The Forgotten Democratic Socialist Republic of Georgia

Dan Gallin ▪ January 24, 2018

A delegation of the Second International meets with leaders of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in the small town of Dusheti, 1920. Courtesy of Eric Lee.

The Experiment: Georgia's Forgotten Revolution, 1918-1921
by Eric Lee
Zed Books, 2017, 259 pp.

At the end of the First World War a revolutionary wave swept over Europe. In many countries people revolted against the senseless slaughter of the war. Many hoped to overthrow their ruling classes by revolutions which, had they happened by 1914, as the Socialist International had sought, would have prevented the war.

The Russian revolutions of 1917 inspired these movements, but their origins were rooted in their own experience, and their fate ultimately depended on the circumstances they encountered in their own countries. In Austria (1917) and in Italy (1918–1920) the challenge to the established order remained inconclusive and did not survive the reactionary backlash of fascism. The German social-democratic revolution

(1918–1919) was suppressed by a social-democratic government resorting to the use of proto-fascist militias out of the demobilized German military. German army units also intervened in Finland in 1918 to tilt the balance of power in the civil war to the Whites. They were not successful in the Baltic countries, where nationalist and socialist militias, with British, French, and Finnish aid, established three independent states, which lasted until the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939. Hungary's revolution (1918–1920) was defeated by the Romanian army, acting as the body guard of Entente capitalism. And then there was Georgia.

The Georgian revolution was unlike any other. It was led by a social-democratic party, the Georgian Mensheviks, with overwhelming popular support. The Bolshevik split was insignificant. There was no civil war. The Georgian Mensheviks established a democratic republic, with a free press, free trade unions, and several parties represented in parliament, and enacted social and economic measures creating in effect a socialist society. It lasted three years (1918–1921). The counterrevolution that crushed it was a military invasion by Soviet Russia.

Eric Lee has written a remarkable book, The Experiment, which tells the history of the First Georgian Republic. (Lee is a longtime friend and comrade of mine from the labor movement.) It does, however, do more than that. By placing the Georgian experiment in its historical and international context, it gives us important insights into the nature of nation-building, socialism, Stalinism, and even contemporary Russia. Let us examine these in order.

Nation-building: Social democracy had established itself as the representative liberation movement of the Georgian people decades before the revolution. It was, in effect, an anticolonial movement. It is easily forgotten that Tsarist Russia and, after it, the USSR, were colonial empires. The difference with the other great European colonial empires, except perhaps the Ottoman one, was that colonizers and colonized shared the same land mass, which created the illusion of a very large multiethnic

single country. In reality, Russia had surrounded itself with a periphery of colonized peoples who took every opportunity to break free as soon as the central power had become too weak to enforce its rule. This is what happened in 1917 and again in 1990.

When Putin today deplores the dissolution of the USSR as the "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century," this is what he means. He is mourning the demise of the Russian colonial empire and he intends to reestablish it if he can.

In Georgia, social democrats led the secession from the former Tsarist empire and went on to build the Georgian democratic state. They were not alone. The other two Transcaucasian countries, Armenia and Azerbaijan, also broke away. Armenia was also led by a socialist party, the Dashnaks, and Azerbaijan by the Musavat, but both with a nationalist, not a socialist, priority. The Georgian social democrats, on the other hand, were an orthodox Marxist party and regarded national liberation as an opportunity to start building a democratic socialist society.

Socialism: In Georgia, the social democrats proved that another revolution in Russia could have been possible. But they also proved that social democrats could be socialists. They had not forgotten the original purpose of the exercise, and they were serious about establishing a society based on freedom and justice. Eric Lee's book documents how they went about it. Today's social democrats, so often at a loss, bereft of courage and imagination, unable to conceive of their movement as an alternative to contemporary capitalism, might benefit from meditating on the Georgian example.

At the time, the Socialist International recognized the importance of the experiment. A delegation had visited Georgia in 1920 and Karl Kautsky, who was part of the delegation, wrote a book supporting it. Trotsky, in a very bad book (Between Red and White), took issue with it (he later said it was based on incomplete information). The Georgian party in exile remained a member of the Socialist International until it

dissolved in 1940.

Stalinism: Perhaps surprisingly, a Stalin museum still exists near Tbilisi, celebrating his high deeds. Some Georgians, not many, regard him as a national hero. In fact, the invasion and occupation of Georgia in 1921 was organized by Stalin, without the knowledge of Lenin nor of Trotsky, then commander of the Red Army (which did not prevent him from trying to justify the invasion after the fact).

The pretext for the invasion was a nonexistent pro-Soviet uprising in a Georgian border province, which, according to Soviet propaganda, had requested the intervention of the Red Army to rescue them from the Menshevik yoke. Not unlike the pleas of a handful of Stalinist functionaries for fraternal aid to protect Czechoslovakia from the counterrevolutionary government of Alexander Dubček—which triggered the invasion by the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968—or the recent creation of a fictional Ukrainian “civil war” requiring Russia to occupy Crimea and to massively support the separatist “republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk to save them from the Ukrainian fascists. The methods of subversion, from Stalin to Putin, have not changed.

A final popular rebellion against the Soviet occupation took place in 1924, and was violently repressed, with thousands of deaths, at the time and over the next few years. Noe Ramishvili, first prime minister of the Georgian Democratic Republic and later its minister of interior, was assassinated by the NKVD in Paris, where he was living in exile, in 1930.

After the occupation of Georgia, its government in exile sought

help from France and Poland for continued training of its military cadres. Poland responded, and several hundred Georgian army cadres and cadets studied at Polish military schools after 1922. They later served in the Polish army, many as officers. When Germany and Russia invaded Poland in 1939 a number became prisoners in Russia and were among the 22,000 Polish army officers murdered by the NKVD in the Katyn forest and in other locations. Some of the survivors joined the Polish resistance.

In 1991 Georgia secured its independence for the second time in modern history, and the Second Republic was established amid political confusion and civil strife. At first, the Menshevik constitution of 1921 was reinstated, together with the red flag of the First Republic. But by 1995, the governing center-left party pushed through a new constitution, strengthening the power of the presidency and opening the door to rampant corruption. After the Rose Revolution of 2003, forces allergic to any form of socialism came to power, and the flag is now white, with lots of crosses.

When I first visited Georgia, about sixteen years ago, it was to lecture at a seminar for the leadership of the Georgian Trade Union Confederation. I took the opportunity to say a few words about the Menshevik republic and the historical role of Georgian social democracy. I urged the trade unionists to recover their own past and to use it to strengthen their identity as a movement. There was no response. I felt I had touched on a sensitive subject, both embarrassing and perhaps dangerous. Today the situation has changed completely. I revisited Tbilisi in September, to participate in the launch of Eric's book, and I also attended the congress of the Georgian Trade Union Confederation. I was delighted to see that Eric had been invited to address the congress. The Stalinist thought police had finally been defeated. The Georgian labor movement was re-appropriating its history.

The importance of this history cannot be overstated. History creates identity, and is therefore not about the past but about the future. In George Orwell's novel 1984 the agent of the

totalitarian State, O'Brien, explains how those who control the past control the future. In Georgia, and not only there, that is what Stalinism tried to do for nearly seventy years. Eric Lee's The Experiment, soon to be translated into Georgian, is a major contribution to the fight for freedom—theirs and ours.

Dan Gallin has been active on the left and in the labor movement for more than sixty years. He is currently chair of the Global Labour Institute (GLI), a labor-service organization established in 1997 with a secretariat in Geneva.