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*The Experiment: Georgia's Forgotten Revolution 1918–1921*

by Eric Lee (review)

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универсальный, а не региональный характер (свойственный лишь Сибири или югу Украины). Значит, это было не случайное явление, а проявление неких фундаментальных, структурных закономерностей, описываемых сегодня при помощи политологической модели делиберативной демократии.

Гибридность крестьянских республик состояла еще и в том, что, с одной стороны, это были формирования государственного типа, а с другой – в них не существовало никаких оснований для формирования государства. Для этого не было ни экономических, ни финансовых, ни территориальных условий. Образование этих формирований имело цель объединить крестьян для борьбы с колчаковщиной или деникинщиной, а не превращаться в постоянные самостоятельные государства.

Рецензируемый сборник не лишен недостатков, главным образом, технического свойства: встречаются фактические ошибки (особенно в написании фамилий повстанцев) и стилистические погрешности, несколько хаотически подан материал. Однако они не умаляют общего положительного впечатления от книги, которая является важным вкладом в исследование истории крестьянского повстанческого движения в России, Украине и Белоруссии.

## Vahram TER-MATEVOSYAN

Eric Lee, *The Experiment: Georgia's Forgotten Revolution 1918–1921* (London: Zed Books, 2017). 259 pp., ill. Index. ISBN: 978-1-78699-092-1.

In May 2018, Georgia celebrated the centennial of the establishment of its first republic. On May 26, 1918, the Georgian National Council declared Georgia's independence and the foundation of the Democratic Georgian Republic (henceforth DGR). It was born amid the havoc of World War I. Like Armenia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus, the DGR was short-lived – it lasted until February 1921, when the Bolshevik forces occupied Georgia and established the communist regime. The significance of the first modern Georgian state notwithstanding, its history remains underresearched. Its abrupt end and the socialist government partially explain the insufficient interest of Georgian historians in the topic (in post-Soviet Georgia, socialism is seen with suspicion, as closely associated with communism). Therefore, Eric Lee's book has become a particularly important contribution to the history of Georgia and the wider South Caucasus region.

The book is organized into sixteen chapters. After discussing the identity and social background of

the founding fathers of the DGR, the author examines the 1905 peasant rebellion in the Guria region of Georgia as a precursor of the subsequent independence movement. The bulk of the book documents the rise, development, and fall of the DGR. Lee provides a detailed account of the road to independence from the collapsing Russian Empire, and the difficult search for foreign protection in the situation of the ongoing World War I, against the overpowering Ottoman army. One of the chapters covers the short Georgian-Armenian war in late 1918, another discusses agrarian reforms, policies stimulating trade unions and cooperatives. An important subject tackled in the book is Tbilisi's complex relations with the national minorities, and the failure to find a lasting solution to the problem. The final four chapters examine the last months of the DGR and the Soviet occupation of it.

Lee approaches the history of the DGR as an important episode of the early socialist revolutions outside Europe that aspired to build a new society on the principles inspired by Marxism. The word "experiment" in the title captures the complexity of the task and the novelty of the ambitious policies that the leaders of the Georgian republic sought to implement. Thus, the book places the story of the short-lived Georgian statehood within the broader context of the European history of the early

twentieth century. This approach proves useful in comprehending the worldview and objectives of the leaders of the Georgian Social Democratic movement. It also helps to go beyond the established narratives of Georgian national history and reveal the roots of the Georgian "experiment" in the European socialist movement. The author persuasively demonstrates the importance of the European political and cultural agenda of the time for shaping the policies of Georgia's Social Democratic leaders of the First Republic.

One of the important contributions of the book to Georgian history is its reassessment of the popular revolt in Western Georgia – the so-called Gurian Republic, when socialists seized power and attempted to implement their vision of a new society in a remote province of the Russian Empire. Lee argues that it was the second most successful attempt, after the Paris Commune in 1871, to establish a popular revolutionary self-government. Reconstructing the organizational features and objectives of the Gurian Republic, the author suggests that its history is directly connected to the history of the DGR. Leaders of the DGR – Noe Zhordania, Noe Ramishvili, and Noe Khomeriki – were all natives of Guria, and relied on the experience of the 1905 self-proclaimed republic. That experience was both practical

and intellectual, in terms of adapting Marxism to the realities of Georgian society.

The centrality of Marxist ideas to Georgian Social Democrats notwithstanding, leaders of the DGR had to deal with the everyday challenges of the “real world” (P. 49). Territorial disputes and wars with Armenia (over the Akhalkalak, Lori, and Borchalo regions), Ottoman Empire (over Adjara, Akhalkalak, and Akhaltsikhe), Azerbaijan (over the Zakatala region), and Russian Red and White governments (over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the very independence of Georgia) shattered the foundations of the newly established country. Besides, the DGR went through the occupation by and subsequent withdrawal of the forces of two European countries. Following a separate agreement between Georgia and Germany, around 20,000 German troops arrived in the DGR in June 1918. Germany badly needed raw materials, and hoped to procure manganese and copper from Georgia and oil from Azerbaijan. German troops withdrew from Georgia after Germany’s defeat in World War I, only to be replaced by 20,000 British troops in December 1918.

The story of shifting international alliances, conflicts with neighboring countries, and domestic political crises makes the history of the short-lived DGR extremely eventful and

complex. The book pays particular attention to the ideological incompatibility and political confrontation between Georgian Mensheviks and Russian Bolsheviks. The struggle against the Denikin Army and the Red Army consumed most of the republic’s resources, causing its collapse in February 1921. Besides open wars, Georgian government had to deal with a number of internal revolts, coups, and other attacks on state institutions. The main source of social tensions and political instability was the government’s “crude and brutal attempts to suppress some of the ethnic minorities” (P. 141) – Ossetians, Abkhazians, Armenians, and Russians.

Despite the hostile political environment, the leaders of the GDR succeeded in promulgating important reforms aimed at building a democratic socialist society in Georgia. The Georgian Constitution, adopted through a painstakingly slow process as the parliament was voting for each article after long discussions, gave broad rights to the people. In line with the socialist ideology, the constitution recognized broad personal and social rights (of gender equality, rights to education and employment, freedom of speech and assembly, and the legality of trade unions and strikes). The death penalty was abolished. Agrarian reforms and the empowerment of trade unions and cooperatives were

central components of Georgia's socioeconomic reforms.

European socialists – leaders of the Second International – showed great interest in the GDR. The book provides interesting details about their trip to Georgia in September 1920. The delegation included such prominent figures of the European socialist movement as Karl Kautsky, Emile Vandervelde, Camille Huysmans, James Ramsey MacDonald, Tom Shaw, Ethel Snowden, Pierre Renaudel, Adrien Marquet, and Alfred Inghels. The delegation received a warm welcome in Georgia as a symbol of international recognition of the country. In their turn, many of the delegation members celebrated the GDR's achievements in shaping a democratic socialist society.

One thing that could have further improved this important book is a historiographical review. Though not abundant, the international historiography of the region and the period includes important studies by David Lang, Ronald Grigor Suny, Firuz Kazemzadeh, Donald Rayfield, and Stephen Jones, to name a few. Lee has duly engaged their scholarship, but it would be useful to survey the state of the field for readers who are not specialists on the region. This would highlight the topics that are fairly well-studied, and those that require further research. It would also underscore

the author's own contribution to the field. For instance, when discussing the peasant revolt in Guria, in a note, Lee refers to Stephen Jones's studies of it. Lee's own contribution to the study of the Guria revolt thus remains unclear. Likewise, the frequency of references to Firuz Kazemzadeh's work raises questions: is he the sole authority on all these different topics, and if not, what is the reason for omitting opinions by other historians?

Another criticism of the book concerns the politics of comparisons upheld by the author. As was already mentioned, Lee is concerned with placing the history of the Georgian revolution in the broader European context. At the same time, he seems to ignore the immediate regional context, where other countries that emerged on the ruins of the Russian Empire struggled to solve the same problems as the Georgian Social Democrats at the helm of the Georgian Republic. For instance, the first Armenian republic was founded only two days after the Georgian in May 1918. Its ruling party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, was also a member of the Second International, its ideology in many respects resembling that of Georgian Social Democrats. Lee mentions this parallel in passing, but a systematic comparison could have made his analysis of the Georgian case even more profound and nuanced.