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National Freedom as a Cornerstone of Georgian Anarchism Varlam Cherkezishvili's Philosophical Concept

This paper explores the philosophical and ideological legacy of Georgian anarchist Varlam Cherkezishvili, emphasizing the synthesis of his anarchist convictions with his deep-rooted patriotism. It challenges prevailing interpretations that view nationalism as a tool for anarchist propagation, arguing instead that Cherkezishvili encountered significant resistance to ideas of autonomy and national revival among his compatriots. Drawing from the insights of contemporary scholars such as Tamar Gvianishvili and contrasting them with those of Paata Gergaia, the paper revisits Cherkezishvili's emotional and intellectual struggle to reconcile anarcho-communist ideals with his fervent support for Georgian statehood. A close associate of Peter Kropotkin and a major figure in international anarchism, Cherkezishvili sharply criticized Marxist socialism, advocating for decentralized, cooperative societies based on social justice, equality, and direct democracy. His unwavering support for Georgian independence, especially through the legal lens of the Treaty of Georgievsky, marks him as a unique thinker who harmonized internationalist anarchism with national liberation. The article ultimately positions Cherkezishvili as a rare figure capable of balancing the tension between personal liberty and national identity, offering a nuanced philosophical approach to the relationship between anarchism and patriotism.

Key Words: Varlam Cherkezishvili, Georgian anarchism, anarcho-communism, patriotism, national freedom, autonomy, Kropotkin, anti-Marxism, Georgian independence, political philosophy.

1. Introduction

(Biographical notices about Varlam Cherkezishvili, historiography of the issue)

This article aims modestly to highlight the name of the Georgian anarchist Varlam Cherkezishvili once again and briefly touch upon his works within a limited time and format. We acknowledge Mr. Gocha Peradze for his significant efforts, which sparked and continue to foster interest in the Georgian thinker, and Mr. Dimitri Shvelidze for his extraordinary monograph “This is Who Varlam Cherkezishvili Was, Georgians!”¹ Additionally, we extend our gratitude to all

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¹ Shvelidze D., This is Who Varlam Cherkezishvili Was, Georgians!, “Intelekti”, Tbilisi, 2001, 446 (in Georgian). ORCID: (0009-0007-8901-3703).

participants of the first interdisciplinary scientific conference² dedicated to Varlam Cherkezishvili for collecting, searching, and analyzing interesting and fruitful material. However, we must note our partial disagreement with Mr. Paata Gergaia³, a participant of said conference, regarding his assertion: “When Varlam Cherkezishvili, an excellent connoisseur of European culture and political thought, came to Georgia to preach anarchism, we must assume that he wanted to understand how anarchism resonated with Georgian nature and psychology, and therefore, its potential popularity among the masses. It seems he considered this feasible and started this activity with great enthusiasm alongside his associates. However, as a Georgian anarchist, he possessed one significant advantage, which he timely put into action. I mean nationality, national issue. The Georgian anarchist, driven by his strong convictions, aligned himself with the “national party,” or at least with a faction advocating for the country's independence. In Georgia, gaining influence and popularity among the populace with this idea was never a challenge. The concept of freedom intertwined with the national cause was already ingrained among the people⁴. Contrasting Mr. Gergaia's viewpoint, we find alignment with the arguments put forth by another participant in the conference, Ms. Tamar Gvianishvili: “Cherkezishvili's deepest concern lies in the lack of popularity of the autonomy concept among Georgians. Furthermore, it is often subject to ridicule. Cherkezishvili attributes this to a breach in national consciousness and a loss of national pride. He criticizes Georgian figures who doubt the nation's ability to sustain autonomous governance.”⁵ Reflecting on Ms. Gvianishvili's insights, we observe Cherkezishvili's emotional turmoil and disappointment with his compatriots, particularly in their support for restoring statehood. Regarding the concept of nationality, which a patriotic anarchist might leverage to promote anarchist ideals, it was unfortunately unpopular in Cherkezishvili's contemporary Georgia and thus couldn't serve as a catalyst for broader ideological dissemination.

2. Varlam Cherkezishvili: As an Anarchist and as a patriot

(Varlam Cherkezishvili: The Anarchist)

Varlam Cherkezishvili is an internationally recognized Georgian anarchist, born on September 16, 1846, in the village of Tokhliauri in Sagarejo district. “Sent from his native Tokhliauri to Russia for studies at the young age of ten, he returned from Europe at sixty”⁶. During this time, he was a convicted and wanted progressive public figure, intellectual, anarchist, and patriot. However, within the scope of this report, we will focus solely on his roles as a Georgian anarchist and patriot, examining the philosophical aspects of his actions, thoughts, and contributions.

² The First Interdisciplinary Scientific Conference Dedicated to Warlam Tcherkezishvili, Agenda and Reports; Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2021 (In Georgian).

³ Ibid. *Gergaia P.*, Warlam Tcherkezishvili-Peculiarities of Georgian Anarchism, Tbilisi, 2021, 35-36 (in Georgian).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. *Gvianishvili T.*, The Conceptual Analysis of a National Question in the Thought of Warlam Tcherkezishvili, Tbilisi, 2021, 47-48 (in Georgian).

⁶ Ibid. *Turashvili D.*, “Georgia’s Chief Lawyer”, Tbilisi, 2021, 94 (in Georgian).

Cherkezishvili, a contemporary and associate of Petre Kropotkin, belonged to the elite of anarchism. According to Akaki Chkhenkeli's memoirs, they (Kropotkin and Cherkezishvili) were referred to by the British as “two noble anarchists”.⁷ Cherkezishvili, better known as Cherkezov, was frequently involved in organizing international congresses and conferences of the Anarchist International in the early 20th century. He founded magazines and publications, and his works were widely published in French, English, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and even Japanese languages. Notable among his works are “Pages from the History of Socialism” and “Predecessors of the International”.⁸

Cherkezishvili, like Kropotkin, belongs to the branch of anarchists known as anarcho-communists. To clarify, we will briefly touch on this distinction within anarchism without delving too deeply and losing sight of the main point. Anarcho-communists, like other anarchists, advocate for the abolition of the state. However, they also promote the concept of forming small, self-governing societies akin to medieval cities and peasant communities, where each community member can fully satisfy their own needs. Anarcho-communists hold an optimistic belief in humans' innate ability to cooperate and assist one another. They argue that accountability and solidarity replace greed and selfishness among members of the commune, and the absence of private property minimizes conflicts. Decision-making in anarcho-communist societies is done through direct democracy, ensuring political equality and popular self-government. To anarcho-communists, the commune structure represents a small public unit enabling individuals to direct their activities through direct interaction with one another.⁹

For Cherkezishvili himself, he advocates for the abolition of all forms of exploitation, the socialization of land, buildings, and factories, and the provision of equal and free living conditions for the vulnerable, elderly, and sick.¹⁰ A Georgian anarchist dreaming of such “pure socialism”¹¹ managed to escape exile in 1876 and arrived in London. At this time, the Russian Gendarmerie describes Cherkezishvili as follows: “about 30 years old, of medium build, with chestnut-colored eyes, thinning black hair, a small beard, and mustache,”¹² Cherkezishvili joined the Anarchist International the following year. He collaborated with the Geneva-published magazine “Obshchina” and first anarchist newspaper – “Le Revolte.”¹³ In 1882, following a terrorist incident in Lyon, persecution of anarchists

⁷ The First Interdisciplinary Scientific Conference Dedicated to Warlam Tcherkezishvili, Agenda and Reports; Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2021; *BubulaSvili E.*, “Warlam Tcherkezishvili and Georgian Reality”, Tbilisi, 2021, 17 (in Georgian).

⁸ *Cherkezishvili V.*, “Txzulebani”, National Academy of Sciences of Georgia, Vol. I, Tbilisi, 2011, 2 (in Georgian).

⁹ *Heywood A.*, “Political Ideologies”, An Introduction, Third edition, Logos Press Publishing House, Tbilisi, Georgian translation 2004, Reprint 2005, p 233-234. – in Georgian.

¹⁰ The First Interdisciplinary Scientific Conference Dedicated to Warlam Tcherkezishvili, Agenda and Reports; Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2021; *Davlasheridze N.*, “Some aspects of the anarchist movement in Georgia in the Early 20th century”, Tbilisi, 2021, 61-62 (in Georgian).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Cherkezishvili V.*, “Txzulebani”, National Academy of Sciences of Georgia, Vol. I, Tbilisi, 2011, 4 (in Georgian).

¹³ Ibid.

intensified. Despite frequent mention of his name during the Lyon trial, Cherkezishvili managed to avoid capture.¹⁴

From Cherkezishvili's intellectual legacy, we should briefly mention the work already cited, "Pages from the History of Socialism".¹⁵ This work stands out as a prominent critique of the Marxist direction of socialism. In it, the Georgian anarchist criticizes the teachings of Marx and Engels, considering their creation a deformation of the ideas of the "true fathers of modern socialism" (followers of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Proudhon are implied). Cherkezishvili worries that Marx and Engels have effectively equated the social, anti-state doctrine with statism, branding opponents of the state and revolutionaries as enemies of socialism. Additionally, he exposes Marxists for advocating the impoverishment of peasants for the supposed greater good of humanity, the loss of their lands, and the selling of labor by workers for the benefit of capitalists. Instead of promoting liberty, fraternity, and autonomy, Cherkezishvili argues that Marxists introduced a doctrine of individual discipline and submission to an all-powerful state.¹⁶

It is fair to acknowledge that Cherkezishvili's assessment was ahead of its time, foreseeing the dangers that would later emerge in the name of socialism – specifically, fascism and communism.

(Cherkezishvili as a Patriot)

Within the confines of this format, we will shift our focus from Cherkezishvili's anarchist activities to his distinctly opposite role as a patriot towards his homeland. Patriotism in Cherkezishvili's contemporary world manifests as a renewed, impassioned wave, marked by an intensified, possessive sentiment towards one's homeland. This stance competes uncompromisingly with other forms of anarchism, which often view national symbols as "cumbersome and impractical"¹⁷ for their goals.

Cherkezishvili, operating on the international stage as a Georgian anarchist, exemplifies this patriotism and strongly support for his motherland. At that time, Georgia had lost its independence to Russian imperialism, resulting in the persecution of Georgian language, traditions, and culture. Such circumstances deeply troubled the patriotic anarchist. He consistently wrote letters about Georgia in foreign and local publications, ardently advocating for its independence both in print and through personal interactions. Whenever possible, he sought to raise awareness among the Georgian people. In Georgia itself, Cherkezishvili delivered lectures on autonomy and self-government, emphasizing their benefits. He argued that these forms of social organization empowered people to manage their own affairs and shape their destiny within their own territory. His efforts extended to the "Iveria"

¹⁴ Ibid, 5.

¹⁵ *Tcherkesoff W.*, Pages of Socialist History, New York, 1902, 125.

¹⁶ Forerunners of the International, Doctrines of Marxism, No. 11. ed. 3, stereotype, *Cherkezov V.N.* URSS. 2020, 206 <<https://urss.ru/cgi-bin/db.pl?lang=Ru&blang=ru&page=Book&id=258994>> [16.05.2025].

¹⁷ The First Interdisciplinary Scientific Conference Dedicated to Warlam Tcherkezishvili, Agenda and Reports; Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2021; *Gergaia P.*, Warlam Tcherkezishvili-Peculiarities of Georgian Anarchism, Tbilisi, 2021, 34 (in Georgian).

newspaper, where he published letters urging his compatriots to embrace the fight for Georgia's autonomy and the significance of federalism.¹⁸

The Georgian anarchist believed that the restoration of Georgia's statehood could be achieved based on the Treaty of Georgievsky concluded in 1783 between Russia and Georgia. In his view, this treaty represented a pathway to restore the historical rights of the Georgian nation, remaining valid since it had not been annulled by Russia. Moreover, its signing by “Catherine the Great” added significant importance to it. Relying on this treaty, the patriotic anarchist considered it the strongest legal basis for Georgia's claims. This belief became so entrenched that Cherkezishvili was often referred to ironically as a “fanatic of the treaty”.¹⁹

In 1904, during a conference of Georgian revolutionaries in Geneva, Cherkezishvili addressed the delegates with a statement: “When I was invited to this conference, I had to decide whether I would participate as a member of my party or as a representative of a certain nation... as an anarchist or as a Georgian? I realized that my place was solely here, among my compatriots, as a Georgian”²⁰

3. Conclusion

Many similar examples could be provided, but we will focus on the fact that for a renowned anarchist, the national cause often grows to such vast and comprehensive dimensions that it encompasses personal, boundless freedom, – whether one seeks to be its precursor or sees it as a stepping stone toward individual liberation. This is where the uniqueness of Varlam Cherkezishvili's philosophy shines through: his ability to reconcile diverse and competing interests, directing them for the benefit of both his compatriots and humanity as a whole.

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¹⁸ Ibid, 35-36.

¹⁹ The First Interdisciplinary Scientific Conference Dedicated to Warlam Tcherkezishvili, Agenda and Reports; Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2021; *Bubulashvili E.*, “Warlam Tcherkezishvili and Georgian Reality”, Tbilisi, 2021, 16-19 (in Georgian).

²⁰ *Cherkezishvili V.*, Georgia's Petition to the International Conference in The Hague, “Promete”, 1907, 15 (in Georgian).

4. *BubulaSvili E.*, “Warlam Tcherkezishvili and Georgian Reality”, Tbilisi, 2021, 17 – The First Interdisciplinary Scientific Conference Dedicated to Warlam Tcherkezishvili, Agenda and Reports; Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2021 (in Georgian).
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