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The Ottoman occupation of Batumi, 1918: a view from below

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ABSTRACT

This article presents for the first time in English an eye-witness's account of the Ottoman occupation of the Black Sea port of Batumi in 1918. Written by a Russian resident of Batumi, V.P. Mel'nikov, the document is held in the archives of the Ach'ara State Museum, Georgia. It offers rare insights into daily life under Ottoman occupation, making a contribution to the general history of occupation policies during the First World War, the history of the Ottoman invasion of Transcaucasia, and the local history of Ach'ara under occupation. The translation of the document is preceded by a commentary explaining the historical context and historiographic significance of Mel'nikov's account.

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Introduction

The Ottoman occupation of vast strips of land in the formerly tsarist Transcaucasia in the course of 1918 has not fully made its way into general histories of occupation policies during the First World War. In recent years, such policies have been a major focal point of historical studies on the war and numerous works have been published on the topic: the occupation of parts of Belgium, France, Russian Poland or Serbia by central powers have produced innovative pieces of scholarship in comparative and transnational perspectives (Liulevicius 2000; Gumz 2009; Scheer 2009; Becker 2010). On the Eastern front, the Russian occupation of Ottoman Anatolia has also been the object of several studies (Holquist 2011; Akarca 2014). By contrast, the Ottoman occupation of the western part of Transcaucasia in 1918 remains a little known aspect of the war, especially as far as works in European languages are concerned. Admittedly, a few works deal with the military and geopolitical issues surrounding the campaigns that were led by the Ottomans and closely monitored by the German supreme command: these integrate the problem of Ottoman occupation into a general picture of the Central Powers' geopolitical interests and *Drang nach Osten* towards the Caspian Sea and Iran (Zürer 1978; Reynolds 2011). But when looking concretely into the forms of this short-lived Ottoman occupation, one encounters a scarcity of available research and sources. A few exceptions can be found in works published in Georgia and Turkey, but even within these works a comprehensive overview of what this occupation looked like is elusive (in Georgian, see Gogolishvili 2001). This paper contributes to filling this gap by making available the memoirs left in 1943 by a Russian inhabitant of Batumi, V.P. Mel'nikov, in an English translation.

Before presenting the text of these memoirs, we will first provide a general introduction to the Ottoman occupation and existing scholarly literature addressing it.

Back to the motherland: the *Elviye-i Selâse* redux

The Ottoman occupation was the result of a victorious offensive launched in February 1918 by the Turkish military. This offensive was by and large an attempt to exploit the weakness of a crumbling Russian state, undermined by the fall of tsarism and the rift between the new Bolshevik government and the regional authorities of Transcaucasia, embodied by a Commissariat and an Assembly, the *Seim*. These authorities, though dissociating themselves from Moscow and claiming their autonomy, did not demand political independence. Their priority was to establish internal order and to find a *modus vivendi* with the Porte, at a time when their military capacity was extremely weak. Non-Caucasian soldiers deserted the Caucasian front en masse from the end of 1917 and their flight constrained the Transcaucasian leadership to create “national” units to substitute for the rapidly depleting post-tsarist forces. Anarchy spread in the region as post-tsarist authorities failed to prevent rising tensions between national and religious communities. Eruptions of interethnic violence led to Ottoman protests and, eventually, the start of a military offensive framed as a defence of local Muslims (HHStA 1918; Şahin 2002, 191). Ottoman forces first took back regions lost to the Russians during the First World War, before entering territories controlled by Russia in 1914. On 5 March, the front page of the *Tasvir-i Efkâr* presented an Ottoman soldier holding a flag and coming to the rescue of a naked woman, chained to a rock and representing the Caucasus (Kılıç 1998, 453). This picture illustrated the idea that this campaign was essentially a *re-conquest* and consequently a liberation of former Ottoman territories.

Ottoman forces entered and occupied formerly tsarist Transcaucasia, under different forms, for less than a year. Nonetheless, only two former Russian provinces were reintegrated to the Ottoman Empire, the Batumi and Kars regions (*oblast*). Tsarist authorities had created these two regions after the war of 1877–1878 when they had annexed them, and their specific legal statute was perpetuated until 1917. In Ottoman public opinion, these lost regions were widely known as the “three *livas*” (*Elviye-i Selâse*) of Kars, Batumi and Ardahan (*liva* is an alternative term for *sancak*, an administrative unit below the level of province). Although not as strong in collective memory as Alsace-Lorraine in France after 1870, the *Elviye-i Selâse* remained a concept popular enough to be reactivated at the beginning of the First World War, when the Ottomans briefly occupied parts of the Kars and Batumi regions in late 1914 (Jäschke 1977, 20). With the Ottoman re-conquest of spring 1918, the term made an explosive comeback in Ottoman public discourse. The capture of Batumi on 14 April was welcomed in the press with euphoria. Recent works by Turkish historians have greatly improved our understanding of this period and its atmosphere. Famous politicians, public figures and intellectuals flocked to Batumi and staged their arrival in the former imperial city. Over the following days, the famous journalist Yunus Nadi hailed the “return of Batumi” (*Batum’um Istirdâdı*).¹ A few days after the conquest, Enver Pasha himself embarked upon a triumphal tour on the Black Sea coast, visiting Trabzon and Batumi, where he proclaimed the liberation (*istihlâs*) of the *Elviye-i Selâse* (Reynolds 2011, 204–205).

Ottoman portrayals of the conquest tended to conjure figures from history and erase the Russian past. In an article titled “The fall of Batumi”, Fazıl Ahmet Bey discussed the modernization of Batumi under sultan Abdülaziz (1861–1876) and former Trabzon governor Emin Muhlis Pasha (Fazıl Ahmet Bey [Aykaç]. 1918a; Sarı 2014, 13). The Aziziye mosque, built by Abdülaziz and still subsidized by the Porte after 1877–1878, was evoked with great fervour. In the following weeks, attempts to bring this past back to life were made, notably when the main streets of the city were renamed. Dondukov-Korsakov Street – named after a Russian general – was renamed Third Army Street, Constantinople replaced Petrograd, Selim III replaced Maria, Gazi Muhtar Pasha replaced Turgenev and so on. Several references were made to the resistance offered by Ottoman loyalists during the 1877–1878 war; Gazi Muhtar Pasha was one of these heroic generals.²

The importance of the *Elviye-i Selâse* and Batumi was both practical and political. Ottoman institutions were called in to provide these prodigal lost sons with everything necessary. The Ottoman sultan pledged in person to provide the city with provisions, in order to compensate the loss of supply areas in the former Russian empire and help the needy (AARSA 1918a). This priority eventually caused dissatisfaction in the Turkish coastal regions, notably in Trabzon province, which had also suffered from war and whose local elites were eager to mobilize subsidies for their own constituencies (Fazıl Ahmet Bey [Aykaç], 1918b). Such tensions were the first signs that the re-conquest of the easternmost provinces would be a complex and protracted process.

Mel’nikov’s account, a view from below

The defeat of the Central Powers by the end of autumn 1918 and the withdrawal of Ottoman forces from the *Elviye-i Selâse* by January 1919 did not leave much time for this project of reintegration to be pursued. Increasingly available sources enable us to get a clearer view of this project from the perspective of the Ottoman administration. Several memoirs containing information about this occupation have recently been published and the Ottoman archive is now a well-charted place for research on this period. Two collections of documents on the history of the Artvin and Ardahan regions contain important sources for the administrative history of the *Elviye-i Selâse* during this short period (Safi 2008; Koltuk and Sağlam 2009). They notably document the Ottoman concern with gaining international legitimacy for this re-conquest and their desire to proceed by the rules of *ius gentium*: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs insisted that the Ottomans scrupulously implement the international law of occupation. This prompted them to maintain transitory systems in matters of personal statute (the population of the region retained their Russian citizenship until the final settlement of the war), land property and law.³ A special delegation headed by a high official from the Ottoman Interior Ministry, Abdülhalık Bey, was sent to tour the region and prepare a report on organizational principles for its reintegration. Although these elements can be reconstituted on the basis of the Ottoman Archive in Istanbul, a majority of relevant material on the occupation is to be found in the Turkish military archive (ATASE), whose openness to researchers remains highly selective. Mustafa Sarı’s recent book (2014) on the role of Batumi in Turkish–Caucasian relations from 1917 to 1921 is a fine example of the treasure trove this archive may constitute for researchers when more widely opened.

By contrast, non-Turkish scholarship concentrates on sources produced and held in the (post-) Soviet space. On the one hand, Soviet and post-Soviet historiographies rely on archival materials in Batumi itself, Tbilisi, and to a lesser extent Moscow. Essentially produced at a time when Turkey was in geopolitical alignment with the West, this literature had an underlying polemic character. On the other hand, post-1991 works produced in Georgia emphasized the national dimension of “resistance” to the Turks in Ach’ara and insisted on the role of pro-Georgian factions in the region under Turkish rule. Among sources used, the State Archives of Ach’ara (*ach’aris avt’onomiuri resp’ublik’is sakhelmts’ipo arkivi* – AARSA) are of particular interest and their rich collections remain underestimated.⁴ This, we should note, holds true for far more than just the history of the Turkish occupation in 1918, since the AARSA contains documents relevant to the wider history of the entire Eastern littoral of the Black Sea. The funds of the military governor of Batumi and the customs administration provide a wealth of information on the economic and social history of Ottoman borderlands, finely complementing the gaps in Ottoman archives. The fund i-7 of the Batumi city *Duma* is without contest the most interesting archival basis for the 1918 occupation. The *Duma* was preserved by the Turks, although it was re-organized on a model where seats were allocated to each national community in an imperial fashion that also responded to the increasingly national structure of public Caucasian life since the end of 1917. A few of the documents contained in these archives were published in Soviet collections, notably on the history of Ach’ara, and quoted in Georgian works (Kalandarishvili, Nefedova, and Tabakua 1961). A third but less important group of sources was connected to the presence of Germany and Austria-Hungary in these regions, since their military, diplomatic and consular envoys regularly produced reports on regional developments. However, these reports were essentially concerned with the military turn of the war and contain little on the Ottoman occupation per se.

This panorama of available sources makes clear the lack of material pertaining to the daily experience of occupation. The document we present here, *The Ottoman Occupation of Adzhariya*, therefore makes an important contribution to this history. It consists of a typescript deposited by V.P. Mel’nikov to the Khariton Akhvediani Ach’ara State Museum and corresponding to file 393 in its archive (Mel’nikov 1943). It was originally a quotation made by local historian Zaur Margiev that first attracted attention to the existence of this document (Margiev 2008, 241–245). Very little is known about Mel’nikov, except that he was a life-long inhabitant of Batumi and probably belonged to the Russian middle class. The text uses a plain Russian language, with occasional use of popular phrases. The Ach’ara State Museum holds another testimony written by Mel’nikov, about the British occupation of the city in 1919–1920.⁵ Both texts were deposited in 1943 by Mel’nikov and a copy was made for the Party Archive in Tbilisi. The moment when these two texts were handed over to the Museum is very important. One should remember that popular mobilization during the war in the USSR was bolstered by the remembrance of foreign occupations in 1918. In 1943, a collection of documents was edited in Moscow under the title *The Defeat of German Invaders in 1918*, while similarly politically driven books had been published a year earlier about Ukraine and Georgia (Gabrichidze 1942; Mints and Gorodetskiy 1942; Razgon 1943). The context of the war was of course instrumental in spurring Mel’nikov to write these memoirs, but could

also be seen as good reason to be circumspect with regard to the information and opinions he provides.

However, any reader expecting a ferocious denunciation of Turkish “invaders” will be disappointed by a text that gives a fairly dispassionate account of these few months under Turkish rule. Mel’nikov’s memoirs conspicuously avoid polemics and focus on a view from below of the Ottoman occupation in its daily aspects. Some normative statements can be found here and there in the text, but they do not impose a general structure or mood on his testimony. Of course, we should remember that Turkey was not a belligerent in the Second World War and the Ottoman occupation of Ach’ara, although it formed part of a general criticism of foreign occupations, was not a priority issue. The only manner in which the context can indeed be felt in the typescript is connected with a fairly long introduction inserted by Mel’nikov, which we have decided not to publish. Approximately 20 pages long, it is actually longer than the narrative itself and constitutes an orthodox, politically correct criticism of imperialism during the First World War in the Caucasus. This painstaking introduction relies upon general historical accounts of the period published in the USSR until the early 1940s and does not make substantial attempts to connect these macro-approaches with the micro-narrative provided by Mel’nikov himself. Similarly, the last sentences of the narrative integrate some elements of Soviet phraseology, but they look rather disconnected from the rest of the text.

Reconstructing life under occupation: historiography and Mel’nikov’s contribution

Mel’nikov’s account of the Ottoman occupation is an important contribution to our understanding of this short period. Until now, as previously discussed, we have lacked direct sources depicting the ways in which the occupation was perceived among the local population. When discussed, the occupation was generally related to the issue of relations between the Ottomans and the rural part of the population, the Ach’ars, on the theme of Islamic commonalities *versus* ethnic and cultural differences. As a representative of the former dominant Russian community, Mel’nikov is particularly interesting, all the more since his text gives an overall positive assessment of the occupation. Mel’nikov was part of the city’s multicultural and multiethnic makeup. In 1890, according to official statistics Batumi had a population of 18,123 inhabitants, of which 4161 were Russians, 3574 were Georgians, 3128 Armenians, 1995 Greeks, 1174 Muslims, 862 Jews and 3229 belonged to other nationalities (“Svedeniya o kolichestve i sostave naseleniya g. Batuma” 1902, 244). Being a Russian, Mel’nikov could have been deeply resentful of Ottoman rule in the region. However, he obviously came to terms with the occupation. Quite a few sentences remind the reader that the Ottomans’ capture of the city re-established order in a region that was sliding into anarchy. This fact was passingly noted in his memoirs by Ottoman journalist Ahmet Refik Altınay, who simply contrasted the enthusiasm of Muslims with the neutral behaviour of local Russians (Altınay 1981, 14–17). The Russian national council could work normally until the end of the summer, when the *mutasarrıf* Cemil Bey received instructions from Istanbul to close a society whose statutes purportedly contradicted the Ottoman Law on Associations (*Cemiyetler Kanunu*) of July 1909 (Eyyüpoğlu 2004, 140–142).

Apart from this official wariness toward Russian national organizations, Russians had no grounds to particularly fear Ottoman domination. This is evident in the contrast drawn by Mel'nikov with local Armenians, who were greatly disturbed and panicked by the Ottoman arrival in the region and fled en masse. Among them several had fled the Ottoman Empire since the turn of the twentieth century and during the war. Moreover, violent clashes had taken place in the interior around Kars, where Armenian resistance was accompanied by violence against civilians (Badalyan 1962; Trumpener 1968, 176; Bal 2004). As emphasized by Mel'nikov, the situation on the coastline remained more calm and few abuses were committed. In many respects, Mel'nikov's testimony accords with the idea that the Ottomans considered Batumi a strategic city at a political level. They were eager to avoid public criticism on this issue. Shipments of supply staples were duly delivered, even though this meant further tensions in Ottoman Anatolia and in Trabzon province, where the priority assigned to the re-conquered *Elviye-i Selâse* caused resentment. A member of the city Duma emphasized in a July speech that Batumi looked like "a lizard's tail, cut from its body", and Mel'nikov's narrative confirms this perception of a city in-between (AARSA 1918b).

A first interesting point coming out of this testimony is that it aptly completes and challenges existing accounts of the occupation with the stress it lays on the practicalities, and oddities, of Ottoman occupation. Mel'nikov provides us with insights into down-to-earth aspects of life in Batumi during 1918 we know little about. His descriptions of measures such as the "currency reform" described in section 4 can be usefully compared with official sources, describing the dilemmas faced by the authorities. Mel'nikov mentions a rate of 16 rubles to 1 Turkish lira in Batumi, but exchange rates varied across the *Elviye-i Selâse*. The lira was much stronger in Ardahan and Kars, where it was worth 20 and 22 rubles, respectively. Abdülhalik Bey lamented on 18 June the speculation that provoked unexpected shortages of Turkish currency.⁶ The economic weakness of the Ottoman Empire in the last months of the war could be felt in the widely noted economic and maritime decline of the city.⁷ Mel'nikov's account shows the wider implications of this decline for the cultural and social life of the city. Although he clearly criticizes the dullness of cultural life under the Ottomans, he attributes it rather to the war context than to a specific policy of the occupiers. In depicting these evolutions, Mel'nikov is little concerned with great politics and presents the humdrum world of anonymous officers, soldiers and bureaucrats who ruled the region for a few months.

His account conspicuously avoids discussing the political events that took place in the city in 1918. He makes no mention of the Batumi peace conference from 11 May to 4 June, which brought an influx of officials and diplomats in the city to sign peace treaties between the Porte and the new Caucasian states (Altınay 1981, 86–87). Neither does he mention the referendum organized in August in the new regions to support reintegration with the Ottoman Empire. This referendum was a major step for Ottoman administrators. Abdülhalik Bey, having previous experience in dealing with minorities in the Bitlis and Alep provinces, toured the countryside since June to convince people to vote in favour of the reintegration (Uran 2008, 79–86). Held from 14 June to 14 July, the referendum saw different results according to the region. In Ardahan, 22,600 out of 22,654 voters officially expressed support for this move, whereas in Batumi only 2669 electors voted for and 160 against and 1483 abstained (Akhvlediani 1971, 48–49; Sari 2014, 209–213). This absence of political events derives from Mel'nikov's sociological position and his intent

in this text to write a people's history of the occupation through anecdotes and daily-life experiences. He remains equally silent on the issue of national or class-based resistance, often mentioned in standard Soviet and post-Soviet accounts of the occupation (Gogolishvili 2001, 17–22). This is all the more interesting when we recall the context in which the text was deposited at the Ach'ara State Museum. In several respects, Mel'nikov's account is a typically petit bourgeois narrative of the Turkish occupation, emphasizing public order over political commitment.

The second main interest of Mel'nikov's memoirs is their comparison between Ottoman and Russian (both tsarist and revolutionary) practices. The overall image of the Ottomans is far from being negative, but brims with contradictions. On the one hand, Mel'nikov concludes these memoirs with the idea that “no one regretted their departure”, but on the other, he gives a rather positive assessment of Ottoman administrative manners. If we are to follow him, the population of Batumi was positively impressed by the simplicity of Ottoman bureaucracy in comparison with their tsarist predecessors. This is a striking point, since we know from Turkish sources that Ottoman officials were deeply concerned about their own ability to match tsarist standards in this domain. In his July report, Abdülhalık Bey noted: “Russian officials, even at the humblest level, wore distinctive signs and the population is now accustomed to such signs marking the dignity of civil servants.” He emphasizes the need for Ottoman officials sent to the region to stay true to such practices, in order to gain the respect of the populations (BOA 1918b). Numerous decrees and regulations were adopted to ensure that quality staff was dispatched to the region from all regions of the Ottoman Empire (BOA 1918a; Gül 1995). If we are to follow Mel'nikov's testimony, the result of this policy seems to have been rather positive: his description of the fall in crime rates and public disorder and the decency of Turkish troops demonstrates that comparison were not necessarily to the detriment of the Turks. This text is thus a useful source for a reassessment of popular perceptions of this occupation, usefully complementing and challenging at times the national and geopolitical narratives of the period.

V.P. Mel'nikov, “The Ottoman occupation of Adzhariya” (1943)

Daily interactions between inhabitants and the new authorities

Many people in Batum thought, on the eve of the invasion of Adzhariya by Turkish troops, that the new Turkish authorities would immediately set about violating established traditions, breaking existing rules, but they were pleasantly surprised: as conquerors, the Turks did not act like threatening, giddy despots. They behave quite wisely and correctly.

As is well known, a distinctive feature of the Turks, notwithstanding the fanaticism and bigotry of some groups in the Sultan's empire, was their tolerance of alien opinions and rites, a fact that was made clear from the very first day of the establishment of Turkish power in Adzhariya. The victors did not reduce the defeated populations to their knees, or shout them down threateningly, and the city was not ransacked as happened previously. This was evidence that time had had its effect: it was clear that dark pages from the history of war would not repeat themselves.

The population welcomed the victors with politeness and decency, but without servility or flattery. The victors reacted to this with the same politeness and decency towards the

entire population, without national, religious or social discrimination. Soon, life resumed its normal course; people were once again busy with their usual business and immediate needs, while the new power took to administering the region. Exemplary discipline reigned in the streets and there was no bingeing, disorder or brawling to disturb it.

Despite the correctness of interactions between the new authorities and the population, no close link was established between them, with a few exceptions. In my view, the reason behind this aloofness lay in the difference of character between the Turks and the people of Batum, emerging from their belonging to different nationalities. It also had to do with the fact that countries of the Quadruple Alliance⁸ were going through a bad period and the advantage progressively turned in favour of the Allies. There was a feeling in the air that the end of this bloody world conflict was approaching. It was clear that Adzhariya and Batum would not remain in the hands of the Turks ...

Decency of Turkish troops

Even though they entered Adzhariya as a subjugated country, Turkish troops did not emphasize their dominant position in their relations with the population. There was none of the conceit, complacency or rudeness of undisciplined soldiers.

The officers of the Turkish garrison in Batum were distinctively well-mannered, tidy and behaved quite correctly. A majority of these officers had been very well educated and could speak fluently, in addition to Turkish, several foreign languages, more often than not French. As is well known, the French language is considered *de rigueur* in most armies of the world, but the fraction of those really able to speak it is usually low. However, all officers of the Batum garrison spoke it fluently.

Familiarity with foreign languages is not at all unusual in the Turkish army: many foreigners live in the capital of the Ottoman empire, Constantinople (Stambul), and in port cities, and they largely use French, English, German and other languages, so that the Turks are used to hearing conversations in foreign languages from their very childhood and very quickly become polyglots. In addition, many officers of the Turkish army received special training abroad and a knowledge of foreign languages was mandatory. Some rank-and-file soldiers of the Batum garrison born in Constantinople and port cities also spoke foreign languages.

The military of the Batum garrison, particularly the officers, were very reserved in their dealings with the populations, polite, without coarseness or violence. The uniforms of these officers were pressed and clean, but the external appearance of soldiers left much to be desired: they were poorly dressed and looked fairly unhappy, even disheartened. This was due to the financial hardships affecting the Turkish Treasury, bled white by the war and unable to keep its soldiers decently dressed or provisioned. Some said in Batum that Turkish soldiers were very scarcely fed, which of course impacted their appearance. However, in spite of their being badly dressed and nourished, Turkish soldiers did not engage in begging or extortion. No one complained about their attitude.

Miraculous scraps of paper

Under tsarism the people of Batum permanently interacted with the complex bureaucratic machinery that held the whole empire in its sway, bringing under its control the lives of ordinary people from the cradle to the grave in all their entirety. This machinery admittedly

experienced some setbacks under the Provisional Government, but still functioned. This accounted for a feeling of bemusement in the first moments of Turkish power in Adzhariya, due to the absence of this bureaucratic machinery to which everyone was accustomed.

After taking up the administration of this region, the Turks introduced practices noticeably different from the previously prevailing forms of government. The modalities of city government were thoroughly simplified, such as the means of interaction between the authorities and the population. Societal groups accustomed to maintaining highly codified, written relations with the authorities, documented with in-coming and out-going serial numbers and other refinements were now deprived of this possibility, due to a linguistic incompetence that shut the doors to these bureaucratic pathways. Administrative procedures in the new Turkish institutions were considerably simplified and engendered no overflowing chancery paperwork. Finally, Turkish officials solved a majority of issues orally, rapidly and simply, with the help of a translator.

I would like to give a telling example, which perfectly illustrates the Turkish system of administration. This example is telling insofar as it shows that superfluous formalism was fundamentally alien to Turkish administration. Under the tsarist regime and the Provisional Government, receiving an official certificate from a governor or, at the time of the Provisional Government, a commissar, required great efforts, considerable time, and sometimes necessitated the bribery of officials, promises to “be thankful”, and so on. Before the official document could be handed over to the requesting side, it had to be registered, authenticated with a seal and countersigned by many people, which made for a very time-consuming process. The entity requiring this document examined it carefully, studied it at length, and then wrote a decision or made a note, before it could be attached to an administrative file. Quite often, this “file” was not worth a damn.

As for the Turks, their way of doing things was much simpler. I know many instances, when the governor of Batumi impressed petitioners by the swiftness of his decisions and, even more, by the very nature of the administrative acts he emitted. Let us imagine that a citizen comes to visit the governor in order to settle some business. The latter listens to him, then gives oral instructions, or writes a short note. What does this note look like? The governor rips a scrap of paper from the sheets kept on his desk and, taking it on his knees, jots down a few words and gives it to the petitioner. The audience is over. The visitor holds in his hands a miraculous piece of paper: with this official note he has free access to all institutions, officials and the request for which he came to the governor will be satisfied immediately, without any paperwork. Quite logically, everyone in Batumi called such notes miraculous edicts.

An original banking reform

After the occupation of Adzhariya by Turkish troops, the question of which currencies would remain in circulation became an important question. Everyone wanted to know what would become of the money they had been using and had saved until the arrival of the Turks. Holders of paper money were particularly concerned, while those who held gold and silver currencies knew their patrimony was in safety.

The new authorities solved this issue quite simply, without causing any damage to the material interests of the population. They proclaimed that the official currency – Turkish liras – would be traded at a fixed rate of 16 rubles against one Turkish lira. This decision was well implemented and the exchange rate of the lira remained unchanged during the

entire stay of the Turks in Adzhariya – the lira did not rise by a single kopeck, neither in banking institutions nor in the bazaars.

This decision of the new authorities entailed a general stability of prices on commodities of first necessity and wages, and avoided speculation on currencies, sparing the population any material loss. It quickly became clear that the population was eager to procure and hoard Turkish liras and there was in consequence an occasional dearth of liras, especially as far as small bills were concerned. This dearth took a toll on the economic situation of the region, in particular when deals had to be made in cash.

The Turkish financial officials found a simple, witty and extremely original way out of this currency scarcity: they cut Turkish banknotes into two halves, made special banking marks on each part, and circulated them. Each half was valued on a par with normal banknotes and was eagerly accepted by everyone. All State institutions and private persons had to accept these new banknotes.

Stick punishment

Turkish police were very severe and local criminals remember them, I suppose, very well, if they happened to fall into their powerful hands. The Batum police stations were notorious for the physical mistreatment reserved for offenders and suspects, who underwent various forms of beating, from kicking in the teeth and ears to breaking the ribs. When the Turks came in, all of this changed.

The Turkish police were obviously aware of the way Russian police bullies had acted. Their own methods were also brutal but, according to the general opinion, rather beneficent. Offenders who were caught and sentenced were not pummelled, kicked or maimed. They were ordered to lie on the floor and were submitted to a vigorous stick punishment. The number of strokes was always strictly stipulated according to the crime. The most frequent sentence involved 31 strokes and was known to the inhabitants in Turkish as *otuz bir*.⁹

People submitted to such punishments emitted shrill screams audible from afar, but this never stopped the enforcement of the sentence in accordance with the count of the strokes. Not one stroke more, not one stroke less, than what was prescribed by the law. After their punishment had been implemented the convicts were free to go. They left writhing in pain and full of shame and were often never to be seen again in Batum.

I was once told a story that happened in one of the police stations. A thief had been caught after stealing a carpet from a woman. He was recognized by the victim and witnesses and immediately submitted to the sentence of 31 strokes. The thief was thrown on the soil and caned. The victim had a good heart, she was moved by the screams of the thief and asked the policemen to stop the enforcement of the sentence. Her request was met – the thief was freed, but she was beaten for the exact number of remaining strokes. Turkish policemen strictly enforced the law ...

One could sleep at night with open windows and doors

Before the Turkish occupation many cases of robberies and burglaries were reported in Batum – although less frequently in the rest of Adzhariya. Robberies were a daily occurrence under tsarism and during the revolution. Batum newspapers even had a special column devoted to the coverage of such events. The tsarist police weakly fought this

kind of criminality since they made a nice profit by colluding with criminals: they took bribes from some of them or simply kept what had been stolen. The police of the revolutionary period, lacking preparedness and intent, showed no particular zeal in fighting robberies, which happened quite frequently until the arrival of the Turks in Adzhariya.

All of a sudden, everything changed: within a few days the new authorities eradicated crime. This was achieved in a simple but decisive manner. The police beat up thieves and robbers when they were caught and the latter could only count themselves lucky if escaped Batum. Previously the inhabitants, especially in the outskirts, set their dogs loose and locked their courtyard gates, doors and windows before going to bed. Now they could sleep with open windows and doors, enjoying fresh air and being confident in the safety of their property. Turkish police dutifully protected public order and private property. Up to their departure, no robbery was registered in Batum.

Entertainment in Batum

The inhabitants of Batum, being true people from the South, were always eager to have fun and entertain themselves and the days of the Turkish occupation were a hard time for them. What could they do after work? In cities such as Batum entertainment revolved around two things: the garrison and the port. The port was affected by the slump; sailors and dockers did not have entertainment on their minds. This was also true of the authorities and military commanders obsessed with the course of war.

The Batum theatre led a miserable life. Occasionally troops made of randomly selected, jobless actors and amateurs performed. The performances were quite irregular and had a distinctively naive and primitive flavour, with staging reminiscent of the worst provincial theatres. The cinemas sometimes showed movies imported to Batum, but mostly repeated old and well-worn films screened so many times that everyone had had enough of them.

Coffee houses had a great time. Those peculiarly accessible Batum institutions were places where you could have long discussions about current events, international issues or personal problems behind a cup of coffee or a glass of tea. People negotiated all kinds of deals there, played backgammon (*nardy*), dominos, notably in the format of what local people called the “telephon”, whereupon the loser had to invite his fellow players to coffee and tea. Some coffee houses organized performances of *karagöz*, a peculiar form of puppet theatre from the South.

During *karagöz* performances, a projection screen and an opaque shield would be installed. Behind the shield stood the “artist”, who sang, played music, told tales and illustrated them by means of a shadow theatre on the projection screen. This kind of spectacle enjoyed great popularity among the coffee house clientele. During performances, people could still smoke, drink coffee and tea, speak in low voices with their neighbours and watch the entertainment for free. Children, too, came for *karagöz* performances. When popular *karagöz* masters performed, the coffee houses were packed. They were rewarded with friendly applause and small gifts, tea, coffee, sweets and cigarettes. During such events, the atmosphere in coffee houses was festive, loud and carefree.

Spoken and written languages in Batum

The Turkish occupation forces, when they took over the administration of Batum and Adzhariya, demonstrated a great tolerance in the spoken and written use of languages.

The official language was of course the language of the Ottoman Empire – Turkish, but they did not try to force it on the population. The Russian language was also widely used in official matters, as the language most widely understood by the nationalities which lived in Adzhariya. Both Turkish and Russian were used for official proclamations, decrees and orders of all sorts. A newspaper, theatre posters and shop signs were edited in both languages.

French could also be used when interacting with the Turkish authorities, even though France was at war with Turkey. This testifies, on the one hand, to the great tolerance of the Turks, and, on the other hand, can be explained by the fact that the familiarity of many officers of the garrison and officials with the French language helped them in their daily relations with the population.

But other nationalities could not complain about vexations from Turkish authorities in the use of their native languages. Conversations in Georgian, Greek, Armenian and other languages could still be heard in the streets and public places of Batumi, as always. In these days Batumi, with its variegated population, was strongly reminiscent of a small-size Constantinople.

Abstinence required!

It is widely known that the Turks, like all Muslims, do not drink alcohol as their religion forbids it. During their stay in Adzhariya nobody ever saw a drunken or inebriated Turk. Their whole lifestyle is profoundly impacted by the fact that they do not drink “fortified” beverages. During their dominion over the city one no longer saw companies of intoxicated and drunken men or the lone drunkards that one was accustomed to, and the usual carousers’ songs could no longer be heard. It was not the case that all inhabitants abstained during the Turkish occupation. The Turks were quite tolerant of trade and consumption of alcohol, but it was considered highly inappropriate to walk the street when even lightly intoxicated. People who wanted to still drink alcohol could drink at home and in restaurants. People still partook of alcohol in private houses, but without the noise, bawling and singing which one could previously hear in the entire neighbourhood.

I did wonder whether the Turks always abided by the requirements of abstinence. It turned out that they did. No inhabitant could tell me an incident where he had seen an even mildly intoxicated Turk. Some nonetheless told that the Turks, whenever they went to Western European cities, drank strong beverages such as vodka, liquor or cognac, and justified themselves by stating that these drinks were not prohibited by the foundational rules of Islam, since they had been invented long after the creation of this religion. These were mere guesses, since a fact remained: during the period of the occupation one never saw a single befuddled Turk and the sober lifestyle of the Turks impacted on the behaviour of the non-Muslim part of the population. Batumi people demonstrated during the occupation a sobriety never seen before or since.

The situation of workers, employees and members of the intelligentsia

Turkish occupation cut off Batumi from the rest of Transcaucasia, even though it was also *de facto* under the power of German and Turkish authorities. The invaders were cautious of what would be the reaction of public opinion in the world and did not officially violate

the “sovereignty” of the Transcaucasian republics. The port of Batum and the Transcaucasia railways were exclusively used for military purposes and the transfer of food shipments, which they could sell for a cheap price to an impoverished population.

The importance of the Batum port, which had earlier played a very considerable role in the economic life of Transcaucasia, the Black sea and international markets, declined after occupation and relations with foreign and Russian ports fell into insignificance. The port was soon operating at a reduced capacity and entered a phase of stagnation. The port played a dominant role in the life of Batum and its decline quickly impacted on the situation of the city: many people working in the port lost their jobs, dockers, porters, clerks of the trade offices and representations, and so on.

This downturn had a general effect on industry and trade in the city. The turnover of the industrial firms whose activity was linked to the port decreased due to the overall paralysis, to the shortage of raw materials and the fall in demand for manufactured goods. Trade dwindled due to the scarcity of staple products and the reduced purchasing power of a population with many more unemployed persons.

The situation of the working class during this period worsened notably. At the beginning of the revolution, the working class of Batum had set the pace of social life but its role was again reduced to production in companies, as in the times of tsarist autocracy. Job cuts followed decreasing turnovers, unemployment went up, and wages went down, to a level that often barely secured the basic means of living.

The intelligentsia was probably in the worst situation: teachers, practitioners of liberal professions and officials. Looking for employment, they would accept any job that remotely suited their qualifications but could not always find one, and they were then doomed with their families to destitution. The general economic precariousness, the decline in trade and industry imparted a sad and monotonous aspect to the city. The only element that kept up the spirits of the population was the hope that the war would soon end. This hope came true only at the end of 1918, which meant the end of the Turkish occupation.

Armenian refugees

At the beginning of the World War a considerable mass of Armenians moved from Turkey to the Russian Empire. Many of them died on roads that were full of perils and even in Russia they did not have an easy time, especially in the early stages of exile. Their emigration was a result of the fear that they would be massacred due to the wild expression of fanatic passions under the sultan's regime.

When Turkish troops entered Transcaucasia in 1918 masses of local Transcaucasians Armenians and former Armenian refugees from Turkey, settled in Transcaucasia in 1914, set off again towards the north. A mood of panic seized the Armenian population living in the Baku region. A majority of them abandoned their houses, properties and work to head to the north, to start there a new life, full of hardships and privations, the life of refugees.

Many Armenian families left Batum at the time: merchants, factory managers, artisans and craftsmen, members of the cultural elite. Only the worse-off among Armenians stayed in Batum: those parts of the Armenian community who depended on their daily work and had no means to emigrate. In the end, their situation actually turned out to be more

favourable than that of their affluent fellow-Armenians: no one molested them under the new Turkish administration, no one offended their national pride and they could live like everyone else, getting on with their usual business.

When the Turkish occupation ended, many Armenian refugees came back to Batum. I talked with many of them about their flight and my questions always received stereotypical answers:

“We left because we were afraid of massacres that were routinely committed under the sultan’s regime.” Were the goods you left damaged? “No, if we exclude what was looted by malevolent neighbours and criminals.” Do not you think that the Turks might be behind this looting? “I don’t think so.” When I told them that the Armenians who had stayed in Batum did not suffer, my interlocutors usually answered: “Maybe we wouldn’t have been molested if we had stayed, but we were afraid to stay because we remembered the anti-Armenian atrocities committed by the sultan’s regime, well-known to the entire world.”

At the customs house

The Turks had received intelligence that water-borne diseases were spreading rapidly in Western Georgia. In order to prevent contamination in Adzhariya, Turkish authorities resorted to original measures. At the border railway station between Adzhariya and Western Georgia all passengers arriving from Georgia were medically examined in a peculiar fashion: every passenger going to Batum had to present ... their faeces to a sanitary agent. They isolated themselves before presenting what was required on a piece of paper, on small planks, on leaves of trees or rags. The sanitary agent carefully examined the faeces and, if convinced that the passenger’s bowels were healthy, gave his authorization to make the trip to Batum. Passengers who had failed to produce evidence of their healthiness were not admitted to move on ...

Curious stories and scams happened in connection with these regulations; some passengers were supposed to “help” each other to present healthy faeces, some were said to have traded or bought them ... Nonetheless, despite these apparently naive measures Turkish authorities achieved their goal: no epidemic disease infected the city and later on no one mocked or criticized this unsophisticated prophylactic method.

The sanitary situation in Batum

Before the revolution Batum was considered one of the cleanest and most orderly cities in the Russian Empire. This was admittedly true only the central part of the city, since the sanitary measures of the city administration barely extended to the outskirts where the workers lived. After the revolution the state and city administrations no longer operated smoothly and the sanitary situation in Batum progressively worsened.

The Turkish occupation meant a clear decline in this respect. The new authorities did not pay due attention to the sanitary situation and many people took advantage of this indifference: slackers in the sanitary inspectorate, unscrupulous caretakers and landlords. The city was soon full of refuse and heaps of garbage and waste could be seen even in the central streets. The situation was even worse in the courtyards, where waste pits and bins were not cleaned and trash spilled into the sea. Buildings and courtyards abandoned by

their owners who had fled Batumi were in a particularly sorrow state. As for Turkish soldiers, nor could they be said to maintain cleanness in the compounds they occupied.

What were the reasons of this indifference and, one could even say, careless attitude of Turkish authorities in sanitary affairs? It might have to do with the fact that the Turks did not feel this city really belonged to them, since the international situation at the time was far from favourable for them.

When the Turkish occupation of Batum ended, the sanitary situation was terrible: garbage was everywhere, swarms of flies, and fleas. Batum fleas are well known in scientific literature for their extravagant size and agility. They were a true scourge for the population. Long after the Turks had left, Batum had to suffer this troublesome and swarming “legacy”, much work had to be done in order to re-establish a satisfactory sanitary situation. During this period the inhabitants of Batum were saved from serious epidemics mainly by the torrential rains which cleaned the rubbish and dragged it out to sea, as well as by the sun which killed diseases. Without these powerful and unpaid interventions, the local population could have suffered much more.

The extermination of swine

Islam does not permit the preparation of pork, since pigs are omnivorous and dirty animals. Contact with swine is considered by Muslims as undesirable. Before the Turks entered the city, many inhabitants left the city and left their belongings outdoors. Many pigs remained in the city without owners. They wandered around the street in search of food, arousing disgust among the Turks. Although they were perfectly comfortable with the fact that the local population reared swine and showed respect for other tastes, they announced that those pigs left without masters would be slaughtered, and recommended that all owners should keep their pigs on a leash or in sties.

This proclamation marked the start of an extermination campaign of stray pigs, led by people who wanted to make some quick income. They were not slaughtered in the streets, but astute people, attracted by the prospect of easy profits, lured swine into quiet places where they killed them. Many such “hunters” hoarded pickled pork for months after preserving their booty.

A typographical worker once told me that, entrusted with the slaughter of a dozen large swine, he worked himself to death during these frenzied days. Abandoning his place of work, he spent whole days eviscerating the pigs, salting and smoking the meat, and touring the shops in search of salt and barrels. “I didn’t know where to put the barrels with half-salted meat and ham. We spend a long time stuffed full of food, generously inviting friends and acquaintances”, he fondly remembered of these happy times. In this manner the issue of stray swine was resolved to the great advantage of both parties – the new authorities and energetic people.

No one regretted their departure

In the historic tragedy that happened in 1914–1918, the retreat of the Russian army from the front after the 1917 revolution was a peculiar event. The battlefield retreat of this huge army, which had expressed its unwillingness to fight any longer, is something quite unprecedented.

Many thought at the time this was the beginning of the end of the world conflict and so it was indeed. Although the Quadruple Alliance took advantage of the Russian retreat and were stronger than before, this did not save them from defeat, since the Entente was stronger and the balance of power further shifted in their favour. This bloody tragedy ended with the defeat of Central Powers. Germany and her allies were brought to their knees and had to sign in humiliating circumstances a shameful peace. It could not have been otherwise: woe to the vanquished!

The British, French, American, Japanese and other imperialists celebrated their victory and started to divide the spoils, reshaping the world map. They did not confine the division of spoils to the properties of the defeated. Their attention was attracted to the former Russian Empire, then replaced by a throng of independent states. Quite naturally, these greedy imperialists looked with envy at these fledgling states and tried to take them into their hands. They were particularly interested by Transcaucasia and its oil kingdom in Baku. Interethnic strife in Transcaucasia greatly facilitated the conquest of Baku.

Soon after Transcaucasia was again occupied. The British played the major role in this occupation. They acted quickly and without great resistance. Adzhariya fell under their control but they were less interested in Adzhariya than in Batumi itself, Transcaucasia's window to the sea and the wider world. This new occupation occurred without violence: the British succeeded in expelling in a short time German and Turkish occupation forces and established their own administration over everything and everyone.

No one regretted the Turks in Adzhariya: they had not succeeded in building strong ties of friendship or fostering strong sympathy among the population. This multiethnic population, despite its subjugated and constrained position, considered itself superior in all regards to the Turkish invaders and did not lament their departure. The population of Adzhariya was of the same opinion because, although they shared the same religion with the Turks, were treated as a separate group. For the Turks, the Adzhars were above all *gurdji*, "Georgians", that is alien people.¹⁰ Even the pan-Islamist forces of Adzhariya who had welcomed the arrival of the Turks were disappointed since they had not received any significant privileges and remained indifferent when they left.

The short-lived occupation of Adzhariya by the Turks ended in this manner and did not leave any significant imprint on her history.

Notes

1. Yunus Nadi, « Batumi'un İstirdadı » par Yunus Nadi, dans le *Tasvir-i Efkar*, 17 April 1334 (1918), No. 2427, quoted in Şahin (2002, 461–462).
2. Decree of the Turkish governor, 22 August 1918, in Khachapuridze (1958, 322).
3. Note of the legal department of the Ottoman Foreign ministry, 28 Nisan 1334 (28 April 1918), in Koltuk and Sağlam (2009, 54–59).
4. *Ach'ara* is the Georgian transliteration of the region's name, which is also often rendered in English more simply and less accurately as Adjara, Adjaria or Ajara. The transliteration from Russian is *Adzhariya*, which is preserved here in Mel'nikov's own text.
5. V.P. Mel'nikov. Angliyskaya okkupatsiya Adzharii. Quoted in Margiev (2008, 248–252).
6. BOA, DH/I-UM, 20-19/13-37, quoted in Mustafa Sarı (2014, 256).
7. See the short account made by a nurse, L.V. Emel'yanova, in Miskin (1980, 214–215).
8. This phrase was coined after Bulgaria joined the Central Powers. It was notably used in the treaty of Brest-Litovsk.
9. "Thirty-one" in Turkish.

10. The departure of Ottoman forces opened a public rift between pro-Turkish and pro-Georgian forces (Dayı 1997, 172).

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