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May 26, 1918 in Georgian School History Textbooks

Abstract

This article explores how the Declaration of Independence of Georgia on May 26, 1918 is represented in Georgian schools from earlier periods and in current history textbooks of Georgia and world. The primary research method is content analysis of school textbooks. School textbooks are examined within their historical context, differentiating between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, and three generations of textbooks are distinguished in the post-Soviet period.

Keywords: Democratic Republic of Georgia, May 26, 1918, Act of Independence of Georgia, School History Textbooks.

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Introduction

Despite the short period of its existence, the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) had a significant impact on the further history of the country. Although the Soviet government tried to erase it from the memory of Georgian population, the democratic republic became a symbol of independence and freedom. The question asked at the referendum on March 31, 1991 – “Do you agree to restore the state independence of Georgia based on the Independence Act of May 26, 1918?” is a confirmation that the independence of Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union was considered as the restoration of the Democratic Republic of Georgia.

Relying on the legacy of the Democratic Republic of Georgia demonstrated the Soviet occupation of Georgia and the restoration of independence as overcoming the occupation and its consequences. This is clearly stated in the Act on the Reestablishment of Independence of Georgia adopted on April 9, 1991.

May 26, 1918, is the most important date in Georgia's recent history. On this day, the Democratic Republic of Georgia was established by adopting the "Georgia's Independence Act." The 1921 Constitution of Georgia was founded on the principles of this Act, and, as already said, independence was restored seven decades later concerning this act.

The Act of Independence of May 26, 1918 is divided into two parts: the first part provides a historical introduction and outlines the conditions necessary for the restoration of Georgia's independence, (as it concerned the authors of the Act of Independence). The second part details the fundamental principles intended to establish the Democratic Republic of Georgia.

It is noteworthy, that the Act of Independence was signed twice - the first time on May 26, 1918, by the members of the National Council of Georgia, and again on March 12, 1919, by the members of the newly elected Constituent Assembly of Georgia, without any formal speeches, during its very first session. This was intended to demonstrate that Georgia's independence was an unconditional and inviolable achievement.

From the above, it is evident that the Declaration of Independence and the Act of Independence of Georgia should be given considerable emphasis when presenting the history of 20th-century Georgia in school textbooks.

The purpose of the research is to study how the declaration of independence of Georgia on May 26, 1918 was changed in Soviet and post-Soviet school textbooks of Georgian and world history. The research is based on the content analysis of 3 textbooks published in the

Soviet period and 14 textbooks published in the post-soviet period. During the research, the following are considered: a/ the volume of the presented material; b/ Evaluative side and basic provisions; c/ presented photo or documentary material.

May 26, 1918 in school history textbooks of the soviet period

The Democratic Republic of Georgia ended due to the February-March War of 1921, during which it was invaded by Soviet Russia and its allies. The occupation and the actual annexation of Georgia were concealed by the communist authorities under the guise of declaring a fictitious "sovereignty." According to the Soviet narrative, Georgia's "true independence" only began with establishing the Soviet government in the country. They also changed the date of independence. February 25 was considered to be such a date in the Soviet period—the day the Russian Red Army entered Tbilisi in 1921—as the new date of independence. It is evident that during the Soviet period, there was an effort to present the Democratic Republic of Georgia in a negative light.

It's important to note that the Soviet government “celebrated” May 26 as an Independence Day of Georgia only once, in 1921, but tried to give it a "Soviet content". However, this was a forced step, because they still did not have power in Georgia, and the next year, in 1922, February 25 was declared "Independence Day" and the celebration of May 26 was banned.

During the Soviet period, in the textbook of the history of Georgia the Democratic Republic of Georgia is presented as a state created as a result of the collapse of the “Stillborn Transcaucasian Independent Federal Republic”, which was ruled by the “Bourgeois-Nationalist Menshevik Government”¹. In the Soviet textbooks, the Sejm of Transcaucasia before the restoration of Georgia's independence is also discussed and its declaration as an independent federation is considered as a result of “the instigation of German and Turkish imperialists”, by which “Transcaucasia was cut off from Soviet Russia”. In the textbooks, the “Menshevik” government is first presented as a vassal of “imperialist Germany”, and after defeat of Germany in the First World War, as the vassal of “imperialist Britain”, which “suffocates the protest of the citizens and the revolutionary movement in blood”².

Due to this attitude towards the Democratic Republic of Georgia, during the Soviet period, the declaration of independence on May 26, 1918 was not mentioned at all, or it was presented in a negative context, "Pretend independence". The Act of Independence of Georgia

¹ History of Georgia, 1961. P. 339.

² History of Georgia, 1961. P. 338.

adopted on this day was completely ignored. Even a basic presentation of its key principles exposed the falsity of the communist version regarding the Democratic Republic of Georgia.

As an illustration, we take a look at the history textbook "Our Motherland" intended for the fourth grade of the school during the Soviet era, where the Declaration of Independence and the Democratic Republic of Georgia are not mentioned at all, and it is briefly noted: "After the victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were separated from Soviet Russia by the enemies of the workers. A Menshevik government was established in Georgia".³ Then it is mentioned that "Georgian workers expected help from Soviet Russia. And so it happened. The Soviet government sent units of the Red Army under the leadership of Sergo Orjonikidze to Georgia. The Georgian people won with the help of the Red Army".⁴

In one of the methodological textbooks intended for teachers during the Soviet period, it is briefly mentioned regarding the teaching of the Democratic Republic of Georgia: "While discussing the period of Menshevik rule in Georgia, the teacher points out that the Mensheviks were the implementers of bourgeois influence on the working class".⁵

During the Soviet period, the memory of the Democratic Republic of Georgia was preserved by the Georgian political emigration, meanwhile, by imposing a "taboo" on historical truths within Georgia, entire generations grew up with little to no knowledge of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Telling the truth about the Democratic Republic of Georgia became possible only towards the end of the Soviet period. Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, part of the broader "transformation," included a degree of democratization and the opportunity to tell the truth about the past. The disintegration of the Soviet version of history accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union.

May 26, 1918 in school history textbooks of the post-soviet period

In the initial post-Soviet textbooks of Georgian history, much attention was paid to the period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. However, it is important to note that these textbooks, when covering the years 1917-1921, relied more on works created in emigration rather than on newly conducted research.

³ Tsikhistavi & Makharadze, 1976. P. 55.

⁴ Ibid, pages.55-56.

⁵ Makharadze, 1959. p. 69.

In the history textbooks of Post-Soviet Georgian (three generations of textbooks are outlined: before 2003, of 2003-2012 and after 2012) contain both textual, photo and documentary material about the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The textbooks contain pictures and brief biographies of the members of the government of the Republic, the national flag, the text of the national anthem and the state coat of arms. In some of them, the Act of Independence of Georgia of May 26, 1918 is presented in full, and in others in the form of excerpts. Attention is focused on the prerequisites for the declaration of independence, on the foreign and domestic situation of Georgia, on the cooperation of Transcaucasian states and efforts to deal with foreign threats.

The authors of the textbooks also try to explain (in some cases by activating the national question) the change in the positions of the Georgian social-democrats regarding the independence of Georgia, which largely depends on the situation in Russia (before and after the Bolsheviks came to power). “The Social-Democratic (Menshevik) Party paid less attention to the national issue. The main task of the party was to transform united Russia into a socially just and democratic state, they demanded only the granting of cultural autonomy, but later, against the background of the activation of the national movement, they changed their position and demanded the political autonomy of Georgia.”⁶ After the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, when their expectations regarding the democratization of Russia were not met, at the same time, in order to neutralize the threat from the Ottoman Empire with the help of Germany, at the meeting of the National Council of Georgia, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, Noe Jordania, read the Act of Independence of Georgia.

The similarities/differences between textbooks published after the restoration of independence (1991-2003; 2003-2012; 2012-2021) is noteworthy: we can say that the most important thing for the authors in the activities of the National Council is the Declaration of Independence of Georgia; Everywhere there is at least some information about the preparation of the Act of Independence, and the act is given either in its complete form or in excerpts; there are also presented the flag, coat of arms, and text of the anthem of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in most textbooks.

As for the difference, it can be said that the changes in the positions of the Georgian Social Democrats and the reasons for their declaration of independence of Georgia are differently presented; In a certain part of the textbooks, much attention is paid to the factors of Soviet

⁶ Akhmeteli, N. Lortkipanidze, B. & Pirtskhalava, N. (2021). P. 230.

Russia, which were unacceptable for the Georgian social democrats, and if before that they did not discuss the independence of Georgia, their position had been changed after the Bolsheviks seized the Russian government; When discussing the issue of the Georgian National Congress convened in November 1917, some textbooks emphasize that “the most important political decision of the National Congress was that it considered necessary to sever all ties with Soviet Russia.” With this it was considered possible for Georgia to exist as a separate autonomous entity within democratic Russia⁷; in the given textbook the authors note that at the congress it was declared that the independence of Georgia would be proclaimed by the convened constituent assembly of Georgia in case “if the restoration of democratic order in Russia is delayed.”⁸ On the same topic, in another textbook published in 2012, we read that “even in 1917 and early 1918, the leaders of the Georgian Mensheviks did not plan to separate from Russia and create an independent Georgia: they considered themselves members of the united Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party (RSDWP) for a long time.”⁹

As we already mentioned, the intensification of the national issue in Georgia and the role of Germany in the declaration of independence are also emphasized. Supporting role of Germany in the conflict with the Ottomans is emphasized in almost all textbooks; it is also emphasized that the aggressive actions of the Bolsheviks made it clear that “Russia can no longer exist in its old form. Nationalism came to the forefront on the periphery of the empire.”¹⁰

It should be noted that in the manuals, excerpts from official documents, excerpts from official documents occupy a large place, excerpts from speeches, as well as excerpts from the memories of the creators of May 26, 1918, the high officials of the Democratic Republic of Georgia are given. Learning of the opinions of Noe Zhordania, Akaki Chkhenkeli, Evgeni Gegechkori, Zurab Avalishvili and others will give students the opportunity to understand what the situation was in independent Georgia and how that time country leadership imagined the development of independent Georgia.¹¹

The assessment of May 26, 1918, by the authors of the textbooks is also important. In the certain part of the reviewed textbooks there are clearly stated that the declaration of independence of Georgia was the most important event in the history of the country - “with

⁷ Vachnadze, M. & Guruli, V. (2005). P.86.

⁸ Vachnadze, M. & Guruli, V. (2005). P.86.

⁹ Kighuradze, N. Gachechiladze, R. & Sanikidze, G. (2012). P. 113

¹⁰ Kighuradze, N. Gachechiladze, R. & Sanikidze, G. (2012). P. 113

¹¹ Vachnadze, M. & Guruli, V. (2005). P.89

the restoration of state independence of Georgia, the long struggle for freedom of the Georgian nation successfully ended.” It is interesting that in some authors we also meet an assessment of the representatives of the government of the Democratic Republic - Noe Zhordania connects May 26, 1918 with the formation of the Georgian nation - “A draft declaration was drawn up, which I read on May 26, and it turned into the basic charter of our freedom.” The May 26 was born. An entire Georgian nation was born.”¹²

We can highlight several factors that the authors of the discussed textbooks pay special attention to:

- The situation created after the Russian revolution of February and October 1917, which contributed to the declaration of independence of Georgia;
- Political processes taking place in Transcaucasian countries and specifically in Georgia, efforts of various political parties to cooperate in search of a solution to the difficult situation;
- Activation of the national issue;
- The actions of Soviet Russia and the Ottoman Empire, which largely led to the change in the positions of the Social Democratic Labour Party of Georgia and their declaration of independence of Georgia;
- Role of Germany in declaration of independence of Georgia.
- Declaration of independence as the only way to save the country;
- Transfer of the main provisions of the Act of Independence of May 26, 1918;
- Showing the role of Noe Zhordania during the declaration of Georgia's independence.

Conclusion

The textbooks of Georgian History (Textbooks of "World History" and "History of the Soviet Union" were not written in Georgia, and Russian textbooks of the corresponding period were translated) of the Soviet period, did not mention either the Democratic Republic of Georgia at all and, even more so, the declaration of independence on May 26, 1918, or the mentioned period was falsely presented, as if the "Mensheviks" turned Georgia into the hands of the "Western imperialists". The ongoing processes in Georgia were part of the Russian Civil

¹² Akhmeteli, N. & Murghulia, N. (2008). P.93

War, and "Georgian workers" gained "true" social and national independence with the help of the Russian Red Army.

Establishing such a falsified version of the history of the period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia was possible only under the conditions of the existence of the Soviet totalitarian regime when an opinion different from the official one was persecuted and magazines and archival materials of the period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia were hidden in "special storages".

As soon as the period of crisis of the totalitarian regime came and it became possible to tell the truth about the past, the Soviet version of history also collapsed. The return of the true history of May 26 was facilitated not only by the bringing to light of material hidden in "special funds", but also by the import of works created in exile. It was the emigration that preserved the true history of May 26 and celebrated this date every year.

As we have seen, in Georgian history textbooks published after the restoration of independence, the authors try to more or less fully convey the declaration of independence of May 26, 1918. Attention is paid to such important issues as the geopolitical situation of that time, the content and basic principles of the Act of Independence, documents and photo materials are presented, and we can say that this important date of the history of Georgia has already been adequately covered.

There is a difference in how this date is presented in Georgian versus world history textbooks. In Georgian history textbooks, this date is given substantial attention, while in world history textbooks, the declaration of independence of Georgia is mentioned relatively briefly and attention is focused on the international aspects of the declaration of independence.

As a wish, we would say that it would be good to express the meaning of May 26, 1918 more clearly in textbooks; What did it mean for the Georgian people and what impact had the Democratic Republic of Georgia on the future development of Georgia. It would also be better to show in textbooks how the Soviet government tried to erase May 26 from the nation's memory and replace it with February 25 - the date of the Sovietization of Georgia, which Georgian society fought against, and how May 26 became a symbol of the struggle for Georgian independence for the national liberation movement.

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