

The Struggle for Southern Georgia (April-May, 1918)

*Excerpt from the book “The Forgotten Wars in the Caucasus, 1914-1922”
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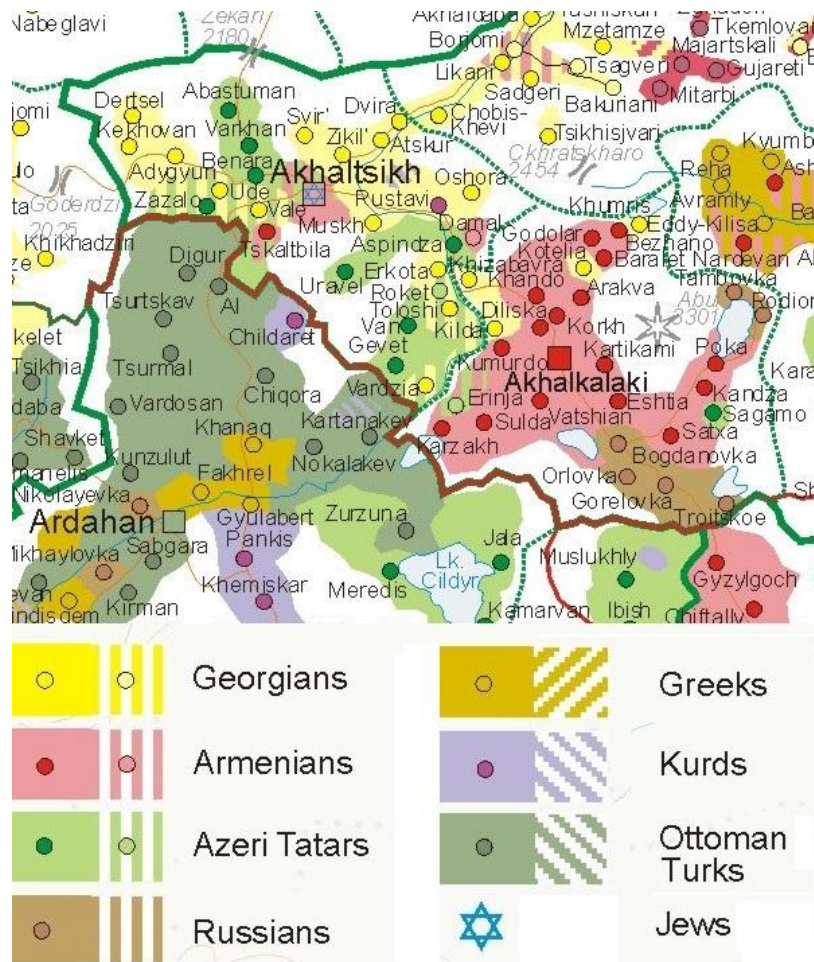
While the diplomats were debating in Batum and Tiflis and the battles were ravaging the province of Erivan, the counties of Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalak in the province of Tiflis remained the arena of ethno-religious warfare.

As of 1918, Sunni Muslims (Turks¹, Kurds and Muslim Georgians) formed the majority population of the rural part of the county of Akhaltsikh (part of historical Georgian province of Meskheti), excluding the county capital. The Christian minorities concentrated predominantly around the villages of Svir, Muskh, Dvira-Saqire, Erkota and Vardzia-Tmogva (Orthodox Georgians), Tskalbila, Pamach and Tskhrut (Armenians), as well as Vale, Ude and Zazalo (Roman Catholics including Armenian Catholics). The town of Akhaltsikh itself was, in turn, predominantly Christian. A little more than half of its total population were Armenians, about one third were Orthodox Christians, including Georgians, Russians, Ukrainians and Greeks and less than one percent – Roman Catholics (most of them Poles). The town also had a small Jewish minority (about 10% of the total population). Against the given ethno-religious background, local Muslim guerillas who in April of 1918 had taken over the rural part of the county and blocked Akhaltsikh, started ethnic cleansing of the smaller Christian communities. In doing so they were supported by their armed coreligionists who came to the county from the neighboring Ardahan district together with several regular detachments of the 5th and 10th Ottoman Divisions of the 1st Corps.² In view of the described situation, local Christians (both Armenians and Georgians) demonstrated unity, and their militias acting in coordination with each other managed to defend a few Christian enclaves quite successfully. One should mention here that although lacking combat experience, the Christian militias of the Akhaltsikh county had high morale and were well-armed, including machine guns and artillery. Their units were often headed by experienced officers who had served in the Russian Imperial Army. The rural Christian enclaves of the county also enjoyed support from the regular Georgian garrison of Akhaltsikh headed by General Ilia Makashvili. At the same time, there was the 3d Georgian Division under the command of General George Arjevanidze that was stationed less than 50 kilometers away from Akhaltsikh in the Canyon of Borjom in the neighboring Gori county. But that division kept strict neutrality and was not crossing the Ottoman-Transcaucasian truce line along the 1877 border. General George Kvinitadze later explained that not only by the weakness of that division but also by the fact that Arjevanidze had no clear instructions from the command whether to consider the Akhaltsikh Muslim militias the regular Ottoman troops or internal insurgents of Transcaucasia.

¹ For some reasons, most of the Akhaltsikh Turks were referred to as the Tatars in Russian statistics of the early 20th century. However, a considerable amount of them were of Georgian origin. By the beginning of the 19th century, most of those people considered themselves Turks and often got very upset if reminded of their ethnic background.

² According to Kvinitadze, Akhaltsikh Muslim irregulars were organized into a separate division within the 1st Caucasian Corps.

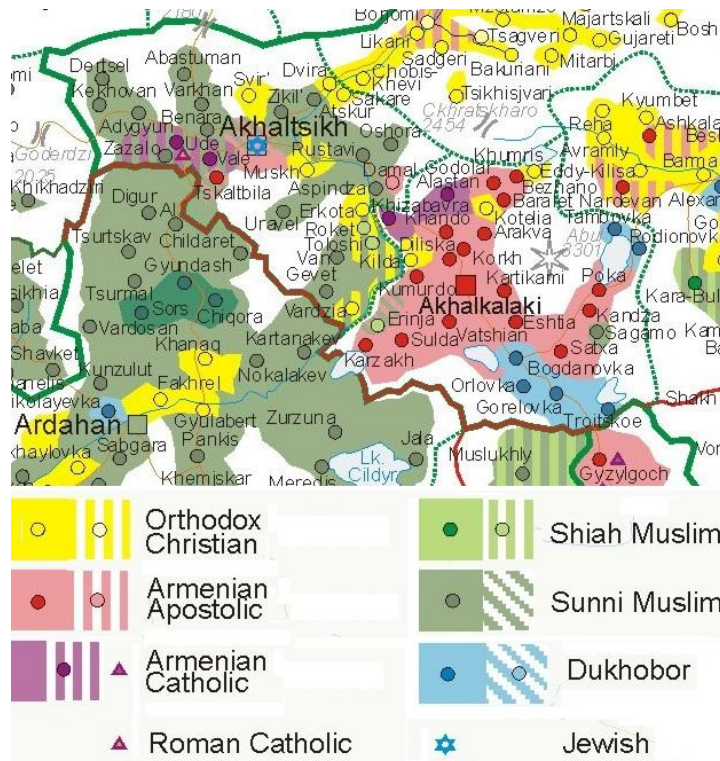
In the first case no interference on behalf of the 3d Division was possible at least until the 15th of May when the Ottomans broke the truce crossing Arpachay into the province of Erivan, whereas in the second, the Georgian command seemingly had freedom of action. However, even in the second case there was a danger to provoke new aggressive activities of Ottomans under the pretext of “protecting peaceful Muslim population against Christian atrocities”. In view of the described circumstances, both the Georgian command and General Arjevanidze preferred to honor the truce and refrain from interfering into the fight for southern Georgia beyond the 1877 border.



Ethnic makeup of Southern Georgia, as of 1914

Meanwhile, during the first half of May 1918, the major military actions in Akhaltsikh county were taking place predominantly around the villages of Muskh and Tskhrut. During the 2nd and 3rd of May, the elements of Georgian garrison blocked in Akhaltsikh made a sortie in the direction of Muskh where they were joined by local Christian militias (Armenian and Georgian) in order to prevent the destruction and of the few Christian and partially Christian villages along

the left bank of Kura river that had not been destroyed yet.³ The Muskh operation personally headed by General Makashvili ended with the victory over the Turkish and Muslim forces. Almost simultaneously, on May 3 and 4, the militias of the Armenian villages Tskhrut and Tskaltbila successfully repulsed the Turkish attacks on their positions to the north and east of Akhaltsikh. After those skirmishes most of the troubled county enjoyed relative Status Quo up until the early June when the peace was finally concluded.⁴



Religious makeup of Southern Georgia, as of 1914

In the county of Akhalkalak (part of historical Georgian province of Javakheti) the situation as a whole was more favorable to the local Christians who formed about 90% of its total population. The Christian communities of the county were dominated by the Armenians (71% of the total population) most of whom belonged to Armenian Apostolic Church with a small amount of Catholics residing mainly in the village of Alastan. There were also a few villages inhabited by Orthodox Georgians (4.2%) and Catholic Georgians of the villages Khizbavra and Saro (less than 2% of the total population). Another significant group of Christians in Akhalkalak county were the Russian colonists known as the *Dukhobors* (9%) who resided in the so-called *Javakhetian Dukhoboria* – nearly a dozen villages in the eastern part of Bogdanovsky sector. The Dukhobors, however, did not participate in the ethno-religious confrontation of May 1918. That happened partially because of the traditional pacifism of the Dukhobors and partially due to the fact that regular Ottoman troops treated ethnic Russian

³ During the late April and early May more than dozen villages on the left bank of the Kura inhabited by Christian Georgians were looted and burnt down by Ottoman troops and local Muslim irregulars. Usually, the villagers were at first disarmed and then butchered or expelled after being stripped of all their possessions.

⁴ Sanosian, pp. 77-86.

civilians well, following the directives of their command.⁵ On the other hand, the local Muslim irregulars did not have a chance to raid the small enclave of Dukhoboria simply because it was isolated from the aggressive Muslim settlements by the chain of Armenian and Georgian villages. The Muslim minority of the Akhalkalak county (Turco-Tatars and Kurds) who comprised a little bit over 10% of its population, concentrated predominantly in the two westernmost enclaves along the right bank of Kura river which, in fact, were natural continuation of the ethnic territory of Meskhetian Muslims. The biggest villages of the above Muslim enclaves of Akhalkalak were Okam-Khavet-Mirashkhan and Khertvis-Nokalakev.

By the beginning of May 1918, the Okam and Khertvis Muslims were organized into armed bands by local Khans and Beks and were expecting arrival of the Turkish troops and the irregulars from Ardahan to start the takeover of the county and ethnic cleansing of the Armenians and Christian Georgians. The Christian population of the county, in turn, was also prepared for the Ottoman invasion. Both Armenian and Georgian militias were well organized, armed and trained while among their field commanders there was a significant number of combat-experienced officers and sergeants of the old Russian army.⁶ Some of those militia units were headed by local priests.⁷

The first skirmishes in the south-western part of Akhalkalak county started as early as in April 1918 when the two Armenian village Murakval and Kartsakh (Karzakh) were attacked by irregular detachments formed in the Muslim enclave Okam-Khavet-Mirashkhan and supported by irregular troops from Akhaltsikh county and Ardahan district. The clashes went on with alternate success until the end of the second decade of May predominantly along the line that ran from the village Vachian to Murakval through Sulda, Okam and Khavet.⁸ Approximately at the same time, armed clashes were also going on along the river Kura between the Muslim (Kurd) militias of the villages Nokalakev and Mirashkhan and their Christian opponents from Kumurdo (Armenian) and Kilda (Georgian). That conflict started after an attempt of the villagers of Kumurdo to help the Georgian refugees that survived after the destruction of the village of Zemo-Tmogvi on the left bank of Kura (in Akhaltsikh county) and came to an ended in Christian victory that resulted in the expulsion of Muslims from Nokalakev and Mirashkhan.⁹

In the south-west of the county military operations started on May 7 when the armed villagers of Khertvis assisted by the Muslim militias of Akhaltsikh tried to destroy the Georgian Catholic enclave of Saro-Khizabavra. Attacked from two sides, the Georgian defenders of the two villages were immediately supported by the Armenian militias from Kumurdo and Diliska.

⁵ Modern Western reader may find it difficult to understand that at least during the described period it was not only religious but also ethnic background that played significant role in the fate of the civilian population that found itself in the zone of Ottoman occupation. For example, both ethnic Germans and Estonians of the Caucasus were treated friendly by the regular Ottoman troops as well as by the Bashibouzouks (local Mouslim irregulars) because despite their Russian citizenship, those people were privileged even for their “distant association” with the mighty German Empire. As for the ethnic Russians and other Slav, one can say that they also enjoyed well treatment because they represented the former Russian Empiire that, although defeated and destabilized by the revolution, was still a big and potentially strong country. At the same time, Armenian and Assyrian civilians were usually massacred en masse no matter what citizenship they held at that time (that applied particularly to the Persian Armenians).

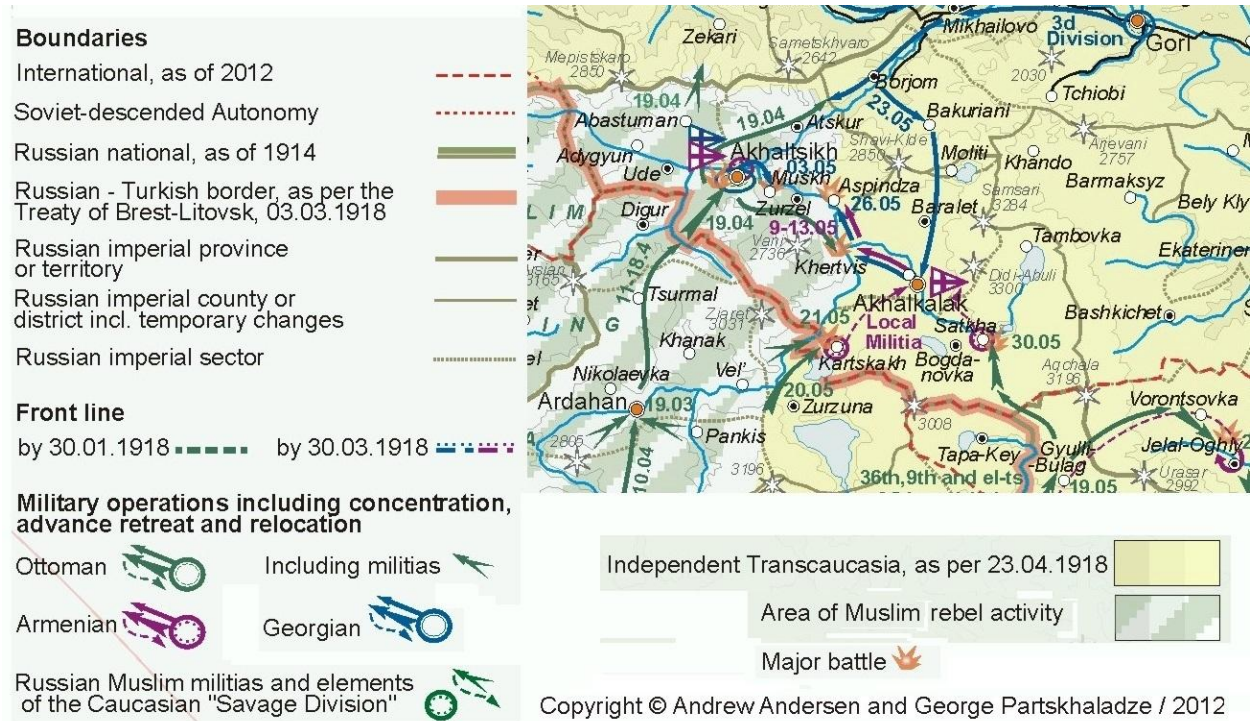
⁶ Sanosian, pp. 119-126

⁷ Sanosian, p. 161

⁸ Sanosian, pp. 134-140

⁹ Sanosian, pp. 138-139

After 5 days of fierce fighting, the Muslim militias were defeated and Khertvis fell into the hands of Armenians and Georgians.¹⁰



Military operations in Southern Georgia in April-May, 1918

Within the next few days the leadership of Christian self-defense of Akhalkalak made a decision to unblock the besieged town of Akhaltsikh in the adjacent county by taking control over the chain of villages along the main road that connected Akhalkalak with Akhalkalak. By that time (see above) the elements of the Georgian garrison of Akhaltsikh together with the Armenian and Georgian volunteer detachments were already controlling the section of that road from the town of Akhaltsikh to the village of Muskh, while the defenders of Akhalkalak county controlled it up to Khertvis (see above). The major obstacle to the success of that operation was the big village of Aspindza that was garrisoned by a regular Turkish detachment reinforced by a thousand of Muslim militias headed by local Beks (chieftains), Khafis Effendi and Shakhi Aga. Overall command of the above contingent was given to an Ottoman officer known as Hasanbeg. The Armeno-Georgian field commanders of Akhalkalak did not have enough men to capture Aspindza, especially keeping in mind that in the third decade of May the military situation in the county began to change dramatically: on May 20, the Muslim militias from Chyldyr and Ardahan supported by a regular Ottoman unit, launched a new offensive on Kartsakh and by the end of the next day took that strategically important Armenian village, while from the east the county was more and more threatened by the troops committed from the 5th Ottoman Division for the purpose of the conquest of Akhalkalak and concentrated around the village of Gyulli-

¹⁰ Sanosian, pp. 158-159

Bulag in the adjacent Alexandropol county. In order to obtain support from the 3d Georgian Division, the field commander Usul Khetcho came to Borjom and started negotiations with General Arjevanidze who was in command of the above Division. After some hesitation, Arjevanidze agreed to send a small regular detachment with an artillery battery under the command of Captain Aleksidze to the Southern Georgia in order to support Christian self-defense there. Arjevanidze's decision was accompanied by a diplomatic statement saying that no troops of the 3d Division sent to Akhalkalak could be used in support of "any aggressive actions"¹¹ On May 23, the above detachment marched from Borjom towards Akhalkalak where it was joined by some thousand militias from Armenian and Georgian villages of the county, and from Akhalkalak moved on further through Khertvis towards Aspindza. Meanwhile, Hasanbeg who was in command of Muslim defenders of Aspindza decided to attempt a preventive counteroffensive. Three days later, on May 26, the group of Hasanbeg approached the village of Tamala where it came into combat with the Georgians and Armenians marching from Khertvis. After a few hours of fierce fighting the Turks and local Muslim irregulars were defeated После яростного боя, длившегося несколько часов, турки и мусульманские ополченцы retreated in disorder suffering heavy losses,¹² while yjr victorious Georgian troops and Christian militias entered Aspindza. The road to Akhaltsikh was now free.

However, next morning the group of Aleksidze was unexpectedly ordered to withdraw back to Borjom called back to the Canyon of Borjom.¹³ Having no accurate data regarding actual the causes of that seemingly unexpected order, we can assume with some degree of confidence that it was the result of the preliminary agreements between diplomatic representatives Transcaucasia, Germany and Turkey, following which both the Akhalkalak and Akhaltsikh counties were to be ceded to the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, all regular troops of disintegrating the Transcaucasian Republic (both Georgian and Armenian ones) were subjects of immediate evacuation beyond the new border.

By the time the fighting subsided around Aspindza, the southern part of Akhalak county was invaded by Muslim irregulars from Akhbaba Valley (Tapakey sector of Kars Territory). With support of some regular Turkish troops and simultaneous attack of Chyldyr militias from Kartsakh, those forces made an attempt to take over the town of Akhalkalak. The decisive skirmish occurred on May 26 near the village Byuyuk Khanchaly. After almost 12 hours of fighting the Armenian volunteers forced the Akhbaba irregulars out of the county, while to the east of Kartsakh the fragile status quo was preserved.

However the next few days saw drastic changes in the overall situation of Akhalkalak county. The regular units of the 5th Ottoman Division that had been concentrating around Gyullibulag since May 19 and especially after the battle for Pambak (see above) started massive invasion from the south-east. The task of those invading forces, supported by hundreds of

¹¹ Sanosian, p. 160

¹² According to the Armenian newspapers of late May, 1918, quoted by Sanosian, the Muslim losses at Damal and Aspindza were close to 80%

¹³ Sanosian, p. 162

irregular Bashibouzouks, included the conquest of the whole county and, if possible, the development of offensive on Tiflis.¹⁴

On the night of 29 to 30 May 1918, the vanguard of the 5th Division entered the Akhalkalak county from Gyulli-Bulag and in a few hours, having marched through Javakhetian Dukhoboria that offered no resistance, reached the village of Bogdanovka. At 4 o'clock in the morning of May 30, the Turks clashed with the armed residents of Satkhe, the first Armenian-speaking village on their way to Akhalkalak. After 20 hours of firefight, the defenders of Satkhe had to retreat in view of the apparent superiority of their enemy, and the whole population of the village evacuated northwestwards.

Within the last day of May 1918, the detachments of Christian militia tried to stop the ottoman advance in the vicinity of Akhalkalak and near the village of Machadia, but their resistance was crushed, and the survivors withdrew towards Bakurian. That signalled the exodus of Armenian and Christian Georgian population from Akhalkalak county to the two adjacent counties of Gori and Borchalo, and Akhalkalak was lost up until the end of the First World War. The few Armenians who decided to stay in their homes were massacred by the Ottoman troops and Bashibouzouks. The only two groups of Christian population that were not affected by ethnic cleansing in the county were the Dukhobors and Catholics.

A week later and later and under somewhat more favorable circumstances the town of Akhaltsikh was surrendered to the Turks together with the Christian-controlled enclaves of the county. On the 5th of May 1918, the day after the Treaties of Batum were signed, an official Turkish commission arrived in Akhaltsikhe to specify the terms of transfer of the county. Following some negotiations, an agreement was reached, under which:

- All armed Christians, including regular troops and militia were free to leave Akhaltsikh with their arms and colors;
- All civilians that decided to stay were guaranteed inviolability of their life and property, as well as immunity from prosecution on ethno-religious grounds;
- The Ottoman authorities would not tolerate any manifestations of religious or ethnic hatred;
- In the town of Akhaltsikhe the old system of civic administration was to be preserved and its elected leaders, most of them Christians, were to keep on their posts.¹⁵

¹⁴ Here it is worth noting that the military leadership of the Ottoman Empire was not even planning to honor either the preliminary agreements reached with the Georgian and German diplomats at the very end of May 1918, or even the provisions of the Treaties of Batum signed a few days later by the Imperial government. The subsequent events clearly showed that the Turkish forces were not going to stop their advance on the new border lines recognized by their government as final and not subject to change. On the contrary, a new offensive was to be launched on Tiflis which was staged to look like “an uprising of local Muslims”, and although in the summer of 1918 the Tiflis direction was considered secondary (the primary direction of Ottoman expansion in the Caucasus was Baku), the possibility of the capture of Georgian capital was not excluded and neither was “the final solution of the Armenian question” that would follow the Turkish occupation of Eastern Georgia.

¹⁵ Sanosian, p. 101-103

During the two days that followed, the Georgian garrison left Akhaltsikhe together with the Georgian and Armenian legionnaires (militias). The troops were followed by a considerable amount of civilians including policemen, civil servants, students and families of officers and legionnaires. On the 8th of May, a small Ottoman contingent entered the town under the command of Baki Bey who was appointed the new Governor of the town and county of Akhaltsikh.

One should admit that in Akhaltsikh the Turks complied with the above conditions, and until their evacuation in December 1918, there were no ethnic cleansings in the county and the overall situation was relatively stable.

Certainly, the battle area in the Southern Georgia (the counties of Akhaltsikh and Akhalkalak) was not the main theater of the strange Turkish-Transcaucasian war of 1918, but it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that it was the stiff resistance put up in the area by Christian militias and troops that to a large extent prevented the fall of Tiflis and significantly reduced the losses among the civilian population.