Eric Lee

Georgia, a small country squeezed between Russia and Turkey, was the unlikely scene of an experiment in democratic socialism that lasted for nearly four years.

From the fall of the tsarist regime in March 1917 until the Red Army invasion of March 1921, Georgia broke away from Russia and was an independent republic under Social Democratic rule. Unlike Soviet Russia, it was a political democracy with a strong civil society, powerful trade unions and cooperatives, and a radical agrarian reform that turned the country's peasants into enthusiastic supporters of the government. The contrast between the Georgian Social Democrats and the Russian Bolsheviks was so strong that in 1920 some of Europe's leading Socialists came to the country to see things for themselves. What they saw astonished them.

Before 1917, the Social Democratic Party in Georgia was almost unique in the vast Russian empire. It was a popular, mass party with a large base among the peasants. No other Marxist party — neither the Bolsheviks nor the Mensheviks — ever achieved such popularity. The only socialist organisation that had achieved anything like this in the Russian Empire was the Jewish Labour Bund.

The Georgian peasants were also unique. A year before the revolution of 1905 which shook the empire, they took control of the entire province of Guria, in western Georgia, and established a kind of revolutionary self-rule, led by Social Democrats. Count Leo Tolstoy was among many who were impressed by what the Gurian peasants had achieved. "What is happening in Guria is an event of immense importance," he wrote. "What should be done is exactly what the Gurians are doing, viz., to organise life in such a manner that there should be no need for any authority." When the Tsar's army came to put an end to this extraordinary experiment in self-rule, they were met by the determined resistance of Guria's "red detachments". But once the Revolution had been put down everywhere else, the Russians turned their full attention to Guria and brutally destroyed their "commune".

The Gurians were supporters of the Social Democratic Party. There were hardly any Bolsheviks in Georgia before 1917 — Joseph Stalin was the exception. The Georgian Social Democrats tended to sympathise with the Russian Mensheviks, and when the 1917 revolution came, some of them took on important roles in Petrograd, both in the Provisional Government and the soviets. One of them, Irakli Tsereteli, became a minister in Alexander Kerensky's government.

Before 1917, the Georgian Social Democrats were not nationalists. They fully expected that the Russian revolution would lead to the creation of a democratic, federal state in which Georgia would have a certain measure of autonomy. In this sense, they had

some similarities with the Jewish Labour Bund, which also sought autonomy, but not independence, for the Jewish people.

The Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917 changed everything. There was not going to be a democratic Russian state. Before the end of 1917, and long before the outbreak of the bloody Russian Civil War, Vladimir Lenin's government had already established a secret police (the much-feared Cheka) and system of prisons and labour camps (the GULAG). Opposition political parties were banned — including the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (who were the most popular party in the country). Lenin's 1917 pamphlet *State and Revolution* had promised the rapid “withering away of the state” once his party came to power. But the opposite happened — the Soviet state grew stronger by the day as dissident voices were silenced across Russia.

Following the Bolsheviks' dispersal — at bayonet-point — of the elected Constituent Assembly, the Georgians knew that their future could no longer be as part of Russia. After a short attempt at a federation with neighbouring Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia declared independence on 26 May 1918. What followed was extraordinary. While in Russia, the regime was growing increasingly dictatorial, Georgia moved in an entirely different direction.

First of all, unlike the Bolsheviks the Georgian Social Democrats, led by the talented Noe Zhordania, created a multi-party democracy. Elections for the new Georgian Constituent Assembly were held in February 1919. Suffrage was universal, equal and secret, and women could vote (which was not yet the case in most countries). Strict proportional representation determined the makeup of the Assembly. Turnout was high — about 60% — despite heavy snow. Fifteen parties ran candidates, but the Social Democrats won an overwhelming victory, winning 109 of the 130 seats. Other parties running included the Social-Federalists, National Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries.

The newly-formed Georgian Democratic Republic was under threat from the very first day. The First World War was still raging. An invasion by Turkish forces was imminent and the Georgians sought help from Germany. For a few months, German troops occupied parts of the country and helped keep the Turks at bay. With the end of the world war, British forces replaced the Germans. Georgia retained its independence even while foreign troops remained on its soil.

To their north, the Georgians were also threatened by both sides in the Russian Civil War. The Whites considered Georgia to be a breakaway province that needed to be brought back under Russian imperial rule. The Reds saw Georgia in much the same way, aiming to bring back under Soviet countries like Ukraine which had broken away from Russia when they had the chance.

The most important task facing the Georgian Social Democrats, other than national defence, was land reform, and their successful implementation of this stood in stark

contrast to the Bolshevik failures in Russia. In Georgia, there was no need to send armed detachments out to the countryside to seize food for the cities. Famine was avoided. Peasant support for the Social Democratic government remained firm.

Georgian civil society flourished. A strong, independent trade union movement convinced the government to include the right to strike in the country's new constitution. But strikes were rare, as powerful unions were able to work together in tripartite bodies that anticipated the social welfare state that would emerge in Europe a quarter century later.

The cooperative movement was thriving. By 1920, only 19% of Georgian workers were employed by the private sector. A majority — 52% — were employed by the state and a further 18% worked for municipal or cooperative enterprises. The country was slowly transitioning from one based on production for profit to one approximating the traditional Socialist vision of a cooperative commonwealth. And they were doing so without dictatorship.

In 1920, Europe's leading Socialists came on a delegation to visit Georgia.

The delegation included some of the most prominent politicians of the time. James Ramsay MacDonald was a leader of the British Labour Party, and less than four years later, he led Britain's first Labour government. The Belgian delegation included Emile Vandervelde and Camille Huysmans. Huysmans became the Belgian prime minister following the Second World War. Vandervelde, who had served as a minister in the government during the First World War, was president of the Labour and Socialist International until he died in 1938.

The best-known member of the delegation was Karl Kautsky, from the German Social Democratic Party, whose hostility towards the Bolsheviks was already quite well known. Kautsky wrote his first critical comments about the Bolsheviks just one week after they had seized power in 1917. By the summer of 1918, his book — with the provocative title of *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* had appeared. Its scathing criticism of the Bolsheviks made Lenin furious with rage. He sat down to write a scathing rebuttal to Kautsky, defending the Bolsheviks — and this was the only book Lenin found time to write while leading the victorious revolution. Kautsky followed this with several other books and many articles laying out the Marxist case against the Bolsheviks.

After a long journey across Europe, the delegates finally arrived in Tiflis. "It seemed very odd," wrote MacDonald. "There we were, having left for some days all that seemed to be of the West, having gone through the Bazaar and the mosques of Constantinople and proceeded far beyond towards the rising sun, and, at our journey's end, at last, we were being received by a President of the Republic of Georgia in a waiting room at the Tiflis railway station, covered with the most glorious Oriental rugs, but hung with the portraits of Karl Marx and his best-known disciples."

MacDonald described later visiting "the heart of the Caucasian mountains, surrounded by the wildest and the gayest rout of untamed mountaineers armed with sword, shield, and rifle" and then standing reverently "whilst an old priest by the light of altar candles guttering in the wind read to us an address of welcome which ended with 'Long live the International.'"

British Labour MP Ethel Snowden, the only woman member of the delegation, was interviewed by *The Times* on her return to London. She gave an entirely positive account of her visit. The Georgian people, she said, are "full of hope and determination. *They have set up what is the most perfect Socialism in Europe.*"

Ramsay MacDonald, too, was interviewed by the *Manchester Guardian* upon his return to England. The Labour leader described "a happy country under a Socialistic regime." MacDonald told the journalist about the Georgian land reform. This initiative, led by Noe Khomeriki, the Social Democratic agriculture minister, was an enormous success. While Soviet Russia struggled with the agrarian problem for years, trying a series of wildly different approaches, the result was often starvation in the cities and civil war in the countryside. Not so in Georgia.

Karl Kautsky arrived somewhat later than the others and stayed on for several months. He wrote a short book about Georgia, published in English as *Georgia, a Social-Democratic Peasant Republic: Impressions and Observations*. Kautsky summed up all the achievements of the Georgian Social Democrats in power, including the strong trade union movement and the growth of cooperatives. Kautsky had his criticisms of the Georgian government. But in his summing up, Kautsky could not have been clearer.

"In comparison with the hell which Soviet Russia represents," he wrote, "Georgia appeared as a *paradise*."

(Kautsky's book was republished in a trilingual edition (Georgian, German and English) to mark the 100th anniversary of Georgian independence by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.)

The Second International and the Social Democratic and Labour parties it united represented, in the view of the Georgian Social Democrats, a world power no less important than Italy or Belgium. That was why it was so important to them to host the delegation. This was not a view shared by all, and some Georgians felt that their country's leaders were wasting time with Socialist politicians who had no real power. But Leon Trotsky took the international Socialist delegation to Georgia so seriously that he wrote an entire book about it while commanding the Red Army during the Civil War. It was published in English as *Between Red and White* and it was his answer to the book Kautsky wrote after leaving Georgia.

If Zhordania and his comrades suffered from the illusion that the Socialist politicians of the Second International mattered, they were not alone, as the Soviet leadership shared the same fantasy.

But as it turned out, neither the Second International nor the Allied Powers could do much for Georgia when Soviet Russia decided it was time to end Georgia's experiment in democratic socialism. Red Army forces invaded Georgia from all sides, and after a bloody battle for the capital, Tbilisi, the Social Democratic government retreated to the Black Sea port city of Batumi. There, the last act of the Georgian government before heading into exile was to enact and print copies of the new constitution — a model document that described a society that had not yet come into being.

In the following years, Stalin and his comrades established a dictatorship in Georgia on the model of Soviet Russia. The unions and cooperatives were brought under state control and the Social Democratic Party as well as all the others were banned. The Bolsheviks declared war on the Georgian Orthodox Church, which had achieved autonomy from the Russian church under the Georgian republic. Many churches were destroyed and priests jailed and killed. When the Catholicos Ambrose, the church's leader, wrote a protest letter to the world, he was jailed following a show trial.

The Georgian question did not go away, as European Socialists remained angry at the Communists for having invaded the country — a country which their leaders had only recently visited. An attempt to reunite the various Socialist and Communist parties which took place in the Reichstag in Berlin in 1922 floundered as the delegates debated Georgia. The meeting had been intended to create a united front against rising fascism and right-wing dictatorships in Europe, but quickly dissolved into a shouting match about Georgia. MacDonald and Vandervelde spoke passionately about all that the Georgian Social Democrats had achieved in their short years in power. Leading figures representing the Communist parties including Karl Radek countered with their own arguments. In the end, oddly, an agreement was reached — but only on paper. The Socialist and Communist leaderships never met again and the rift between the two movements was becoming wider.

A national uprising across Georgia led by the Social Democrats in August 1924 failed to topple the Soviet regime — but the massacres that followed, orchestrated by a young and ambitious Cheka officer, Lavrentiy Beria, shocked the world. They led many Socialists abroad to believe that the Soviet regime was not a form of socialism, but of fascism. The Georgian Social Democrats were among the first to draw this comparison, calling the Bolshevik dictatorship a form of “red fascism”.

When the leadership of the Labour and Socialist International met to discuss what to do about Soviet Russia in the wake of the bloody suppression of the 1924 uprising, they attempted to draft a position. When this proved impossible, Karl Kautsky offered to write something. What we wrote — and what was adopted by the International — represented a sea change in how Social Democrats viewed Communism.

Instead of seeing the Soviet state as a kind of deformed or imperfect form of Socialism, Kautsky made the comparison to the new Fascist regime in Italy, headed by Benito Mussolini. Kautsky did not call for armed uprisings against the Soviet regime —

because he thought them doomed to failure. But Kautsky did persuade the International to adopt the view that were such uprisings to take place, Social Democrats should support them and take the leadership in them.

Kautsky's views were adopted, but controversial. Among others, the Russian Mensheviks did not agree. But over the next several years, as the Stalinist regime became more totalitarian, support for Kautsky's views grew. When the International was re-founded in 1951 in Frankfurt, Kautsky had been dead for thirteen years. But it was his voice that could be heard in the words of its founding declaration, *Aims and Tasks of Democratic Socialism*. That document found no common ground between the Socialist and Communist movements. It condemned Soviet imperialism, pledging support to any people who rose up against Communist rule. That position was tested in practice in 1953, when East German workers rose up across the country against the newly-formed Communist state. The Socialist International took a firm stance in support of those workers.

The creation of a uniquely *democratic* socialist movement grew directly out of the reaction of Social Democrats to the bloody suppression of the August 1924 uprising in Georgia. And in turn, that uprising grew out of the hopes of the Georgian people that had been awakened during their all-too-brief experiment in democratic socialism.

Seventy years after the Soviet invasion of Georgia, the country once again proclaimed its independence in 1991. It adopted the 1921 constitution, making it the legal basis for its independence. The new government made 26 May the main national holiday. And the blood-red flag of the Georgian Democratic Republic once again flew in the streets of the capital, Tbilisi.

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