

Dr. George Otxmezuri

Associated Professor, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Administrative Status and Ethnic Composition of Shida (Inner) Kartli (according to historical sources)

The Autonomous District of South Ossetia (ADSO) was founded within the borders of Georgia under the 29 April 1922 Decree issued by the Board of the Peoples' Commissariat of the Central Committee of the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Georgia. Under the same decree, Tskhinvali was made the capital of the District.

On 20 September 1990, the local authorities declared the ADSO a sovereign Soviet Socialist Republic of South Ossetia within the borders of the Soviet Union.

Led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the Georgian authorities did not recognize the decree and on 11 December 1990 abolished the status of the ADSO.

Outbreak of Conflict

In August 2008 the conflict reached high level of tension which led to the armed confrontation on 6 August. On the pretext of protecting the self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia, the Russian Federation launched an obvious intervention of Georgia. On 25 August Russia unilaterally recognized the independence of the Republic of South Ossetia.

Culmination of the Conflict

The ADSO was established in the north-west part of Shida (Inner) Kartli. The north border of Shida Kartli runs along the main range of the Caucasus and thus forms the south frontier of Georgia; from the east to west it encompasses the area from the Aragvi River, i.e. from the environs of Mtskheta-Tbilisi to the Surami (Likhi) Pass (the latter divided Georgia into the east and west parts). The former district and the current self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia consists of four administrative districts, those of Tskhinvali, Java, Akhalkgori and Znauri. In addition to these, Shida Kartli included the present-day Mtskheta, Kaspi, Gori, Kareli and Kashuri districts.

The origins of human habitation in Shida Kartli can be traced to the ancient times. Archaeological and ethnographic evidence witnesses the uninterrupted cultural history of the Georgian ethnos from the late Paleolithic Age to a certain point in the late Middle Ages (17th-18th century), and to the present day, to a certain extent.

Shida Kartli has been one of the centers of the consolidation of the Georgian nation, Georgian culture and statehood. Thanks to its location, it has always had a distinguished role in the political life of Georgia. This region has always been part of the Georgian state and functioned as a single military-administrative centre.

From the emergence of the Kingdom of Kartli (Iberia) in the early 4th century BC to the disintegration of Georgia into kingdoms and principalities in the 8th century AD Shida Kartli was the central

principality (saeristavo) of the country. It was ruled by an army commander-in-chief – ‘head of all eristavis’ (governors) and the second after the king in the state. According to the accounts of Georgian historians of the feudal period (Leonti Mroveli), the same kind of governance system can be witnessed in the reign of King Parnavaz, founder of the Kingdom of Kartli. Similar system worked in the middle of the 7th century according to the Charter of Protection concluded in 654 between the erismtavari of Kartli and Arab invaders.

The feebleness of the central government contributed to the emergence of large feudal entities. Inscriptions carved on the bases of cross steles provide evidence confirming the presence of three such entities on the territory of Shida Kartli in the 8th and 9th centuries. The Kataula (Kaspi District), Usaneti (Gori District) and Berijvari (Akhalgori District) steles feature various relief compositions presenting local feudal lords, the scene of the Baptism of Christ (Christ is baptized in a font by John the Baptist) accompanied with explanatory inscriptions in asomtavruli (old Georgian majuscule) script.

Reaching control over Shida Kartli was a key to success in the fight for the unification of Georgia in the period between the 9th to the 11th centuries.

Beginning from the 9th century, the realm of the Arab reign in Georgia was limited to Tbilisi and Kvemo (Lower) Kartli. Left without the supreme administration, Shida Kartli became an arena of struggle among Georgian kingdoms and principalities. Gaining influence over Shida Kartli was a primary indicative of promotion. Local feudal lords were certainly involved in this struggle trying to retain their independence.

11th century chronicles *Matiane Kartlisai*, *Sumbat Davitis Dzis Tsokhovreba da Utskeba BagrationTa and Apkhazta Mepeta Divani*, numerous 10th and 11th century inscriptions carved on churches in Shida Kartli and the only document surviving from this period (*Pavnelis Datserili*) describe the confrontation among the kings of Kakheti, Egris-Apkhazeti and Tao-Klarjeti in their struggle for gaining control over Shida Kartli. Facts pointing to their suzerainty are provided.

The suzerainty of the Tao Bagraionis in the beginning of the 9th century is confirmed by the reference made to the father of the founder of Tao-Klarjeti, Ashot I the Great and his sister ‘daughter of Blessed Adarnase, Latavra’ in the fresco inscriptions surviving in the Monastery of Kanchaeti Kabeni (Akhalgori District).

Beginning from the late 9th century to the 980s Shida Kartli fell under the influence of the western Georgian state, Egris-Apkhazeti, or the Kingdom of Apkhazeti (Abkhazia). Local feudal clans – Tbelis, Kanchaetis, Mgdeuris, Korintelis, Skhviloselis and Pkhuenelis (the names of these feudal lords derive from the titles of their estates all of which were located in Shida Kartli: Tbeti in Tskhinvali District; Kanchaeti, Gdu and Korinta in Akhalgori District; Skhvilo in Kaspi District and Pkhvenisi in Gori District) refused to give up their independence without struggle. As a result of these fights, a compromise was achieved between Abkhaz kings and Shida Kartli feudal lords -- a local nobleman was appointed eristavi of Kartli. In the 10th century this title was chiefly owned by the feudal house of the Tbelis. Their feudal domain was in the Liakhvi Gorge. They had family churches in Tbeti, Eredvi and Dodoti (Tskhinvali District).

Inscriptions on the Armazi (864), Samtsevrissi (912-913), Eredvi and Dodonti (914), Tsirkoli (957-967), Tsorbisi (960), Tbeti (latter half of the 10th century) and other churches, together with narrative sources, confirm the supremacy of the authority of the King of Abkhazs over the whole of Shida Kartli and also inform us on the identity of the representatives of the five generations of the Tbelis. In the 11th

century this powerful feudal house of Shida Kartli was overthrown by Bagrat III. The authority of the first king of the united Georgian feudal monarchy became real only after he succeeded in exercising his legal rights in Shida Kartli: in 980, in the Moghrisi Battle near Tighva he defeated Kartli nobles led by Kavtar, who was a descendant of the 'eristavi and ruler' of Kartli (Eredvi and Dodoti inscriptions), Ivane Tbeli and a son of Patrick Tbeli, builder of Tbeti Church.

Next to the king and the eristavi, Armazi, Tsorbisi and Samtsevisi inscriptions mention mamasakhlisi. Mamasakhlisi was a clan headman or a prefect and like a governor, ruled a small administrative unit incorporated into a principality.

From the 11th to the 15th century, Shida Kartli was part of Kartli principality. In the beginning, representatives of various noble families were appointed to this honorary position, including the Kanchaelis, Abazasdzes, Baghvashis and the Orbelianis. According to the building inscription, Kanchaeli family representatives built Bieti, Ashuriani and Samtavisi churches in the 1020-30s. From the 12th century to the 1320s, the noble family of Suramelis were Kartli eristavis. Narrative records and Georgian historical documents confirm facts from a century-and-a-half history of the family. Sula Surameli, together with other royal officials active at the court of Giorgi III and Queen Tamar (Commander-in-chief of Army and Chief of Police Chiaber and Chancellor Vardan Dadiani) are mentioned in the building inscription of 1172 on Ikorta Church (Tskhinvali District).

After the disintegration of Kartli principality (14th century), Shida Kartli fell apart into princely estates. The importance of the region is further evidenced by the fact that in the late feudal period (from the 16th to the 18th century), four out of the six great princely estates of the Kingdom of Kartli were located in Shida Kartli (Ksani principality, Saamilakhvaro, Samukhranbatono and Satsitsishvilo). One of these, Ksani principality had 30 per cent of the area of the former district. The territory of the former district was also represented by the Machabelis', Amirejibis', Palavandishvilis and other minor nobles' estates, while the rest of the area of Shida Kartli was divided among splendid princely estates of Mukhranbatonis, Amilakhvaris, Tsitsishvilis and about twenty minor princely estates. The compilation of documentary material, epigraphic inscriptions and historical narratives allows us to gain a fuller picture of the genealogy of these feudal families and the geographic boundaries of their domain. For instance, Ksani principality included what is now Tskhinvali, Akhagori and Java district villages. The residence and the family cemetery were moved from Largvisi to Akhagori and Ikorta. In Ikorta are buried the heroes of the 1660 Kakheti uprising, Shalva and Elizbar Eristavis of Ksani and Bidzina Cholokashvili. The church preserves 19th century epitaphs of Ksani eristavis.

The chief domain of the Machabelis was in the gorge of the Didi Liakhvi. The Machabelis come from the village of Achabeti, Tskhinvali District. Tiri Monastery was their residence and burial place of this family from the 15th through the 18th century. The inscriptions and epitaphs on the church wall inform us on the Machabelis as well as on the previous and later owners of Tiri Monastery, namely King Alexander I the Great (1412-1442), chief Royal Treasurer Khela Tavkhelidze (end of the 14th-beginning of the 15th century) and Mroveli Pilipe Taktakidze and his brothers (1682).

The same applies to other princely estates and royal or nobles' serfs and lower nobility, for example, the estate of the members of the king's lower nobility, the Korinteli family, was located between the Ksani and Mejuda rivers. Sakorintlo (estate of the Korintelis) included several villages of the Akhagori district (Avlevi, Jurta, Khevi, Veluri and Ikoti). St Marina's Church at Ikoti has a grave of Magdan, daughter of Davit Korinteli, the epitaph of which dates from the late 18th century.

Churches and monasteries were important centres of Georgian culture and literacy at the time. The most powerful cultural and educational centres of the region were to be found in Largvisi (Akhalgori District) and Kanchaeti. In the 15th century, distinguished Georgian scribes, calligraphers and artists, father and son Avgaroz and Grigol Bandaisdze were active in Largvisi. *Dzegli Eristavta*, a chronicle of the family of the Ksani eristavis, one of the important works of Georgian historical literature, was written by them.

Several manuscripts created at Kanchaeti Kabena, including the liturgical book copied in 1674 and illuminated with miniatures.

It is remarkable that the earliest Georgian patterns of written language are from Shida Kartli (Urbnisi, Nikozi – 5th century). Nikozi (Gori District) is only two kilometers away from Tskhinvali. Ecclesiastically the area of the former district was mainly subordinated to Nikozi Bishop, while part of it belonged to the Mtskheta Catholicate. Together with the central authorities and the royal family, the Georgian Orthodox Church was actively engaged in the administration and building of Shida Kartli. Old Georgian inscriptions surviving at Nikozi (5th century), Eredvi (906), Tighva (minor church, 11th century) and Tiri (1682, Tskhinvali District) inform us about the building activity of Nikozi and Mroveli bishops.

Tamar, daughter of Davit Aghmashenebeli (David the Builder) built the Church of the Dormition at Tighva. The specially decorated tympanum on the top of the entrance door has a two-line inscription in asomtavruli script. Married to Shirvan Shah, Tamar returned to her homeland after the death of her husband. She completed the building of Tighva Monastery in 1152 and took the veil right there.

The building of Ikorta Church was mentioned above. In 1673 the church was restored by Queen Rodam, spouse of Vakhtang V of Kartli, also called Shahnavaz (1658-1675) together with eristavi Iese of Ksani. Ketevan, daughter of Tsereteli and the daughter-in-law of Giorgi XII (1798-1800), the last king of Kartl-Kakheti, restored Ikota Church in 1798. Tskhinvali was a royal city. The facades of Zghudgari churches of St George and the Virgin in Tskhinvali bear inscriptions confirming the suzerainty of the spouse of King Rostaom of Kartli (1633-1658), Queen Mariam and of Vakhtang VI (1703-1724).

Epigraphic inscriptions and historical documents provide information on the representatives of the lower social classes living in the same region. These are architects building churches, artisans, donors and pilgrims, serfs and peasants. Their number is large and their majority are Georgians. For instance, Sokhta (Java District) and Tskhavati churches have commemorative inscriptions of artisans and masons, while Kvaisa, Kasagina (10th century) and Tskhinvali (1718) churches mention donors and builders.

According to the military-administrative arrangement, Shida Kartli was incorporated into the king's military district in the united Georgian state (11th-15th century). After the disintegration of Georgia (16th-18th century) Ksani principality, together with Aragvi principality and Samukhranbatono made part of the leftist military district (Commander-in-chief Mukhranbatoni), while other princely estates on the territory of ADSO (the Amirejibis, the Machebelis, the Pavlenishvilis, the Palavandishvilis, the Davitashvilis and others) were affiliated with Amilakhori military district (National Centre of Manuscripts, Hd-2124).

Hence, as the aforementioned material confirms, the territory of the former ADSO (as well as the whole of Shida Kartli) abounds in Georgian architectural monuments and Georgian inscriptions.

Works of material culture, inscriptions, official documents and narrative sources testify that the territory of the former ADSO and the present-day self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia was always integrated into the Georgian state, where representatives of various social classes, including a regional governor, major local feudal lords, their vassals, lower nobility, serfs and peasants and architects and artisans – church builders lived. Their majority were Georgian Orthodox Christians whose spoken, literary, official and ecclesiastical language was Georgian.

With respect to the settlement of the Ossetians and the formation of the ADSO in Georgia: the Ossetian (Alans') state existed and continues to exist in the north Caucasus. The main road connecting Georgia to the North Caucasus (the so-called Military Highway) runs across the Caucasian Ridge and the north Caucasian Ossetia. This road and the fortress defending it (located where the present-day Georgian-Russian border runs and Larsi checkpoint lies) were in Georgia called Dariali or Osta Kari meaning Ossetians' Gate or Door (Darialan, Dari-Kari and Alan-Osi). Georgian kings took constant measures to fortify the road and the fortress.

The first wave of the settlement of the Ossetians in Georgia started in the 17th century, though spontaneous cases of their settlement in Georgia had been noted before. The Arab commander-in-chief Bugha-Turk brought a hundred of Ossetian families through the Dariali road and settled them in Dmanisi. Their future remains unknown to the present day. In the 1260s, two squads of the Ossetians were settled in Dmanisi and Zhinvali on the order of the Mongols. Later, with the help of the latter, the Ossetians expanded their estates taking up part of Shida Kartli and the town of Gori. In the 1320s, King Giorgi V of Georgia expelled them from Georgia after a three-year war.

The late 16th and early 17th centuries offered favourable conditions for settling north Caucasian tribes suppressed by empowered Russia in Georgia affected by difficult political, economic and demographic situation. The Lezgian (the Dagestan) settlements were set up in Kakheti, Apsua (Abkhazian) in Abkhazia and Ossetian in Shida Kartli. Georgian, Russian and European historical records, as well as maps, reflect the process of settlement of the Ossetians first in the 17th century in the highlands of Shida Kartli, later at its foothills and finally in the 19th century in its lowlands.

According to M. I. Tatischev, who led the diplomatic mission of the Russian state to Kartli and Kakheti from 1604 to 1615, only two hundred Ossetians lived in Georgia at the time.

Georgian historical documents offer evidence confirming, for instance, the fact that in the first half of the 17th century it was not only that the Ossetians did not live in Java District, but that they even raided and looted continuously the local population. One of the documents even preserves the names of the first Ossetians who moved to the village of Roka, located to the north of Java, in the middle of the 17th century. These were Tomashvili Khontkara and her son Khachi. They enjoyed the protection of kings Rostom and Vakhtang VI of Kartli. The royal court pursued the same policy later, which led to the growth of the Ossetian population in Kartli. The eminent Georgian historian and geographer, Prince Vakhushti Bagrationi assigns the emergence of Ossetian villages (in places of Georgian ones) in the highlands of the former district, at the origins of the Didi Liakhvi and the Patara Liakhvi, the Mejudi, Lekhuri and the Ksani, to the 1720s. Identical date of the Ossetian settlement in Georgia is offered by the German scholars, member of the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences I. Guldenstedt (1872) and E. Eichwald (first half of the 19th century). Similar is the date suggested by the Ossetian scholar, V. Abaev. In 1959, he wrote that the settlement of the Ossetians in the Ksani gorge was not very old, but rather counted two hundred years. Ossetia (i.e. the land of Ossetians) is marked only within the north Caucasus on the map of the Turkish Empire and the Caucasus drawn up by the French geographer De Witt and the Georgian Map (*Carte de la Georgie*) made by the French geographer De Lisle in France.

That the ADSO is an artificially formed administrative unit and that even Russia did not recognize it as a historical homeland of the Ossetians and an independent political entity is obvious from the history of Georgian-Russian relations. According to the 1783 Georgiyevsk Treaty, as well as the map drawn up in 1784 by Colonel Saburnashov and the one made in 1801 by the Caucasian Archaeological Commission, the whole of Shida Kartli, including the ADSO, is part of the Kartl-Kakheti Kingdom, while Ossetia is marked only within the border of the north Caucasus, where the present-day Autonomous Republic of Ossetia is located.

The statistical data obtained as a result of the censuses held in 1802, 1886, 1922 and 1989 point to the artificial growth of the Ossetian population in Georgia. Only in Tskhinvali, the number of Ossetians grew fifty times from 1922 to 1989 – an increase from 613 to 31,537. There is no need for comment.

The term ‘South Ossetia’ first entered the vocabulary of Russian officials in 1830. In parallel with South Ossetia, applied instead of an administrative unit, the term South Ossetian was also introduced. In order to avoid possible criticism about the biasness of the opinion of Georgian scholars with respect to this term, it would be reasonable to present the viewpoint of the well-known Russian historian, N. Dubrovin, according to which ‘the reason of the settlement of the Ossetians on the south slope of the main ridge of the Caucasus was the land shortage. They (Ossetians) took the Didi Liakhvi and Patara Liakvi, Rekhuli and Ksani gorges and became serfs of eristavis and the Machabelis themselves. These are the very so-called ‘South Ossetians’.

The Ossetians living in Shida Kartli, led by the Ossetian and Russian Bolsheviks, staged three rebellions against the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (26 May 1918 – 25 February 1921). Soviet Russia continued to provide support to the rebels even after signing the Treaty with Georgia on 7 May 1920, but the strong stance taken by the Georgian authorities, as well as the international situation made the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) declare this rebellion illegal.

After the annexation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia by Bolshevik Russia in which Georgian and Ossetian Bolsheviks took an active part, on 20 April 1922 the ADSO was formed with the capital being Tskhinvali.

When establishing the district, neither the protest of the Georgian population living in the town of Tskhinvali and Tskhinvali District (although the Georgians made the majority of the local population) was taken into account nor the inappropriateness (from the geographical, demographical and economic points of view) of separating ‘South Ossetia’ as a single administrative unit.

It is of note that the ADSO was created when no Ossetian unity existed in the north Caucasus, homeland of the Ossetians. The Autonomous District of North Ossetia was set up on 7 July 1924. It was granted a status of an autonomous republic on 5 December 1936.

The goal of the establishment of two Ossetian administrative entities in the single state, the Soviet Union, was to allow for raising the issue of their unification within Russia, when and if needed.

The ADSO had a function of a time bomb, which would explode if Georgia desired to withdraw from the Soviet Union. It is well-known that the district realized this mission at the needed time.

History repeats itself. Ossetian separatists continue to put forwards the same claims and receive support from Russia.

The Ossetians living in Georgia are considered local population. This is so not only because of the contemporary legal regulations, but also due to the medieval Georgian Law, according to which the third generation of the foreigners having settled in Georgia is to be regarded as locals.

The population living on the territory of the former district enjoy the rights to have administrative power, as well as to cultural self-identification, protection and development of their traditions and studying on the mother tongue. They had these rights in the past too: Ossetian secondary schools and double-language (Ossetian-Georgian and Ossetian-Russian) schools functioned, while not a single Ossetian school was to be found in the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia. Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute (later University) was the higher Ossetian educational institution. The Tskhinvali branch of the Georgian Academy of Sciences studied the history of literature of Ossetia. The Tbilisi State University and the Institute of Linguistics taught and studied the Ossetian language respectively. The Ossetian theatre functioned, Ossetian-language magazines and newspapers were issued, scientific works and fiction were published... As regards to the staff policy, it was fully controlled by Moscow. It was mostly Ossetians who were appointed to the highest party and administrative positions. It is therefore that the Ossetians living in Georgia, even after gaining the status of an autonomous district, did not even think of requesting the secession from Georgia. Such requests came only between 1918 and 1921 and in 1990. This fact makes it obvious that the Georgian-Ossetian conflict was inspired by external forces. It is noteworthy that the Georgians and Ossetians at all times lived peacefully together. There is a high rate of mixed marriages. Currently one hundred thousand Ossetians live outside the boundaries of the ADSO. Even in such circumstances there has not been a single case of conflict on ethnic grounds.

In order to be engaged in the life of the country, the Ossetians living in Georgia (as well as all citizens of Georgia, either Georgian or non-Georgian) are obliged to know the official language – Georgian. The only right they do not have is the infringement of the territorial integrity of Georgia.