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Review of Phillip Ammon's Book "Georgien zwischen Eigenstaatlichkeit und russischer Okkupation"

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There are many historical books that meet the basic requirement of being simply interesting. However, there are also books that are illuminating, capture reader's attention from the very beginning and keep their unrelenting dynamics until the very end. Philipp Ammon's work "Georgien zwischen Eigenständigkeit und russischer Okkupation" (*Georgia between (Self)statehood and Occupation*) is exactly this kind, and despite its very specific and narrow contextual framework, it offers a vast amount of information, highly valuable and deeply important to shed light on the complexity of Russo-Georgian relations since the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783.

This is indeed a history book, and its chronological structure clearly indicates the historical approach to the *problématique*, with the 18th and 19th centuries as the key episodes representing the early roots, rise and the consequent fruition of the tension between the two nations, nicely formulated as "Zuneigung und Entfremdung" (*Affection and alienation*). The omnipresent importance of and the need to grasp the complexity of this hate-love like relationships, equally valid for both sides, is clearly seen as the dominant theme in the book. It is supported by multiple pieces of evidence of Russian discontent with "ungrateful Georgians" unable and unwilling to appreciate Russian sacrifices to protect Georgia (albeit in a greater effort to conquer the Caucasus) and the Georgian bitterness caused by Russian "betrayal" that nullified Georgian state, and key elements of national identity (pp. 11–13). This element is additionally supported by the plenitude of references that stress the deep emotional linkages stretching from the early Christian influence of Georgia in Russia to the point of subordinating all Georgia-related intelligence issues in today's Russia to the internal (not foreign!) security service – FSB (pp. 13, 5–40). The relevance of those aspects should not be underestimated as they take a significant part of problem description and provide a solid basis for its explanation. Even for a reader, familiar with the Russo-Georgian affairs, this is a truly big help.

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All efforts of political scientists and IR-specialists to engage with the major question of the book in their scientific domain and through the familiar analytical lenses are obviously futile here. There is little about geopolitics, big vs small country approach or the party (power) politics, and the political nature of the governmental system. However, through the vast amount of information, a huge spectrum of issue-areas (incl. purely political) reviewed and the cross-thematic coverage of the entire periods, it is even for a narrowly minded political scientist perfectly possible to digest volumes of information and distil all necessary conclusions from his scientific perspective. For instance, the heavy emphasis on the socio-cultural and ideational angle of analysis, that deal with the various concepts of national identity or the notion of the state itself, helps very much to highlight the role of political and societal elites in generating political atmosphere and shaping political decision making both at local (Georgia) and central imperial level (Russia). Very helpful hereby is the subchapter "Zur Begrifflickheit" (*On Terminology*), in which a long-range of particular local (Georgian) socio-cultural terms, phenomena and constructs are explained and put in a respective time-bounded and comparative regional political context. A good example of this is the notion of Georgian nobility, exposing strong similarity traits to European feudal system, yet firmly linked with its roots and origins to ancient Persia (p. 20). Without doubt, understanding local peculiarities, whether in relation to various aspects of socio-cultural self-identification or the roles played in the political system, helps very much in navigating through and understanding the logic and dynamics of Russo-Georgian relationships, especially in pivotal 19th century.

The essence of the *problématique* tackled in the book is being extensively reviewed an analyzed in chapters that cover the period from the first Imperial *Ukazs* of factual annexation and incorporation of Kartl-Kakheti into the Russian empire in 1801 to the turbulent events of national awakening and growing demands of cultural and ecclesiastical autonomy by the end of 19th century. With tragic clarity, the author manages to provide an inherent disbalance and mismatch of interests pursued by Russian and Georgian Sovereigns while crafting the "unification deal". On the one side were Georgian kings that placed their entire hope on the sense of Christian solidarity and the partnership spirit of the Georgievsk treaty, and on another side – profoundly secularized Russian empire with its ever-growing geostrategic calculations in the Caucasus region (pp. 42–57). This would be one of the most valuable findings, scholars from other fields, especially in political science, would appreciate and make use of it. The vast disparity from the very beginning of state to state relations, laid the very foundation and determined the logic of Russian behaviour in Georgia that aimed: **first**, at the protection of the newly acquired territories resulting in the physical survival and safety of Georgians, and; **second**, at the formation and solidification of its colonial policy toward Georgia resulting in administrative unification with Russia, linguistic repression ("russification") and a full socio-cultural (incl. ecclesiastical) incorporation (pp. 76–90). The critical role of

Georgian nobility (*tavad-aznaurni*) in both, decisively facilitating the Russian administrative foothold in the country and nurturing the ideas of national identity, autonomy and ultimate independence is another important conclusion, which can be drawn from the book, and can serve as a strong explanatory variable to the lasting phenomenon of Georgian mental duality (hate-love) towards Russia. The continuity of perceptions can clearly be traced deep into the late soviet period, as even after the collapse of the Union the major Russian political figures (incl. democratic ones) expose little difference to the imperial views shared by enlightened *Decembrist (Dekabristi)* leaders of 1825. On the other hand, the Georgian nobility, which was fully incorporated into a "politico-cultural symbiosis" and entertained close, often informal ties to the Russian elite, despite all odds, was able to transfer these features to the late soviet Georgian *intelligentsia*, similarly shaped as predominantly Russophile (pp. 95, 120).

The book is also very clear about the inherent and logical inability of the Georgian elite to capitalize on Russia's economic and social reformist policies and establish strong popular support for the national movement similar to the processes across Europe in late 19th century. Highly elitist it generally remained loyal to Russian rule and with their constant claims on preserving economic privileges, they inevitably paved the way for a growing massive influence of Socialist and Bolshevik ideology among peasantry and workers (pp. 86–92). This explains very well the failure of conservative nationalism (national democratic party) in Georgia, especially after the assassination of its leader Ilia Tchavchavadze, the created gap as a result, and its gradual exploitation by the newly formed socialist movement, *Mensheviki* (pp. 146–149). In the end, it was not the nationalism and internal nationalist push that brought in 1918 the independent Georgian republic into being, but a result of multiple global factors, that forced the Georgian social-democrats to accept the Georgian statehood.

In conclusion, we can identify several levels of dichotomy or certain duality effects that had been created by Czarist Russia across the socio-political landscape in Georgia. They decisively shaped the ideas and visions of Georgian society, were successfully transferred into the soviet reality and even today still show remarkable survivability. **Firstly**, speaking in IR terms, a strong disparity of state interests and objectives on the strategic level, backed by a radical mismatch of strategic calculations led to consequences that meant both good and bad for Georgia: the physical survival and safety from Muslim invasions were spoiled by the deconstruction of statehood, abolishment of sovereignty and administrative as well as socio-cultural incorporation. **Secondly**, so-called close "politico-cultural symbiosis" of Georgian and Russian elites created an ambivalent view dominant across the Georgian nobility that regarded Russia as increasingly oppressive and adversarial for Georgian national identity but remained thankful for national survival and stanchly loyal to Russian imperial unity. Most probably, it is the dual nature of the Georgian elite that contributed decisively to the incapacity of forming a strong national movement with the clear objective of a state

as an institutional construction and not a mythical abstraction. Not surprisingly, only those political movements that could raise popular support from a different (from nationalism) ideological angle could hope for political success. Both parties, *mensheviki* as well as *bolsheviki* managed to establish themselves and grow on popularity in Georgia only as a part of something bigger, the global socialist and communist ideology. This is, in fact, the **third** level of duality effects, a reader can discern from the book. Having little experience and desire to deal with the fully independent state, Georgian constituents of Russian Social-democrat and Bolshevik parties managed to take extraordinary powerful positions in Russia and exert their influence. Only forced by the Turkish ultimatum and threat of military occupation Georgian social democrats declared the independence of Georgia on May 26, 2018. Georgian Bolsheviks went even more radical and never regarded Georgia as independent unity, outside the ideological and territorial scope of the Soviet Union (Russia). The consequences of the third level duality is a Georgian society having a vague (never clearly defined) understanding of the concept and idea of a state, and the Georgian political elite lacking capacity and experience to manage the state. Conversely, the Georgian elites were very successful and influential as a part of a bigger (imperial) construction or ideological project in a post-Czarist time. Therefore, from that perspective, the Bolshevik rule in Georgia was, in fact, a continuation of the Russian imperial tradition of a socio-political symbiosis, albeit this time with the strong and close integration of new Georgian elites in the political structure, administration and cultural life of the Soviet Union.

Political scientists appreciate the defining role of "historical junctures" while exploring the dynamics and logic of particular political processes. Ammon's book is a valuable contribution in this regard, and makes its point by introducing the phenomenon of "continuity of dualism". On the case of centuries, long relationship between Russia and Georgia the mentioned continuity of dualism is more than simply visible on the various levels of political and social life.

Source

Ammon, Ph., 2020. Georgien zwischen Eigenstaatlichkeit und russischer Okkupation. Die Wurzeln des Konflikts vom 18. Jh. bis 1924. Klostermann: RoteReihe.