

The Ethnic-Linguistic Structure of Abkhazian/Georgian Population in 1921-1939

ABSTRACT

The report is a part of the project “Representation of the Functioning and the Scientific study of the Abkhazian Language According to Archival Materials” (FR – 23 -15212), financed by Shota Rustaveli Scientific Foundation of Georgia.

The communists considered the population census data an essential tool for planning, implementing, and justifying their policies.

Censuses were held in the Soviet Union in 1937 and 1939. The communists abolished the results of the 1937 census under the pretext of disregarding the instructions and falsifying the data by statisticians. Factually, the census failed to reflect Stalin’s 1935 decree, stating that the empire's net population increase amounted to three million people per year and claiming that each year, the population equaled the entire population of Finland.

The results of the 1937 census exposed the flows of the regime: a considerable part of the population was religious, large-scale repressions precluded the annual population growth by 3 million people, and the social conditions of people failed to improve... Therefore, conducting of a new, repeated census in 1939 became essential. Question 8 of the repeated census clarified the data on citizen’s native languages. The instructions provided the following explanation:

“The language that the person being questioned believes to be his/her native language is recorded here. The language used in the household has been documented as a mother tongue for the children, who are yet unable to speak.”

The development of local national languages not only was not encouraged in Tsarist Russia, but, on the contrary, the languages of ethnic minorities were constantly suppressed. [...] in the USSR, the languages of every other nationality are flourishing at never-before-seen pace, along with the growth of the big, free, and powerful Russian language. Many nationalities first acquired their writing systems during the Soviet regime” (*Agitatoris Bloknoti (Agitator’s Notebook)* 1938, pp. 45-48, in Georgian).

Factually, the scripts created in the 1920s, had already been abolished since 1936; nothing was published in them anymore, theatres were shut down, the publication of newspapers were outlawed, and the teaching of the mother tongue was stopped in a great number of schools (Turkish, Greek, Laz, German and Estonian...).

Materials of the Georgian Academy of Sciences archives reflect the statistical data of the Abkhazian ASSR in 1926 and 1939. Georgians, Abkhazians, Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Ukrainians, Turks and “others” were among the ethnic groups residing in Abkhazia during that period. The languages of the majorities, Georgians, and Abkhazians, were not used for interethnic

communication, and only Russian played the role of “Lingua Franca.” Neither the number of Georgian and Abkhazian populations nor the constitutional status of their languages (both were the state languages of Abkhazia) became the decisive factor in the spread of these languages among the ethnic groups.

The settling of large number of Russian, Armenian, Greek, and colonists of other nationalities in Abkhazia between 1926-1939 was part of the Soviet demographic policy to receive Russified Soviet citizens, having one unified ethnic and linguistic identity decades later.

The main objective of our project is to carry out the following activities: digitize new documents, classify them chronologically and thematically, upload them to the project-based blog www.abkhazology.wordpress.com (the blog has received over 59,000 views), and translate Russian language documents into Georgian and English, to ensure their accessibility for the specialist and interested parties. The digital documents will facilitate the dissemination of the accurate information about the interethnic problems.

Keywords: Digital history of ethno-conflict; Digital documentation of the history of Abkhazia; Digital documentation of the Abkhaz-Georgian issue; Soviet demographic policy in Abkhazia; Ethnic minorities of Abkhazia in the 1930s.