

Batumi, 1919–1920: British Balancing Policy, Russian Post-Imperial Politics, and Georgian Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between the Russian National Council and the British occupation administration in Batumi during 1919–1920, and its impact on the state interests of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The study analyzes the role of Batumi as a post-imperial political space within the context of the Russian Civil War and the rivalry among great powers in the South Caucasus. Particular attention is devoted to the political activities of the Russian National Council, the concept of a "united and indivisible Russia," Britain's policy of balancing, and the efforts of the Georgian authorities to secure Batumi's integration within the framework of an independent state.

The research is based on P. Maslov's memoir Batumi in 1917–1920, as well as on Georgian, Russian, and Western historiography, which allows for a comprehensive analysis of the issue.

The study demonstrates that, during 1919–1920, Batumi emerged as one of the principal centers of international political rivalry in the South Caucasus. Despite its declared policy of balancing, the practical measures taken by the British administration frequently strengthened Russian anti-Bolshevik forces. London considered the Batumi question not only in relation to Georgian interests but also within the broader context of the "Russian question," and supported those forces striving to restore a "united and indivisible Russia." At the same time, the Russian National Council regarded Batumi as part of Russia's historical space and did not recognize Georgian independence. As a result, the Batumi question became one of the significant factors shaping international diplomacy and the regional balance of power.

The article argues that the political crisis in Batumi reflected the contradictions of the post-imperial transitional period, in which the idea of national statehood, imperial revanchism, and the geopolitical interests of the great powers intersected.

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ბათუმი 1919–1920 წლებში: ბრიტანეთის ბალანსირების პოლიტიკა, რუსული პოსტიმპერიული პოლიტიკა და საქართველოს სუვერენიტეტი

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ბათუმის შოთა რუსთაველის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, ბათუმი, საქართველო

ინფორმაცია

სტატიის შესახებ

საკვანძო სიტყვები:

ბათუმი,
საქართველოს
დემოკრატიული
რესპუბლიკა,
ბრიტანეთის
საოკუპაციო
ადმინისტრაცია.

აბსტრაქტი

სტატიაში განხილულია ბათუმში რუსეთის ეროვნული საბჭოსა და ბრიტანეთის საოკუპაციო ადმინისტრაციის ურთიერთობა 1919–1920 წლებში და მისი გავლენა საქართველოს დემოკრატიული რესპუბლიკის სახელმწიფო-ბრივ ინტერესებზე. კვლევა ანალიზებს ბათუმის, როგორც პოსტიმპერიული პოლიტიკური სივრცის, როლს რუსეთის სამოქალაქო ომისა და სამხრეთ კავკასიაში დიდი სახელმწიფოების კონკურენციის კონტექსტში. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა რუსეთის ეროვნული საბჭოს პოლიტიკურ საქმიანობას, „ერთიანი და განუყოფელი რუსეთის“ კონცეფციას, ბრიტანეთის ბალანსირების პოლიტიკასა და საქართველოს ხელისუფლების მცდელობას, უზრუნველყო ბათუმის ინტეგრაცია დამოუკიდებელი სახელმწიფოს ფარგლებში.

კვლევა ეფუძნება პ. მასლოვის მემუარულ ნაშრომს ბათუმი 1917–1920 წლებში, აგრეთვე ქართულ, რუსულ და დასავლურ ისტორიოგრაფიას, რაც საკითხის კომპლექსური ანალიზის შესაძლებლობას იძლევა.

კვლევა აჩვენებს, რომ 1919–1920 წლებში ბათუმი სამხრეთ კავკასიაში საერთაშორისო პოლიტიკური კონკურენციის ერთ-ერთ მთავარ ცენტრად ჩამოყალიბდა. მიუხედავად დეკლარირებული ბალანსირების პოლიტიკისა, ბრიტანეთის ადმინისტრაციის პრაქტიკული ნაბიჯები ხშირად რუსულ ანტიბოლშევიკურ ძალებს აძლიერებდა. ლონდონი ბათუმის საკითხს საქართველოს ინტერესებთან ერთად „რუსეთის საკითხის“ კონტექსტშიც განიხილავდა და მხარს უჭერდა იმ ძალებს, რომლებიც „ერთიანი და განუყოფელი რუსეთის“ აღდგენას ესწრაფოდნენ. ამავე დროს, რუსეთის ეროვნული საბჭო ბათუმს რუსეთის ისტორიული სივრცის ნაწილად მიიჩნევდა და საქართველოს დამოუკიდებლობას არ აღიარებდა. შედეგად, ბათუმის საკითხი იქცა საერთაშორისო დიპლომატიისა და რეგიონული ძალთა ბალანსის ერთ-ერთ მნიშვნელოვან ფაქტორად.

სტატიაში დასაბუთებულია, რომ ბათუმის პოლიტიკური კრიზისი ასახავდა პოსტიმპერიული გარდამავალი პერიოდის წინააღმდეგობებს, სადაც ეროვნული სახელმწიფოებრიობის იდეა, იმპერიული რევანშიზმი და დიდი სახელმწიფოების გეოპოლიტიკური ინტერესები ერთმანეთთან იკვეთებოდა.

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Introduction

The collapse of the Russian Empire and the geopolitical consequences of the First World War fundamentally reshaped the South Caucasus. Within this changing political environment, Batumi acquired exceptional strategic importance owing to its Black Sea port, railway network, and position within the u–Batumi communications corridor. Between 1919 and 1920, the city became a contested political space where Georgian state-building, Russian post-imperial ambitions, and British regional strategy intersected.

Although the political history of Batumi has received considerable scholarly attention, the relationship between the Russian National Council and the British military administration has remained insufficiently examined. Existing studies have primarily analysed either British policy in the South Caucasus or the Russian anti-Bolshevik movement, while their interaction and its implications for Georgian sovereignty have received comparatively little attention. This article addresses that historiographical gap by examining Batumi as a key arena of post-imperial political competition.

The study draws upon the works of O. Janelidze, L. radze, D. Shvelidze, S. F. Jones, R. H. Ullman, F. Kazemzadeh, O. Figes, and J. D. Smele, while placing particular emphasis on British archival documentation and the memoirs of P. N. Maslov. It argues that the interaction between the British administration and the Russian National Council significantly influenced the political status of Batumi and complicated the consolidation of Georgian sovereignty during the formative years of independence.

Research Methods

The research combines historical-comparative analysis, source criticism, and political-historical interpretation. Particular emphasis is placed on the memoirs of P. N. Maslov, which are critically examined alongside British archival documents and Georgian, Russian, and Western historiography. This methodological approach makes it possible to analyse the Batumi question simultaneously as a regional political issue and as part of the wider post-imperial transformation of the South Caucasus.

I. Batumi and the Post-Imperial Transformation of the South Caucasus (1918–1920)

The collapse of the Russian Empire and the end of the First World War fundamentally transformed the political geography of the South Caucasus. Rather than creating a political vacuum, the disappearance of imperial authority produced a contested post-imperial space in which newly established states, competing imperial projects, and the strategic interests of external powers confronted one another. Within this rapidly changing environment, Batumi emerged as one of the principal centres where the future political order of the South Caucasus was negotiated and contested. As Georgian historiography has demonstrated, the political significance of Batumi extended far beyond its local administrative functions and became inseparable from the consolidation of Georgian statehood and the international position of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (Janelidze, 2018; Kobakhidze, 2015)

Batumi's strategic importance resulted from the convergence of geographical, economic, and political factors. Situated on the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea, the city linked the South Caucasus with Europe, the Near East, and the Caspian basin through its port and the u–Batumi railway corridor. This infrastructure transformed Batumi into one of the principal centres of regional communications and international commerce, while control of the port directly affected access to Caspian oil exports, customs revenues, and maritime trade (Kazemzadeh, 1951; Reynolds, 2011). For the Democratic Republic of Georgia, however, Batumi represented considerably more than a strategic port. It constituted the country's principal maritime outlet, an indispensable element of its economic viability, and one of the essential foundations of effective sovereignty. As Georgian

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historians have emphasised, without political control over Batumi, the consolidation of Georgian independence remained strategically incomplete (Janelidze, 2018; Kobakhidze, 2015).

The significance of Batumi therefore cannot be explained solely through its geographical position or commercial infrastructure. The city became a political test of whether the newly established Georgian state could exercise effective authority within a post-imperial environment characterised by competing claims to sovereignty. Recent research has likewise demonstrated that the continued activity of Russian political organisations under the British occupation administration transformed Batumi into one of the principal arenas in which Georgian sovereignty was challenged politically before it was challenged militarily (Zosidze et al., 2025). Consequently, the struggle for Batumi should be understood not simply as a dispute over territory but as part of the wider contest over legitimacy and the post-imperial reorganisation of the South Caucasus.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 accelerated these developments by destroying the administrative and military institutions that had sustained imperial rule in the Caucasus. As P. N. Maslov observed, the disintegration of the army and the collapse of the imperial administration undermined central authority and encouraged the emergence of competing political organisations throughout the former empire (Maslov, 2018). Batumi rapidly became one of the principal arenas in which Georgian state institutions, Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations, Ottoman interests, and subsequently the British military administration attempted to establish political influence. In this respect, Batumi reflected a broader regional transformation: the South Caucasus was no longer an imperial frontier but a contested political space in which the legitimacy of newly established states remained subject to continuous international and post-imperial challenge.

The strategic value of Batumi also explains the growing interest of the Great Powers in the region after the First World War. The weakening of Russian authority encouraged renewed Ottoman activity, while Germany and, above all, Great Britain increasingly regarded the South Caucasus as an area of considerable geopolitical importance. For London, Batumi represented far more than a Black Sea port. It formed an essential element of the communications system linking the Black Sea with the Caspian basin and constituted an important component of Britain's wider strategy aimed at containing Bolshevik expansion, safeguarding regional communications, and preserving access to the economic resources of the Caucasus (Ullman, 1968; FO 371/3668; FO 371/4958). British policy was therefore shaped less by support for any particular regional government than by broader strategic calculations concerning the future balance of power in the Black Sea and the former Russian imperial borderlands.

Although Britain cooperated with the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, it simultaneously maintained relations with Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations whose leaders rejected the legitimacy of Georgian independence and continued to advocate the restoration of a "United and Indivisible Russia" (Smele, 2015; Jones, 2020). This apparent contradiction reflected Britain's attempt to reconcile immediate security priorities with uncertainty regarding the future political configuration of the former Russian Empire. The result was a policy of strategic balancing that neither fully recognised Georgian political expectations nor endorsed Russian post-imperial ambitions. In practice, however, this policy created favourable conditions for the continued political activity of Russian organisations in Batumi and complicated the consolidation of Georgian authority (Zosidze et al., 2025).

From this perspective, Batumi should be understood not merely as the principal Black Sea port of the Democratic Republic of Georgia but as one of the key laboratories of the post-imperial transformation of the South Caucasus. The political struggles that unfolded there demonstrate that the consolidation of Georgian sovereignty depended not only on domestic institution-building but also on the interaction between competing international actors, divergent concepts of political legitimacy, and the unresolved legacy of the Russian Empire. Batumi thus became the place where the geopolitical interests of Great Britain, the post-imperial aspirations of Russian political organisations, and the state-building project of the Democratic Republic of Georgia confronted one another most directly. This broader analytical framework provides the necessary context for examining the

activities of the Russian National Council and its relationship with the British military administration during 1919–1920.

II. The Russian National Council and Russian Post-Imperial Political Strategy

2.1. The Russian National Council and the Doctrine of a “United and Indivisible Russia”

The collapse of the Russian Empire and the outbreak of the Civil War fundamentally reshaped the political landscape of the South Caucasus. Batumi, owing to its strategic location, developed into one of the principal centres of Russian anti-Bolshevik political activity, attracting former military officers, imperial civil servants, and political organisations committed to preserving Russian influence in the region. Among these organisations, the Russian National Council emerged as the most influential political representative of Russian post-imperial interests in Batumi.

As P. N. Maslov observed, the revolutionary events of 1917 brought about the progressive disintegration of both the imperial army and the administrative apparatus, thereby weakening central authority throughout the former empire (Maslov, 2018). In Batumi, this institutional collapse created favourable conditions for political competition among Georgian national institutions, Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations, and, subsequently, the British military administration. The city thus became one of the first post-imperial political spaces in the South Caucasus where competing concepts of sovereignty confronted one another.

The establishment of the Russian National Council should therefore be understood within the broader ideological framework of the White movement rather than as an isolated local initiative. Its political programme was founded upon the doctrine of a “**United and Indivisible Russia**,” which rejected the legitimacy of the territorial fragmentation that followed the revolutions of 1917. From the perspective of Russian anti-Bolshevik leaders, the emergence of independent republics represented not a legitimate transformation of political authority but a temporary consequence of revolutionary upheaval and civil war (Smele, 2015).

This doctrine reflected the continuity of Russian imperial political thought. Throughout the nineteenth century, the South Caucasus occupied an essential place within the military, administrative, and economic structure of the empire. Consequently, many representatives of the White movement regarded the newly established republics not as sovereign political entities but as territories that would ultimately be reintegrated into a restored Russian state. **The denial of Georgian independence was therefore not merely a reaction to the revolutionary crisis; it constituted a coherent political strategy aimed at preserving imperial continuity under post-imperial conditions.**

General Anton Denikin's political programme clearly embodied this conception. The Volunteer Army consistently rejected the legitimacy of the national republics established within the former imperial borders and regarded the restoration of Russian territorial unity as one of its principal political objectives following the defeat of Bolshevism (Figes, 1996, pp. 533–540; Smele, 2015). The Russian National Council operating in Batumi adopted precisely the same position. Georgian independence was interpreted not as an internationally recognised political reality but as a temporary deviation from the historical unity of the Russian state.

As Georgian historiography has emphasised, this position fundamentally shaped relations between the Democratic Republic of Georgia and Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations. Georgian political leaders understood that, despite their opposition to Bolshevism, the White movement and its representative institutions refused to recognise Georgian sovereignty and continued to regard the South Caucasus as an inseparable part of Russia's historical political space (Janelidze, 2018; radze, 2018). Consequently, the political conflict between the Georgian government and the Russian National Council extended far beyond ideological disagreement and became a dispute over the legitimacy of the emerging post-imperial order.

Within this political framework, Batumi acquired exceptional importance. Beyond its military and economic value, the city possessed considerable symbolic significance for Russian political circles. Its port, railway infrastructure, and strategic position within the Black Sea–Caspian communications network were widely perceived as products of Russian imperial development. The preservation of political influence in Batumi

therefore acquired significance far exceeding local administrative considerations, becoming closely connected with broader debates concerning Russia's future position in the South Caucasus.

The activities of the Russian National Council likewise extended beyond opposition to Bolshevik rule. Through memoranda, political declarations, contacts with Allied representatives, and cooperation with anti-Bolshevik organisations elsewhere, the Council attempted to preserve claims of historical continuity, territorial unity, and political legitimacy within the former imperial space. Its programme sought not only to challenge the legitimacy of the new national republics but also to persuade foreign governments that the territorial disintegration of Russia remained provisional and politically reversible.

Recent Georgian scholarship has further demonstrated that the Council functioned not simply as a representative body of the Russian community in Batumi but as an organised political institution that sought to preserve Russian administrative and political influence under the conditions created by the British occupation (Zosidze et al., 2025). This interpretation confirms that the activities of the Council formed part of a broader post-imperial strategy rather than a series of isolated local initiatives.

From this perspective, the Russian National Council should be regarded as one of the principal instruments through which Russian anti-Bolshevik elites attempted to preserve imperial political continuity after the collapse of the Romanov Empire. **Its significance lay not merely in its opposition to Bolshevism but in its systematic rejection of the legitimacy of the new post-imperial states.** Batumi consequently became one of the principal arenas in which competing understandings of sovereignty, historical continuity, and political legitimacy confronted one another during the formative years of the South Caucasus after the First World War.

2.2. Batumi as a Centre of Russian Post-Imperial Political Activity

The political programme of the Russian National Council acquired its most tangible expression in Batumi. Between 1918 and 1920, the city evolved into one of the principal centres of Russian post-imperial political activity in the South Caucasus, providing Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations with an opportunity to preserve institutional continuity and maintain political influence despite the collapse of imperial authority. Batumi's strategic location, developed transport infrastructure, and international connections created favourable conditions for the concentration of former imperial officials, military officers, and political activists who regarded the preservation of Russian influence in the Caucasus as an essential political objective.

P. N. Maslov's memoirs demonstrate that Batumi differed fundamentally from many other urban centres of the former empire. Rather than experiencing a complete disappearance of political authority, the city became a space in which several competing centres of power operated simultaneously. Georgian governmental institutions, Russian political organisations, local self-government bodies, and later the British military administration each sought to influence the future political status of the region (Maslov, 2018). This coexistence of competing authorities illustrates one of the defining characteristics of the post-imperial transition: the collapse of empire produced not institutional emptiness but overlapping and often conflicting claims to political legitimacy.

Within this environment, the Russian National Council functioned as the principal coordinating body of Russian anti-Bolshevik political activity. Its role extended beyond representing the interests of the Russian population residing in Batumi. Through memoranda, political declarations, public meetings, and communication with Allied representatives, the Council attempted to preserve the perception that Russian political authority in the South Caucasus remained historically legitimate despite the disintegration of the imperial state. Its activities therefore reflected a broader strategy of political continuity rather than a temporary response to revolutionary circumstances.

The Council's programme rested upon the conviction that the fragmentation of the former Russian Empire would ultimately prove temporary. Accordingly, Batumi occupied a central position within Russian post-imperial thinking. The city was regarded not only as a strategically important Black Sea port but also as an essential component of the communications system connecting Russia with the South Caucasus and the Near East.

Consequently, maintaining political influence in Batumi became closely associated with preserving Russia's future geopolitical position in the region.

Georgian historiography has consistently interpreted these developments from the perspective of state sovereignty. As Otar Janelidze has argued, the activities of Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations created a persistent challenge to the consolidation of Georgian independence because they rejected the legal and political foundations of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (Janelidze, 2018). Lasha radze likewise emphasises that the Batumi question formed part of the wider international debate concerning the recognition and territorial integrity of the Georgian state (radze, 2018). Viewed from this perspective, the Russian National Council represented not merely an émigré political organisation but an institutional expression of continuing post-imperial claims directed against the consolidation of Georgian sovereignty.

Particularly significant were the Council's relations with the British military administration. British authorities regarded Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations as potentially valuable partners in containing Bolshevik influence and therefore tolerated their political activity in Batumi. This policy enabled the Council to maintain an active public presence, preserve organisational structures, and participate in political discussions concerning the future of the South Caucasus. At the same time, Britain deliberately avoided endorsing the programme of a "United and Indivisible Russia", seeking instead to retain diplomatic flexibility in its relations with both Russian and Georgian political actors (Ullman, 1968; FO 371/3668).

The resulting political environment reflected a fundamental contradiction within British regional policy. While London recognised the practical necessity of cooperating with the Democratic Republic of Georgia, it simultaneously permitted the continued activity of organisations that openly challenged the legitimacy of Georgian independence. This policy of strategic balancing did not imply British support for Russian post-imperial objectives; nevertheless, it created political conditions in which Russian organisations were able to preserve visibility and influence during a decisive stage in the formation of Georgian statehood.

Recent research has demonstrated that the activities of the Russian National Council should therefore be understood within the broader institutional framework of Russian post-imperial politics in Batumi rather than as the isolated initiatives of a local political organisation. By preserving administrative networks, maintaining contacts with Allied representatives, and advancing claims of historical continuity, the Council attempted to influence both regional political developments and international perceptions of the Batumi question (Zosidze et al., 2025).

The experience of Batumi demonstrates that the end of the Russian Empire did not bring an end to imperial political thinking. Although imperial institutions had disappeared, their political assumptions continued to shape the objectives of Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations. Batumi consequently became one of the principal arenas in which competing interpretations of sovereignty, legitimacy, and historical continuity confronted one another. In this respect, the activities of the Russian National Council reveal that the post-imperial transformation of the South Caucasus was determined not only by the emergence of new national states but also by the persistence of political projects seeking to preserve or reconstruct the imperial order under fundamentally changed historical circumstances.

III. The British Administration and the Russian National Council: Cooperation, Competition, and Conflicting Interests

The establishment of British military rule in Batumi marked a new stage in the political transformation of the South Caucasus following the collapse of the Russian Empire. Unlike the preceding period, characterised primarily by the struggle between emerging national governments and revolutionary forces, the British occupation introduced a third political actor whose strategic objectives significantly influenced regional developments. Although Britain officially presented its presence as temporary and primarily military in character, its administration quickly became one of the principal mechanisms through which the political future of Batumi and the wider South Caucasus was shaped.

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The British occupation did not eliminate the existing political competition within the city. On the contrary, it created conditions in which competing projects of regional order coexisted and interacted. The government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia regarded British support as an opportunity to consolidate sovereignty and integrate Batumi into the Georgian state. Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations, meanwhile, interpreted the arrival of British forces as a chance to preserve their political influence and to maintain the prospect of restoring a united Russian state. British authorities, however, pursued neither objective unconditionally. Their overriding concern was the preservation of regional stability, the protection of strategic communications, and the containment of Bolshevik expansion until a more durable political settlement could emerge (FO 371/3668; FO 371/4958; Ullman, 1968).

These different political expectations transformed Batumi into one of the principal arenas of post-imperial competition in the South Caucasus. The city became a meeting point of three competing political projects: Georgian state-building, Russian post-imperial reconstruction, and British strategic management of the regional balance of power. Consequently, relations between the British administration and the Russian National Council cannot be understood simply as cooperation between two anti-Bolshevik forces. They reflected broader contradictions concerning sovereignty, legitimacy, and the political future of the South Caucasus. As recent studies have demonstrated, Batumi represented not merely a strategically important port but one of the key political centres through which competing visions of the post-imperial order were articulated and contested (Maslov, 2018; Zosidze et al., 2025).

3.1. British Occupation Policy and the Political Environment in Batumi

The arrival of British military forces in Batumi at the end of 1918 fundamentally altered the political environment of the South Caucasus. For British policymakers, control of Batumi was not an end in itself but part of a broader strategy aimed at safeguarding the Black Sea communications system, protecting the u–Batumi transport corridor, and preventing the expansion of Bolshevik influence towards the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The city's strategic significance derived not only from its port and railway infrastructure but also from its position as the principal junction connecting the Black Sea with Transcaucasia and the Caspian basin. This geographical position gave Batumi importance that exceeded local political considerations and made it an essential component of British regional strategy (FO 371/3668; Ullman, 1968; Jones, 2005).

British military administration consequently developed as an instrument of strategic control rather than as a conventional occupation regime. Authority remained concentrated in the hands of the military command, which supervised the port, railway, customs, communications, and security institutions. Existing local administrative bodies continued to operate, yet only within the framework established by the occupation authorities. Britain therefore sought to combine military supervision with limited administrative continuity, thereby avoiding the institutional vacuum that could encourage political instability or facilitate Bolshevik penetration into the region (Daushvili & Kacharava, 2020).

The complexity of governing Batumi resulted from the coexistence of several competing political authorities. Georgian institutions sought gradually to extend their administrative competence and strengthen the legal foundations of state sovereignty. Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations attempted to preserve their institutional networks and political influence, while numerous local social, commercial, and ethnic groups pursued their own interests within the rapidly changing political environment. British authorities therefore faced a task that extended beyond maintaining public order. They were required to manage the interaction of competing political actors without allowing any single force to dominate the city completely.

Batumi's exceptional position within the post-imperial political geography of the South Caucasus further complicated this task. As Maslov (2018) has demonstrated, the city functioned not merely as the principal maritime outlet of the region but as a strategic gateway connecting the Black Sea, Transcaucasia, the Caspian basin, Persia, and Asia Minor. Control over Batumi consequently implied influence over regional communications, trade, diplomacy, and military logistics. British policymakers therefore viewed the city less as

an isolated administrative unit than as an indispensable element of the wider security architecture that emerged after the First World War.

3.2. The Russian National Council under British Rule: Cooperation, Political Rivalry, and the Limits of British Balancing Policy

The political environment created by the British occupation enabled the Russian National Council to preserve its organisational continuity despite the collapse of imperial authority. Although the Council no longer represented an official institution of the Russian state, it continued to function as one of the principal centres through which Russian political interests were articulated in Batumi. Its activities demonstrate that the disappearance of the imperial administration did not immediately eliminate Russian political influence in the South Caucasus. Rather, imperial political traditions adapted to the new post-imperial environment through representative organisations that sought to maintain institutional continuity and international relevance (Maslov, 2018; Zosidze et al., 2025).

The Russian National Council attempted to establish itself as the principal representative of Russian political interests in Batumi by combining organisational activity with continuous communication with the British military authorities. Its leadership understood that political influence could no longer be derived from formal governmental authority but depended instead upon access to foreign decision-makers, administrative expertise, and the ability to present Russian political interests as compatible with Allied strategic objectives. Consequently, the Council invested considerable effort in maintaining regular contacts with British military and diplomatic representatives while simultaneously preserving links with Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations operating elsewhere in the former empire (FO 371/3668).

Administrative experience constituted one of the Council's principal political resources. Many of its leading members had previously served within the imperial administrative system and possessed extensive knowledge of local government, finance, transport, and judicial administration. Under British occupation this experience acquired renewed importance. British officials, confronted with a complex political environment and limited knowledge of local conditions, frequently relied upon individuals capable of providing administrative expertise and political information. The Council therefore sought to transform former imperial administrative capital into political influence within the new regional order (Maslov, 2018; Zosidze et al., 2025).

The relationship between the Council and the British administration nevertheless remained fundamentally pragmatic rather than ideological. British authorities valued the information, administrative experience, and regional knowledge possessed by Russian political organisations, yet they carefully avoided recognising the Council as the legitimate representative of Russian political authority in the South Caucasus. Cooperation therefore remained limited to practical matters concerning administration, public security, communications, and political consultation. Britain consistently refused to endorse the Council's broader political programme advocating the restoration of a "United and Indivisible Russia" (Ullman, 1968; FO 371/4958).

Political representation and international lobbying occupied an equally important place in the Council's activities. Through memoranda, petitions, analytical reports, and direct consultations, its representatives attempted to persuade British officials that developments in Batumi should not be viewed as an isolated local problem but as an integral component of the wider Russian question. The Council consistently argued that the political future of the South Caucasus could not be separated from developments within Russia and that any durable regional settlement required the eventual restoration of a unified Russian state (FO 371/3668).

Information became one of the Council's most effective political instruments. British authorities required continuous assessments of local political conditions, the activities of Georgian institutions, Bolshevik organisations, and regional security developments. The Russian National Council attempted to influence British perceptions by supplying political analyses that reflected its own interpretation of events. As a result, the struggle for influence increasingly extended beyond formal diplomacy into the sphere of political information and

strategic interpretation. The ability to shape British understanding of regional developments became almost as important as direct political negotiation (Maslov, 2018; Zosidze et al., 2025).

Despite these efforts, the Council encountered structural limitations that it proved unable to overcome. Its political programme remained firmly rooted in the assumption that the dissolution of the Russian Empire represented only a temporary disruption of historical statehood. Consequently, the Council regarded the independence of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan not as a permanent transformation of the regional political order but as an exceptional situation produced by revolutionary instability. This interpretation fundamentally differed from the position adopted by both the Georgian government and British policymakers, who increasingly treated the newly established republics as political realities that required practical engagement regardless of their ultimate international status (Suny, 1994; Jones, 2005).

The Democratic Republic of Georgia viewed the activities of the Russian National Council with growing concern. Georgian political leaders regarded the Council not merely as another émigré organisation but as a political institution that continued to challenge the legitimacy of Georgian sovereignty in Batumi. The Council's refusal to recognise the permanence of Georgian independence inevitably created tension between the two sides and complicated the work of the British administration, which sought to maintain working relations with both (Janelidze, 2018; Daushvili & Kacharava, 2020).

The dispute over Batumi therefore extended far beyond the administration of a strategically important city. It reflected two fundamentally incompatible understandings of political legitimacy. For the Georgian government, sovereignty derived from the establishment of an independent national state recognised through international diplomacy. For the Russian National Council, legitimacy remained inseparable from the historical continuity of the Russian state, within which the South Caucasus occupied an integral political and strategic position. British authorities declined to endorse either interpretation unequivocally. Instead, they pursued a policy intended to preserve stability while postponing decisions concerning the long-term political future of the region.

This policy of political balancing ultimately revealed its own limitations. Britain's refusal to commit itself fully either to Georgian state-building or to Russian political restoration enabled temporary coexistence but could not eliminate the underlying conflict between the competing political projects. As the prospects for restoring a united non-Bolshevik Russia steadily diminished, the political influence of the Russian National Council likewise weakened. Nevertheless, its activities continued to shape political debates in Batumi and complicated the consolidation of Georgian authority throughout the period of British occupation (FO 371/4958; Zosidze et al., 2025).

The experience of the Russian National Council illustrates a broader characteristic of the post-imperial transformation of the South Caucasus. The collapse of imperial institutions did not immediately terminate imperial political ambitions; rather, those ambitions were reformulated through new organisational structures operating within an altered international environment. Batumi thus became one of the principal arenas in which British strategic interests, Georgian state-building, and Russian post-imperial politics interacted simultaneously. The significance of the Russian National Council lay not in its capacity to restore Russian authority but in its ability to preserve imperial political claims within the emerging post-imperial order, thereby demonstrating that the struggle over sovereignty in the South Caucasus continued long after the formal disappearance of the Russian Empire (Maslov, 2018; Zosidze et al., 2025).

The consolidation of Georgian authority in Batumi nevertheless encountered serious political obstacles. The city remained a space in which several competing concepts of political legitimacy coexisted after the collapse of the Russian Empire. Georgian institutions sought to integrate Batumi into the administrative, legal, and economic framework of the Democratic Republic, whereas Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations continued to regard the city as belonging to the historical political space of Russia. The presence of the British military administration further complicated this environment. Although Britain recognised the Georgian government as an important regional partner, its occupation policy was primarily directed toward preserving military stability and protecting

Allied strategic interests rather than facilitating the unrestricted consolidation of Georgian sovereignty. Consequently, the practical exercise of state authority in Batumi developed within a political environment shaped by continuous negotiation, competing claims, and external intervention (TNA, FO 371/3668; FO 371/4958).

This situation illustrates a broader characteristic of post-imperial transformation in the South Caucasus. The collapse of imperial authority did not create a political vacuum but generated overlapping systems of legitimacy in which newly established national governments, imperial successor organisations, and external powers simultaneously claimed influence over the same political space. Batumi represented perhaps the clearest manifestation of this phenomenon. Here, questions of sovereignty extended beyond the formal definition of state borders and became closely connected with the practical capacity to exercise political authority, administer strategic infrastructure, and secure international acceptance of that authority.

The Georgian leadership consistently interpreted these challenges through the perspective of state consolidation. Official correspondence and diplomatic initiatives demonstrate that Batumi was regarded not simply as a strategically valuable territory but as an indispensable element of the republic's institutional development. Control of the port, customs administration, railway communications, and external trade constituted the material foundations upon which the effectiveness of Georgian sovereignty depended. This understanding distinguished Georgian policy from that of its principal competitors. Whereas Russian political organisations primarily approached Batumi through the prism of restoring the territorial unity of the former empire, the Georgian government regarded the city as an integral component of an emerging sovereign state whose legitimacy rested upon the successful construction of modern political institutions.

British diplomatic reporting likewise reflected the exceptional importance attached to Batumi. Foreign Office correspondence repeatedly identified the city as one of the principal strategic centres of the eastern Black Sea, emphasising its significance for regional communications, military logistics, and political stability. These reports demonstrate that British officials understood the future status of Batumi as extending beyond a bilateral dispute between Georgia and Russian political organisations. Rather, they considered the city a decisive factor in determining the wider post-war political order in the South Caucasus and the balance of influence among the principal regional actors (TNA, FO 371/3668; FO 371/4958).

From the Georgian perspective, therefore, the struggle for Batumi was inseparable from the broader process of securing internationally recognised sovereignty. The city represented the point at which economic security, diplomatic legitimacy, territorial integrity, and state authority converged. Georgian policy consequently sought not merely to obtain formal recognition of territorial rights but to establish effective control over the principal institutions through which sovereign power could be exercised. In this respect, Batumi became one of the clearest expressions of the relationship between post-imperial state-building and the practical consolidation of national sovereignty.

The centrality of Batumi to Georgian statehood simultaneously explains why the city occupied such a prominent place in the political calculations of other actors operating in the South Caucasus. If Georgian leaders regarded Batumi as indispensable to the consolidation of an independent republic, Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations viewed the loss of the city as incompatible with the restoration of a united Russian state. These fundamentally incompatible political visions transformed Batumi into one of the principal arenas in which competing post-imperial projects confronted one another during 1919–1920, a confrontation that is examined in the following section through the political programme of the Russian National Council.

IV. Georgian Statehood and the Batumi Question in International Politics

4.1. Batumi within the Strategic Architecture of Georgian Statehood

For the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Batumi represented far more than the country's principal Black Sea port. Following the proclamation of independence in May 1918, the city became inseparable from the broader process of state-building, serving simultaneously as an economic asset, a strategic frontier, and a symbol of sovereign authority. The incorporation of Batumi into the Georgian political system was therefore regarded by

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the government in Tbilisi not merely as the restoration of historical territory but as an indispensable condition for consolidating the institutional and international foundations of the new republic (Jones, 2005; Janelidze, 2018).

Batumi's exceptional importance derived from the combination of geographical, economic, and political factors that distinguished it from any other urban centre in Georgia. As the republic's principal maritime gateway, the port connected the South Caucasus with European and Mediterranean markets and ensured access to international maritime communications. At the same time, the u–Batumi railway corridor linked the Caspian oil region with the Black Sea, making Batumi an essential element of regional transit and commercial infrastructure. Control over this communications network directly affected customs revenues, foreign trade, financial stability, and the government's capacity to exercise effective authority over external economic relations. Georgian political leaders therefore viewed the city's incorporation into the republic not simply as a territorial objective but as one of the principal prerequisites for the long-term viability of Georgian independence (Janelidze, 2018).

The strategic significance of Batumi extended beyond economic considerations. The city occupied the south-western gateway of the republic and controlled one of the principal approaches connecting the Black Sea with the South Caucasus and eastern Anatolia. British diplomatic correspondence repeatedly recognised that possession of Batumi influenced not only regional communications but also the wider balance of power in the eastern Black Sea. Foreign Office reports consequently treated the city as a strategic node whose political status would inevitably affect the future security architecture of the entire region (TNA, FO 371/3668; FO 371/4958).

For the Georgian government, these realities transformed Batumi into an essential component of sovereign statehood. Effective sovereignty required more than formal declarations of independence or international recognition; it depended upon the state's ability to exercise administrative authority, regulate external communications, control customs administration, and secure its principal maritime outlet. Georgian diplomacy therefore consistently linked the Batumi question with the practical consolidation of state institutions rather than presenting it solely as a historical or territorial claim. This approach reflected a broader understanding that political independence could not remain durable without economic self-sufficiency and secure access to international trade routes.

The diplomatic importance of Batumi emerged with equal clarity during Georgia's efforts to obtain international recognition. Georgian representatives understood that possession of the country's principal port strengthened both the credibility and the viability of the new republic in the eyes of the Allied Powers. Batumi consequently became an integral component of Georgian diplomatic arguments at the Paris Peace Conference, where sovereignty over the city was presented as inseparable from the recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity and political independence. In this respect, the Batumi question assumed significance that extended well beyond local politics, becoming part of the wider international debate concerning the post-imperial reorganisation of the South Caucasus.

4.2. The Rejection of Georgian Independence and the Russian Post-Imperial Political Vision

The Russian National Council's rejection of Georgian independence cannot be understood solely as a dispute over territory or the immediate political consequences of the Russian Civil War. Rather, it reflected a fundamentally different conception of political legitimacy and state continuity that survived the collapse of the Russian Empire. Whereas the Democratic Republic of Georgia derived its legitimacy from the principles of national self-determination and international recognition, the Russian National Council continued to regard the South Caucasus as an inseparable component of the historical Russian state. The conflict between the two sides therefore extended beyond competing territorial claims and embodied two mutually exclusive visions of the post-imperial political order in the South Caucasus (Smele, 2015; Jones, 2005).

The ideological foundations of the Russian National Council were closely associated with the political doctrine of a "United and Indivisible Russia," which constituted one of the principal objectives of the White movement during the Civil War. Although anti-Bolshevik organisations differed in their political programmes and military strategies, they shared the conviction that the territorial disintegration of the former empire

represented a temporary consequence of revolutionary upheaval rather than a legitimate transformation of the political map. Within this framework, the emergence of independent republics in the South Caucasus was interpreted not as the exercise of national sovereignty but as an abnormal interruption of Russia's historical state continuity (Figes, 1996; Smele, 2015).

This understanding largely determined the political programme of the Russian National Council in Batumi. Its representatives did not regard themselves as leaders of a local émigré organisation or merely as opponents of Bolshevik rule. On the contrary, they presented themselves as representatives of a legitimate all-Russian political tradition whose objective was the restoration of a unified Russian state following the defeat of Bolshevism. Their political activity therefore sought not only to preserve Russian influence within Batumi but also to prevent international acceptance of the new political realities that had emerged after 1917.

From this perspective, Georgian independence possessed neither historical nor legal legitimacy. The Russian National Council consistently maintained that the Democratic Republic of Georgia had emerged under exceptional revolutionary circumstances that could not determine the permanent political future of the region. The collapse of imperial administration, the disintegration of the Caucasus Front, and the temporary weakness of central authority were interpreted as conditions that had facilitated the appearance of national governments but had not altered the legal and historical unity of the former Russian state. Consequently, the restoration of a united Russia necessarily implied the reintegration of the South Caucasus into a reconstructed Russian political order.

The significance attributed to the South Caucasus reinforced this position. For Russian political circles, the region constituted far more than a peripheral frontier. Its geographical position between the Black Sea, the Caspian basin, eastern Anatolia, and the Middle East had long endowed it with exceptional military, economic, and geopolitical importance. Batumi occupied a particularly prominent place within this strategic framework because it controlled one of Russia's principal maritime outlets to the Black Sea and formed an essential component of the transportation network connecting the Caucasus with European markets. The preservation of Russian influence over Batumi was therefore perceived as inseparable from the restoration of Russia's status as a major regional power.

Key Findings

1. The Batumi question demonstrates that the post-imperial transformation of the South Caucasus cannot be explained solely through the emergence of new national states. Rather, it represented a prolonged competition between newly established sovereign governments and political forces that sought to preserve the institutional and ideological continuity of the former Russian Empire.
2. The Russian National Council functioned not merely as a representative organisation of the Russian community in Batumi but as an institutional instrument of post-imperial political continuity. Its activities reveal that imperial political projects survived the collapse of imperial state structures and continued to influence regional politics through new organisational forms.
3. British policy in Batumi illustrates the structural limits of strategic balancing. By attempting simultaneously to support regional stability, contain Bolshevism, and preserve cooperation with Russian anti-Bolshevik forces, Britain unintentionally created political conditions that complicated the consolidation of Georgian sovereignty.
4. The political conflict surrounding Batumi was fundamentally a conflict between competing concepts of legitimacy. Georgian statehood rested upon the principles of national self-determination and international recognition, whereas Russian political organisations continued to derive legitimacy from the historical continuity of the former imperial state.
5. The study demonstrates that effective sovereignty in the post-imperial South Caucasus depended not only upon diplomatic recognition but also upon the ability to exercise practical control over strategic infrastructure, communications, customs administration, and international economic networks. Batumi therefore became one of the principal material foundations of Georgian statehood.

6. Batumi illustrates that post-imperial political competition was shaped not only by military confrontation but also by institutional influence, administrative experience, diplomatic lobbying, and the struggle to shape international perceptions. Political legitimacy became an equally important arena of competition alongside military and diplomatic power.
7. The interaction between the British military administration and the Russian National Council demonstrates that external powers often influenced the process of state-building indirectly. Even without formally rejecting Georgian independence, British administrative practice affected the balance of political influence within Batumi and consequently altered the dynamics of regional sovereignty.
8. Viewed within the broader history of post-imperial transformation, Batumi should be interpreted not simply as a strategically important Black Sea port but as one of the principal laboratories in which competing models of regional order were tested after the First World War. The Batumi experience therefore provides an important analytical framework for understanding the relationship between imperial collapse, external intervention, and the consolidation of sovereignty in the South Caucasus.

Conclusion

The political struggle over Batumi between 1919 and 1920 illustrates one of the clearest manifestations of the post-imperial transformation that reshaped the South Caucasus after the collapse of the Russian Empire. Rather than representing a conventional territorial dispute, the Batumi question became a contest over sovereignty, political legitimacy, and the future regional order. The city emerged as the principal arena in which the state-building project of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, the post-imperial aspirations of the Russian National Council, and the strategic calculations of the British military administration intersected.

This study demonstrates that the activities of the Russian National Council should be understood within the broader framework of Russian post-imperial politics rather than solely within the history of the White movement. Although imperial institutions had disappeared, Russian political organisations continued to defend the principle of a united Russian state and regarded the South Caucasus as an integral component of its future political space. Their opposition to Georgian independence therefore reflected not only immediate political circumstances but also the persistence of an imperial conception of state continuity that survived the revolutionary collapse of 1917.

The analysis further demonstrates that British policy towards Batumi remained characterised by strategic ambiguity. British authorities sought simultaneously to contain Bolshevik expansion, preserve regional stability, protect communications linking the Black Sea with the Caucasus, and maintain cooperation with anti-Bolshevik Russian forces. This balancing strategy reduced the risk of immediate military confrontation but also enabled Russian political organisations to preserve their influence in Batumi despite the consolidation of Georgian state institutions. British policy consequently contributed both to regional stability and to the continuation of political competition over the future of the South Caucasus.

The Batumi question likewise demonstrates that the consolidation of Georgian sovereignty depended upon considerably more than formal declarations of independence or diplomatic recognition. Effective statehood required political control over strategic infrastructure, administrative institutions, external communications, and international economic connections. In this respect, Batumi represented one of the principal material foundations of Georgian sovereignty, explaining why its political status acquired significance extending far beyond the local or regional level.

The findings also contribute to the historiography of the post-imperial South Caucasus by demonstrating that the political conflicts of 1919–1920 cannot be adequately interpreted through the history of individual national movements alone. Batumi functioned as a shared post-imperial political space in which competing conceptions of legitimacy confronted one another. Georgian statehood rested upon the principles of national self-determination and international recognition, whereas Russian political organisations continued to defend the legal and historical continuity of the former empire. The political struggle over Batumi therefore reflected the confrontation between two fundamentally incompatible models of post-imperial political order.

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Viewed from this perspective, Batumi occupied a significance that exceeded its geographical and economic importance. It became one of the decisive political laboratories in which the future of the South Caucasus was negotiated following the First World War. The interaction between Georgian state-building, Russian post-imperial ambitions, and British strategic interests demonstrates that the formation of the regional order depended upon the complex relationship between domestic political transformation and the policies of external powers. The Batumi question thus provides an important case for understanding both the consolidation of Georgian sovereignty and the wider dynamics of post-imperial state formation in the South Caucasus.

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