

Soviet Russia – Great Britain Trade Negotiations and the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1920-1921)

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the dynamics of trade negotiations between the Soviet Union and Great Britain during 1920-1921. The study aims to examine how the question of Georgia’s independence played a role in the negotiation process and to assess which of the negotiating powers was expected to retain Georgia within its sphere of influence. The research reveals that, for a significant portion of negotiations, Georgia was considered part of the United Kingdom’s area of interest and influence. However, at the final stage, Britain was compelled to relinquish its political interest in Georgia, a shift that was reflected in the treaty signed between the two states on March 16, 1921, in which Georgia was no longer mentioned. The dynamics of the Democratic Republic of Georgia’s independence within the broader context of the long-term negotiations between Russia and Britain are examined for the first time in historiography.

Keywords: Trade agreement, Democratic Republic of Georgia, Soviet Russia, Great Britain, negotiations

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of the trade agreement signed between Soviet Russia and Great Britain on the Democratic Republic of Georgia is generally acknowledged in Georgian historiography. It is commonly assumed that one of the provisions of the agreement declared that “Britain renounced any interest in Caucasian affairs.”

However, our findings indicate that the situation was more complex and nuanced. This article seeks to reconstruct that historical reality and reassess prevailing interpretations.

The dramatic, three-year downfall of the Democratic Republic of Georgia serves as yet another example of how powerful geopolitical actors often determine the fate of small nations. For a specific period, Georgia was of interest to Great Britain. However, the British government at the time proved unable to counterbalance the traditional and formidable influence of Soviet Russia in the strategic South Caucasus region.

METHODS

The study employs a range of methodological approaches appropriate to historical research, with particular emphasis on primary sources, especially the text of the trade agreement at the center of analysis. Additionally, the research applies Karl Popper’s falsificationist framework, which advocates minimizing unfounded claims and unsubstantiated interpretations in the examination and analysis of historical events. By adhering to this approach, the study expands the boundaries of historical knowledge and reconstructs the actual course of events with greater accuracy.

During 1920–1921, negotiations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union directly affected the question of the Democratic Republic of Georgia’s independence. It may be argued that the outcome of these negotiations proved fatal for the fate of Georgia’s First Republic.

On January 16, 1920, the Supreme Council of the Entente lifted the blockade imposed on Soviet Russia in October 1919. Around the same time, the Soviet Russian trade mission based in Denmark, commonly referred to as “Centrosyuz”, attempted to establish contact with the British trade authorities. In May 1920, a Centrosyuz delegation arrived in London under the leadership of Leonid Krasin, the People’s Commissar for Trade of Soviet Russia. Krasin’s objective was to secure the trade agreement with Great Britain.

From the Soviet perspective, the trade agreement also encompassed areas of broader political significance, such as the demand that Britain cease supporting Poland, with which Soviet Russia was at war at the time.

The British side also had its own initial objectives and was not opposed to reaching an agreement. Moreover, Prime Minister Lloyd George’s objective approached a pacifist stance: to resolve the “Russian problem” as swiftly as possible and to withdraw British troops from the former territories of the Russian Empire, including the Caucasus. Accord-

ing to the foundational work of Beka Kobakhidze, Lloyd George had already begun advocating for the withdrawal of British forces from various regions of the world, including former Russian imperial territories, as early as January 1918 (Kobakhidze, 2015, p.80)

At the same time, Lloyd George articulated his own vision for Britain's policy toward Russia in the form of a three-point plan: "1. Disengagement from the Russian Civil War; 2. Initiation of trade relations with the Soviet government; 3. The disintegration of Russia, which implied support for the independence of small nationalities" (Kobakhidze, 2018, p.138).

At the initial stage of negotiations with Soviet Russia, Prime Minister Lloyd George adopted what can be described as a maximalist position. Specifically, his demands included the following: "Soviet Russia was required to renounce support for hostile actions against Britain in Asia Minor, Iran, Afghanistan, India and Georgia; to refrain from propaganda and agitation; to cease its support for the Kemalists in Turkey; to pledge not to attack the Baltic States; and to refrain from initiating military operations in the Black Sea against Wrangel or in the Caspian Sea against Iran. Additionally, the British side demanded that Soviet Russia formally acknowledge responsibility for the Tsarist debts" (Anglo-Soviet, 1921, March 16).

It is important to note that when negotiations began on June 30, 1920, between Lloyd George and Krasin, they adopted a "joint draft agreement, which was to serve as the basis for subsequent negotiations." Clause three of the draft acknowledged that "the stated claims would be discussed at a future peace conference; however, the ongoing trade negotiations should not be interrupted." This indicates that, at that point, Lloyd George's demands concerning Georgia were still in effect.

Attention should also be drawn to the fact that negotiations between Russia and Georgia, as well as between Russia and Britain, were underway simultaneously and were interconnected. Soviet Russia's recognition of Georgia was likely closely linked to its trade negotiations with Britain. Given that Georgia was mentioned in the initial British demands and that Britain had shown interest in Georgia, the Soviet leadership may have found it necessary to diplomatically maneuver by recognizing Georgia's independence.

The subsequent development of events unfolded as follows. On July 2, 1920, Krasin, head of the Centrosoyuz delegation, returned to Moscow for consultations with the Soviet government, intending to return to London shortly thereafter. However, the ongoing war with Poland complicated the broader situation and led to renewed tensions in British-Soviet relations. France and Britain urged Soviet Russia to seek peace with Poland, warning that failure to do so could result in their entry into the war on Poland's side. On August 2, the Soviet delegation traveled to London to resume trade negotiations. However, by September 10, tensions between the parties had escalated once again, prompting Prime Minister Lloyd George to demand the Soviet delegation's departure from British territory.

On October 12, 1920, a preliminary peace agreement was signed between Poland and Soviet Russia. As a result, the Soviet Commissariat for Foreign Affairs approached the British government with a proposal to resume negotiations. This occurred on November 9, 1920, and trade negotiations resumed on November 29.

At this point, it is necessary to examine a phase of negotiations that has not been previously analyzed, neither in this article nor in the existing literature. The fact is that during the negotiation process, a disagreement emerged between the parties, which led to a temporary disruption. On July 1, 1920, the British government presented its demands to Moscow. The most critical of these was a provision requiring Soviet Russia to renounce its interest in the East.

Let us enumerate the three conditions upon which Britain was prepared to conclude a trade agreement. 1. The Soviet government renounces all hostile actions and propaganda against British institutions. 2. The Soviet government refrains from any actions or propaganda intended to incite the peoples of Asia against British interests and the British state. 3. The Soviet government permits British subjects to return from Russia, and in return, the British government will not obstruct the repatriation of Russians from Britain and its colonies.

These issues were discussed in detail in *The Daily Telegraph*, which served as a source for the Social-Democratic newspaper *Ertoba*, where Victor Nozadze published materials based on the article (Nozadze, 1920, November 4). Let us now turn to the content of that report.

According to available accounts, the negotiations continued, and on July 7, Chicherin informed the British side accordingly. The talks were conducted by Krasin and the British Foreign Secretary, Curzon, with Lev Kamenev joining the negotiation process from that point onward. A preliminary “black” draft of the agreement was nearly complete when, on October 1, 1920, Lord Curzon protested, claiming that the Soviet side was failing to meet the agreed conditions. It is essential to note that by this stage, the situation had become increasingly complex, and the issue of Georgia remained unresolved and effectively suspended. Notably, *The Daily Telegraph* article appears to make no mention of Georgia. “These conditions,” Curzon’s note stated, “have been and continue to be flagrantly violated. Mr. Kamenev has engaged in what amounts to open propaganda and has attempted to support a campaign in England against the British Constitution and British institutions. For this reason, he was not permitted to enter the country.”

In summary, the Soviet government consistently continued its anti-British propaganda efforts. The Communist Third International openly declared that “all institutions of the world must be overthrown.” A conference of representatives of Asian peoples was held in Baku, and what is particularly relevant for our purpose is that Curzon’s note explicitly stated: “The actions of the Soviet government in the Caucasus, Persia, Central Asia, and Afghanistan are directly aimed against Great Britain” (Nozadze, 1920, November 4). The note that Soviet Russia was required to fulfill its obligations if it wished to conclude the trade agreement. At that point, the future of the negotiations rested with the Soviet leadership.

As for the “Caucasus,” this primarily referred to Georgia and, at that time, still unoccupied Armenia. Azerbaijan, by contrast, had already been “written off” by Britain, as Baku’s oil fields were under Soviet control. Curzon’s note indicated that negotiations between Britain and Soviet Russia were either progressing slowly or had been suspended altogether. Ultimately, the note issued a categorical demand: the Soviet side was required to provide clear responses on all disputed matters no later than October 10.

For his part, Krasin's note took the opposite position, accusing the British side of violating the agreed terms by providing support to Wrangel, Poland, and others. Nevertheless, Krasin concluded with a categorical demand to resume and finalize negotiations on a trade and economic agreement. As he stated: "The Russian government, acting in the interests of the working masses of both Russia and England, demands the immediate restoration of economic and commercial relations and the conclusion of a comprehensive truce between the two countries. It is prepared at any moment to demonstrate its sincere desire to reach a prompt agreement and to take every necessary step to accelerate such settlement (Nozadze, 1920, November 4).

The issue of British prisoners held in Azerbaijan was a particularly sensitive point. According to Krasin, negotiations between Azerbaijani and British representatives should continue in "Tiflis", where Russia would also send its own representative. After the fulfillment of these mutual obligations, Krasin once again returned to the topic of the trade agreement, concluding: "... The Russian government is prepared to come to terms with the British government and to continue negotiations toward an economic agreement." For his part, Viktor Nozadze offered the following conclusion: "What this negotiation will bring and what outcomes it will yield, this we shall soon see." (Nozadze, 1920, November 4).

Chronology of British-Soviet Russian Negotiations

- July 1, 1920, Britain presented Soviet Russia with the principal conditions for concluding a trade agreement (three main points).
- July 7, Chicherin informed London that the Soviet government had accepted these conditions.
- October 1, Curzon sent a formal note to Soviet Russia, accusing it of failing to comply with the terms outlined in the 1 July note, without which the trade agreement could not be concluded. A deadline of October 10 was given for a response.
- In his reply, Krasin fulfilled several of London's demands and firmly insisted on the continuation of negotiations.
- The 17 November issue of *Ertoba*, citing information from the newspaper *Izverstia*, reported that the draft trade agreement was under review in London and that its signing was expected soon. The newspaper *Sakartvelos Respublika* also reported that Britain had prepared a draft agreement and that the cabinet would review it in the near future.

Throughout these months, the issue of the "Caucasus" and, by implication, Georgia remained within the scope of British strategic interests and protection. This was evident in Curzon's note of October 1; in other words, up to that point, Britain had not yet formally withdrawn its support for Georgia, or so it appeared. The following development further reinforces this view: in the second half of November, Lord Curzon reportedly expressed concern that Batumi, which was part of independent Georgia, faced a threat from Soviet Russia. In response, on November 28, 1920, Chicherin sent a radio message to Curzon, protesting the Soviet government's stance against Britain's alleged occupation of Batumi.

In that message, Chicherin reaffirmed Soviet support for Georgia's independence, declaring that "...the Russian government consistently defends Georgia's independence and, under no circumstances, will it violate the sovereign rights of Georgia, by any means whatsoever" (Ertoba, 1920, December 1). This statement was made by Soviet Russia's Foreign Commissar Georgy Chicherin just two and a half months prior to the occupation of Georgia.

One way or another, as we can observe, in this particular case, it was not only Russia but also Great Britain that assumed the role of protector and defender of Georgia's independence. This was the second half of November 1920. Britain's eventual "abandonment" of Georgia likely occurred shortly after this phase of diplomatic exchange, especially following Soviet Russia's occupation of Armenia on November 29, 1920. The establishment of the Socialist Soviet Republic of Armenia on the map of the Caucasus marked the full assertion of Soviet dominance in the region. With this development, Britain's capacity to maintain any effective presence in the Caucasus was effectively exhausted.

During this period, the trade agreement between Russia and Great Britain was expected to include a provision under which the British government would assume the obligation to refrain from any hostile actions against the Soviet government. Following this, negotiations continued, though the agreement was repeatedly postponed for various reasons. Ultimately, as is well known, the agreement was signed on March 16, 1921.

Although Georgia was not explicitly mentioned in the agreement, it was implied. Specifically, in the preamble of the treaty, where general principles were outlined, we read the following in paragraph A:

"This agreement is conditional upon the fulfillment of the following provisions, in particular:

a) Each party shall refrain from any hostile actions or measures against the other, as well as from conducting, beyond its own borders, any form of official propaganda, direct or indirect, against the institutions of the British Empire or of the RSFSR. In particular, the Soviet Government of Russia shall refrain from any attempt, whether by military, diplomatic, or any other means, including propaganda that may incite any of the Asian peoples to engage in hostile actions against British interests or the British Empire, especially in India and the independent state of Afghanistan. The British government undertakes a reciprocal obligation toward the Soviet government with respect to those countries which formerly constituted parts of the Russian Empire and have now become independent." (Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement, March 16, 1921).

The final text of the agreement makes it clear that the Soviet side either persuaded or mutually agreed with the British that neither party would interfere in the affairs of each other's former or current colonies. Of particular relevance to this study is the provision stating that the United Kingdom would not, in any form, infringe upon Soviet Russia's interests "regarding those countries which formerly constituted parts of the Russian Empire and have now become independent." This provision referred to Georgia and other newly independent states that had declared sovereignty following the collapse of the Russian Empire.

This provision carried two key implications. First, the United Kingdom effectively granted the Soviet government freedom of action in Georgia. Second, it explicitly referred to

the matter as concerning “independent states”, meaning that Russia, whatever measures it might have taken in Georgia, was still expected to acknowledge its status as an independent entity at least formally. This circumstance represented the sole residual benefit of Britain’s earlier goodwill toward Georgia.

During these months, while negotiations between Britain and Soviet Russia were underway, Vladimir Ulyanov-Lenin, the principal architect of the Soviet State, closely followed their progress. The trade agreement was of vital importance to Soviet Russia, which was economically devastated at the time. For this reason, Lenin repeatedly warned his devoted Georgian Bolshevik comrades, Orjonikidze and Stalin, to act cautiously and diplomatically regarding the Georgian issue so as not to jeopardize the ongoing negotiations with Britain, which were progressing favorably.

The Anglo-Russian trade agreement was signed at a time when it had already lost its significance for Georgia. Nevertheless, The essential terms of the agreement had been in place since negotiations resumed on November 19, 1920. From that point onward, the fundamental provisions of the agreement remained unchanged, and both parties took care to ensure compliance with the obligations they had previously undertaken.

In essence, the two imperial powers reached an understanding not to interfere in each other’s colonial affairs. As a result, Soviet Russia effectively completed the process of Georgia’s international isolation. Should it choose to occupy Georgia, neither of the world’s two most powerful states – Great Britain and the United States would oppose it. The latter, indeed, had never recognized Georgia’s independence at all.

At this point, it is appropriate to cite in full Stalin’s well-known words, which, given his awareness of the finalized draft of the British-Soviet agreement, effectively pronounced a death sentence upon democratic and independent Georgia: “This Georgia is now counting the last days of its existence... There can be little doubt that, in a critical moment, the Entente will abandon Georgia just as it abandoned Armenia.” (Stalin, 1948, p. 447)

It is evident that the Russian *Narkomnats* (People’s Commissar for Nationalities) already knew that the British “imperialists” had abandoned Georgia.

DISCUSSION

Specific details still remained unresolved. If not earlier, then by December 1920, the issue of occupying Georgia had already been placed on the Soviet government’s agenda. The process, however, was intended to unfold gradually and systematically, with a preparatory phase preceding direct action. This preparatory stage entailed a series of intensified provocations against the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The first significant wave of these provocations was launched almost simultaneously from three directions: from the Russian Soviet Republic and from the supposedly “independent” Soviet states of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

By order of the government of the RSFSR, all Georgian railway trains moving northward were halted. At the same time, oil supplies from Azerbaijan to Georgia were suspended. Along the republic’s borders, particularly around the Poilo Bridge, movements of Soviet

troops and the construction of military fortifications were observed. Meanwhile, the government of Soviet Armenia arrested Georgia's diplomatic representative in Yerevan, General Solomon Kharalashvili, along with his secretary.

On December 12, 1920, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia sent an urgent radio dispatch to the republic's diplomatic representatives in nearly all locations where legations were established: Moscow, Yerevan, Baku, London, Paris, Warsaw, and elsewhere. The representatives were instructed to inform the governments of their respective countries about the coordinated offensive being carried out against Georgia and the violation of all treaties that Georgia had concluded with Russia and its two puppet states.

Most importantly, in its radio communication to foreign governments, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that this was not a routine manifestation of the previously hostile attitude occasionally demonstrated by the Soviet side. Instead, the Georgian statement underlined the exceptional and unprecedented nature of the coordinated offensive, whose clear objective was to undermine Georgia's independence. As the ministry's declaration stated: "It may be concluded that in this case we are dealing with preparations of an aggressive nature, aimed at launching an attack against Georgia." (Ertoba, 1920, December 17).

The leaders of Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and government accurately assessed the nature of the recent developments and correctly identified the real purpose behind the provocations. In the concluding section of the radio dispatch, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, "Magieri" Konstantine Sabakhtarishvili, instructed the diplomatic missions to issue a "strong protest" to the governments of the states responsible for the provocations.

As noted earlier, Sabakhtarishvili's radio dispatch was sent to its recipients on December 12. Shortly thereafter, the Press Bureau of the Soviet Russian mission issued a public statement accusing the Georgian government of violating the principles of good-neighborly relations and the terms of the existing agreements. The statement claimed that Georgia had detained the train of the Soviet representative in Armenia, Legran, and halted a transit train bound for Armenia. The Georgian side categorically rejected these accusations as false and entirely fabricated (Ertoba, 1920, December 17).

The evidence clearly demonstrates that the accusations brought forward by Soviet Russia were false and fabricated. Nevertheless, this did not alter the situation. Nevertheless, Russia had already decided to proceed with the occupation of Georgia, and this plan included a targeted series of provocations designed to construct an image of the Republic of Georgia as an enemy. The central Soviet authorities sought not so much to prepare the world as the compliant Russian public for the justification of the forthcoming occupation. To this end, Georgia was to be portrayed as an adversary of Soviet Russia, a bastion of landlords and capitalists, and a loyal ally of world imperialism and the Entente, standing in opposition to the Soviet State.

During the months of November, December, and January 1920-1921, particularly following the Sovietization of Armenia, two main approaches toward Georgia emerged within the Soviet leadership. The first and decisive line was Lenin's official policy, which defined

the formal direction of Soviet strategy. Lenin consistently emphasized that the Georgian question required extreme caution and that the time for its direct occupation had not yet arrived. The second line was represented primarily by Stalin and Orjonikidze, especially the latter, who persistently demanded the immediate occupation of Georgia and presented the situation to Lenin in such a way that he would eventually authorize the necessary directive.

The prevailing view in the scholarly literature holds that the idea of an immediate Sovietization of Georgia originated with Stalin, Orjonikidze, and other Georgian-Caucasian Bolshevik renegades. This interpretation, however, is not accurate. In reality, the two tendencies differed only functionally. Lenin acted in accordance with the international conjuncture and set the official strategic line; Stalin and Orjonikidze's faction were merely its operational executors. Their role was to prepare the ground for occupation by every available means and, once they secured the Centre's assent, to carry it out without delay. That is precisely what occurred.

The decisive phase in resolving the issue of Georgia's occupation began on the threshold of 1921. Although the central authorities continued to resist the Caucasian Bureau's appeals, it had become evident that the process could no longer be prolonged. On January 2, 1921, the tandem of Orjonikidze and Kirov prepared a report and once again submitted the question of Georgia's occupation to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party. In that report, the Democratic Republic of Georgia was portrayed as a threat to Soviet Russia and the other Soviet republics, as well as an instrument of the Entente that was blatantly violating the terms of the Treaty of May 7.

Naturally, the problem did not lie in whether Lenin genuinely believed the Caucasian Bureau's demagoguery and tales about Georgia's alleged aggression. The real issue was to ensure that Soviet Russia's impending attack on Georgia did not unduly provoke the British government, with whom a draft trade agreement was already nearing signature. Moreover, the broader international context at that time did not compel Soviet Russia to act with particular haste. In the Georgian question, it faced no real competitors.

The only constraint that might have prompted the Soviet authorities to exercise caution was the still-unsigned Russian-British trade agreement. As previously noted, on November 29, 1920, following Lloyd George's instructions, the final draft of the agreement was delivered from London to Leonid Krasin. According to Russian historiography, by that time, the draft approved by the British government already contained a provision stipulating that Britain would neither obstruct nor criticize Russia's actions in the former territories of the Russian Empire and the newly proclaimed independent states.

By January 12, 1921, when the Central Committee convened to review the Orjonikidze-Kirov report, Lenin and his circle were under considerable pressure, as the agreement was on the verge of being signed in London. What guarantee did Lenin have that Lloyd George would not reconsider at the last moment? Lenin was unlike Orjonikidze, who was fervently obsessed with the idea of bringing Georgia into the "paradise" of Russian socialism, or Stalin, who was already driven by ambitions of dictatorship.

Therefore, on January 12, 1921, the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Russian Com-

unist Party once again blocked the Caucasian Bureau's request for the immediate occupation of Georgia. The Democratic Republic of Georgia was, for the time being, spared once more.

It is interesting to consider what was happening in Georgia during this period, from December 17, 1920, to January 12, 1921. The fact that the situation surrounding Georgia had become catastrophic was already well understood within the country long before that. As early as June 30, 1920, Akaki Chkhenkeli confided his anxiety in his diary, writing: "Will Georgia withstand this experiment? I doubt it. Moreover, if it does, it will be either a miracle or the good fortune that has, until now, protected her. In any case, an agreement with England is essential for us. Lloyd George and his associates are already in talks with Krasin" (Chkhenkeli, 2021, p.234).

Naturally, the Georgian government could not avoid the complex issue of clarifying its relations with neighboring states, particularly with the newly established Turkey. In November 1920, the Georgian authorities submitted a peace treaty proposal to the Turkish government. Since the government in Angora maintained close allied relations with Soviet Russia and benefited from its military and financial support, it was interested in understanding Russia's position toward Georgia. For this reason, on December 15, 1920, the Angora government's commissioner for foreign Affairs, Muhtar, formally inquired with the Soviet government about how it should proceed, whether to conclude a treaty with Georgia, and what Moscow's stance on the matter would be. The Russian authorities did not respond at the time, and we believe that this silence was by no means accidental.

At this point, Angora's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Muhtar, once again addressed his great ally, asking how he should proceed. "I am awaiting your response", Muhtar wrote to his Soviet counterpart, "as is Georgia, ever since we delivered a note to Mr. Simon Mdivani, the representative of Georgia in Turkey".

However, for the Georgian side, another circumstance was even more noteworthy. The Angora Foreign Affairs Commissar wrote to Chicherin: "In a friendly manner, we request clarification of Russia's position on the question of Georgia, yet to this day we have received no response. At the same time, we understand that a war may break out between the Red Army and the Georgians. If this information is correct, then, in order to clarify the potential misunderstandings that may arise, we wish to know the intentions of your government" (Ertoba, 1921, January 6).

It was evident from the prevailing signals, indications, forecasts, and expectations that the isolated Georgia would not remain unconquered by Soviet Russia for long. This was precisely the reason why the Soviet government refrained from responding to Angora's inquiries.

Muhtar Ahmad's note also contained a second piece of information of particular interest to Georgia. The Turkish commissioner expressed dissatisfaction that his Russian ally was withholding information from Angora. For example, the Turks had learned from other sources that Soviet Russia intended to conclude an agreement with Britain: "We report to you the terms of the agreement we wish to conclude with you, yet we do not respond what-

soever to the proposals submitted by them (the British – D.Sh). Moreover, this happens at a time when the entire European press and our agents are already discussing the agreement concluded between Russia and England, an agreement that has sparked extensive debate in the House of Commons” (Ertoba, 1921, January 6).

Both pieces of information, each of vital importance to Georgia, made the position of the First Republic increasingly hopeless. The first, namely, the fact that Soviet Russia neither disclosed its stance toward Georgia nor provided any response to Turkey’s inquiries on the matter, clearly indicated that Moscow was concealing its true objective: to occupy Georgia, to bring about the dissolution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, and to establish Soviet rule over the conquered nation.

According to the second piece of information, official London did not conceal the fact that it was concluding an agreement with Soviet Russia. This article may further note that reports on this matter also appeared in the Georgian press. For instance, the *Sakartvelos Respublika* of January 6, 1921, published information about debates in the British House of Commons on the agreement with Russia. However, these reports contained no mention of Georgia.

It remains unknown what details were or were not available to the highest representatives of the Georgian government regarding the ongoing negotiations surrounding the Anglo-Russian trade agreement. On January 7, 1921, the British Foreign Secretary, George Nathaniel Curzon, in his customary ultimatum-like manner, sent a note to the Soviet Foreign Minister, Chicherin. The note briefly outlined the history of negotiations on the agreement, a process that had lasted several months, or, more precisely, nearly a year. By that time, discussions about the negotiations between the two sides were already openly covered in both the international and Georgian press.

An excerpt from Curzon’s note provides perhaps the most reliable evidence: “The fact that the agreement has not yet been signed after such a long time is mainly the result of the Soviet government’s evasion of the conditions itself accepted on July 7. The question of interpreting the articles of the agreements reached on June 30 and July 7 has been the subject of repeated discussions. Krasin is well aware of the reasons that compel His Majesty’s Government to insist on inserting in the preliminary draft of the agreement specific provisions regarding those geographical regions in which the Soviet government has repeatedly pledged to cease its propaganda and hostile activities directed against the British Empire, and particularly against British interests” (*Sakartvelos Respublika*, 1921, January 12).

Curzon’s note asserted that omitting specific geographical regions from the agreement could later lead to misunderstanding and dispute. To prevent this, the British side “insistently” demanded the explicit designation of those geographical areas that both parties would henceforth refrain from targeting through criticism, propaganda, or any form of hostile action. In other words, as our interpretation suggests, the two sides effectively acknowledged these territories as belonging to their respective spheres of influence and renounced any claims to them. Although the note itself did not specify the “geographical regions” in question, it is evident that the reference was, on the one hand, to Afghanistan and India,

and on the other, to the former territories of the Russian Empire that had established new independent states, above all, to Georgia.

As it appears, Soviet Russia refrained from specifying such regions for a particular reason, while the British side remained steadfast in its insistence on doing so. Curzon's note states: "For its part, the British government has expressed the wish to also consider the situation of those geographical regions, in which the Soviet Government of Russia has special interest, and the British Government would regard this as forming the basis of the corresponding obligations which it would undertake" ([Sakartvelos Respublika, 1921, January 12](#)).

In its concluding section, the note urged the Russian side to put an end to the baseless disputes and to grant Krasin the authority to proceed with the signing of the agreement.

In short, by January 7, 1921, when Curzon's note was sent to his Soviet counterpart, Georgi Chicherin, not only had the trade agreement remained unsigned, but even the specific clause concerning the designation of regions regarded as falling within the respective spheres of influence of the two parties was still left unresolved. The Soviet side continued to hesitate. It was precisely this issue, the trade agreement itself, and particularly the controversy surrounding that clause, that preoccupied the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of Russia and restrained him, for the time being, from launching an attack on Georgia.

However, following Curzon's note, it is likely that a significant shift occurred during negotiations between Russia and Britain. From that point onward, the Soviet authorities agreed to the political provisions of Curzon's conditions and to the formulation that was ultimately incorporated into the final text of the agreement, though with one crucial condition:

Britain explicitly named those countries, or in Curzon's terms, the "geographical regions", in which it held interests, such as Afghanistan, India, and others. Soviet Russia, by contrast, did not specify particular countries but indicated that its sphere of interest encompassed the former colonies of the Russian Empire that had declared independence. Consequently, around mid-January 1921, intensive negotiations were underway between the two sides, suggesting that both governments had reached an agreement on the principal political issues outlined in Curzon's note. The subsequent discussions focused primarily on trade and economic matters, Russia's pre-revolutionary debts, the establishment of a joint trade and economic framework, and related issues ([Sakartvelos Respublika, 1921, January 18](#)).

The shift in the course of the British-Russian negotiations was also felt within the Georgian government. Jordania wrote with evident disappointment that Evgeni Gegechkori, who had been dispatched to negotiate with Lloyd George, was entirely neglected by the British authorities: "It was clear that something had changed. Krasin was gradually gaining influence, and it was no longer in his interest for our minister to travel to England" ([Jordania, 1990, p. 118](#)). Drawing a historical parallel, Georgia's Minister of Foreign Affairs found himself in a situation reminiscent of that of Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani. As is known, Sulkhan-Saba's presence in Paris was concealed because, at that time, the Iranian ambassador, Mohammad Reza Khan, had arrived in the French capital. Similarly, according to Noe Jordania, Evgeni Gegechkori, who was then in Istanbul, was denied passage on a British ship and was abandoned, treated merely as a private individual.

The shift that occurred during the process of concluding the agreement with Britain was rapidly reflected in Soviet Russia's attitude toward Georgia. Almost immediately, both wings of the Soviet leadership, ostensibly divided but in reality aligned, became active: on the one hand, the renegade tandem of Georgian-Russian Bolshevik leaders, Stalin and Orjonikidze, and on the other, the central figure himself, Vladimir Ulyanov-Lenin. They joined forces and reached a unified decision: to occupy Georgia. This decision was made on January 26, 1921.

In a report delivered at the Congress of Railway Workers in early January 1921, Georgia's Minister of War, Grigol Lortkipanidze, provided a general overview of the republic's domestic and foreign situation. He enumerated and analyzed the positions of the neighboring states separately, concluding that Georgia was unable to maintain normal, friendly relations with any of them. As for the Soviet government of Russia, he argued, its social priorities had transformed into a policy of conquest, masked by a social façade, much as Napoleon had once done. It was a remarkable analysis, and for that reason, it is worth recalling, as the Georgian railway workers once did, Lordkipanidze's principal conclusion:

“Russian communism, in which social elements, however primitive and crude, had once more or less predominated, underwent profound changes, particularly after the Russian-Polish war. Just as the banner of revolution became a powerful weapon of conquest for Napoleon, so too, for Russian nationalist imperialism, communism has, regrettably, come to play an auxiliary role.” (Ertoba, 1921, January 11).

On February 14, 1921, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party convened to discuss the issue of Georgia. It approved the resolution drafted by Lenin, which was sent to the Revolutionary Military Council of the 11th Army: “The Central Committee is prepared to authorize the 11th army to actively assist the uprising in Georgia and to occupy Tbilisi, in accordance with international norms, on the condition that all members of the Revolutionary Military Council of the 11th army, after a thorough examination of all available data, provide guarantees of success, 14/II.” (Lenin, 1965, p.50).

“The Politburo proceeded with caution”, notes researcher Levan Toidze, and rightly so. Lenin was particularly cautious, not only because he was the party leader, but also because he served as the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars and was thus to some extent accountable before international political, diplomatic, and governmental circles. True, he had the assurance of silence from both Great Britain and the United States, yet he still feared unnecessarily provoking them. This is why he emphasized that the occupation of Tbilisi must be carried out “in accordance with international norms”. In reality, such norms did not exist; there were only, according to Bolshevik terminology, the “imperialist states” and “empires” with which Soviet Russia had concluded agreements and divided the territories designated as “Spheres of influence”.

CONCLUSION

From the beginning of 1920, Soviet Russia initiated negotiations with Great Britain to conclude a trade agreement. Beyond trade matters, the negotiations also encompassed certain political issues, one of which concerned the delineation of spheres of influence between the two parties. Research indicates that, at the initial stage, Georgia was regarded as falling within the scope of British interests. During the first phase of negotiations, which continued until the final months of 1920, the conditions set forth by the British side required Soviet Russia to refrain from any hostile activities directed against Britain in Asia Minor, Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Georgia.

At a particular stage, the trade negotiations coincided with the talks between Soviet Russia and the Democratic Republic of Georgia and, in all likelihood, played a positive role in prompting Soviet Russia's recognition of Georgia's independence.

For several months, and even in Lord Curzon's note to Soviet Russia dated October 1, 1920, Georgia continued to be referred to as part of the British sphere of interest (In the form of Caucasus – D.Sh).

“Following the forcible Sovietization of Armenia, Great Britain appears to have withdrawn its interest in Georgia, leading to the emergence of a new formulation later reflected in the final text of the agreement, signed in London on March 16, 1921. In that document, Georgia was no longer mentioned explicitly, yet its inclusion was implied indirectly: the British government undertook the obligation not to interfere in the actions of the Soviet government with regard to those countries that had once formed part of the Russian Empire and had since become independent.

Despite the fundamental agreement concerning the countries of mutual interest, Ulyanov-Lenin continued to avoid provoking Britain, as the treaty had not yet been signed. The decision to occupy Georgia was made only on January 26, 1921, by the leadership of the Russian Communist Party.

To conclude, the two imperial powers agreed not to interfere in each other's affairs concerning their respective colonial territories. Soviet Russia thus completed the process of Georgia's international isolation: if it were to occupy Georgia, it would face no obstruction from the two most powerful states in the world – Great Britain and the United States, the latter having never recognized Georgia's independence in the first place.

Ethics Approval and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or publication of this work.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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