

## **THE POPULATION OF TBILISI AS OBSERVED BY EUROPEAN TRAVELLERS BETWEEN THE YEARS 1903 AND 1925**

### **Abstract**

This article introduces the accounts of European travellers regarding the ethno-religious composition of the population of Tbilisi in the early 20th century. The travellers are as follows: Edouard Alfred Martel (1903), Claude Anet (1905), Duchess Hermine de Rohan (1909) and Maurice Rondet-Saint (1913). At the time of their travels, Georgia was part of the Russian Empire. At the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, a French health mission led by Dr. Louis Dartigues arrived in Tbilisi. During the First Republic of Georgia in 1919, Tbilisi was visited by British intelligence officer Colonel Sir Alfred "Toby" Rawlinson and British journalist Carl Eric Beckhofer Roberts. In 1925, during the Soviet era, Tbilisi was visited by the French teacher and trade unionist Maurice Wullens.

**Keywords:** *Tbilisi, Edouard A. Martel, Claude Anet, Maurice Rondet-Saint, Louis Dartigues, Carl Roberts, Maurice Wullens*

### **French travellers' observations on the population of Tbilisi (1903-1925)**

In the autumn of 1903, Edouard Alfred Martel, the French geographer and founder of French speleology, paid a visit to Tbilisi. Martel observed the remarkable diversity of the city's population, noting the variety of clothing, headgear, and weapons. He postulated that the inhabitants of Tbilisi might speak as many as seventy languages, as travellers had reported, and that the Tatar market, Maidan, might be considered a veritable Babylon of cosmopolitanism, with a multitude of types, races, and idioms.

Among the group of European travellers who arrived in Tbilisi during the 1905 revolution was the French journalist Claude Anet. In his essay, he observes that the majority of the city was on strike, including the personnel of the London Hotel where the travellers were residing. Polyglot soldiers were deployed to safeguard the hotel and attend to the travellers, including a German soldier born in Odessa. Similarly, Claude Anet, akin to Alfred Martel in his work, highlights that seventy languages were spoken in Tbilisi. Despite the strike, Easter services were conducted in the old church. The travellers attended two performances at the "Bolshoi Theatre". Anet wrote ironically: "Tbilisi. The last days in the Caucasus. The theatres are open. We must thank the revolutionary committees for this".

Four years after these events, in June 1909, a prominent member of Parisian high society, the Duchess Hermine de Rohan, arrived in Georgia. In her writings, she noted that

the eastern part of Tbilisi was populated by a wide variety of people, including richly dressed Persians, Tatar sayyids and mullahs in loose robes and turbans, Tatars with shaved heads and daggers at their belts, casually dressed Armenians, armed mountaineers, heavily laden porters, pedestrians and horsemen. In the eastern bazaar, Persian merchants could be seen sitting outside their tents, smoking leisurely cigarettes as they waited for potential customers. The whole scene was visually attractive and had a certain charm for the traveller to Tbilisi. Like the Europeans who visited Tbilisi in the nineteenth century, Herminie de Rohan observed the clothes worn by the Georgians. She found the Circassian coat more refined than the redingote, and the fur hat more refined than the top hat. She also noted that the velvet headband, the lace veil, and the embroidered dress with tail added a touch of aristocratic grace to the walk.

In the summer of 1913, Maurice Rondet-Saint arrived in Tbilisi, having been employed by the French Ministry of Trade in the capacity of a foreign trade adviser. His objective was to examine the status of the French communities abroad, which were the most effective disseminators of French ideas, customs, language, and products. In his work, he described Tbilisi as a melting pot, where representatives of a multitude of ethnic groups coexisted. The population of Tbilisi was diverse, comprising Armenians, Tatars, Persians, Jews, Georgians, Mingrelians, Russians, Greeks, Kurds, Turks, Ossetians, Circassians, descendants of German colonists, and numerous other ethnic groups. The Jewish population, estimated at between 12,000 and 15,000, was predominantly impoverished, as the two nations, Armenians and Persians, were better equipped to engage in commercial competition. Similarly, Maurice Rondet-Saint makes reference to the fact that seventy languages were spoken in Tbilisi, as evidenced by the works of Alfred Martel and Claud Anet. He observed the presence of multilingual inscriptions on trams in Russian, Turkish, Persian, Armenian, Georgian, and occasionally Greek. Notably, no French or German inscriptions were observed, despite the widespread teaching of these languages in Russia. This has been attributed to a deliberate decision by the Russian authorities to prevent the spread of Western ideas and, consequently, the languages associated with them within the borders of the empire.

### **Information about the population of Tbilisi by Louis Dratigues (1917-1918)**

The French Surgical Sanitary Mission, under the direction of French physician Louis Dartigues, arrived in Tbilisi on 8 August 1917, at the height of the Russian Revolution. The objective of the mission was to provide assistance to the Russian health system and to treat wounded military personnel from the Caucasus front. Dartigues observed that the prestige of the French name facilitated integration into the most aristocratic and respectable society, where good cosmopolitanism was the norm. The society in question was comprised of individuals from a multitude of backgrounds, including Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Georgians, Armenians, Tatars, Belgians, French, English, Americans, and others. It may be described as a veritable League of Nations, a melting pot of civilised habits, refinement, and understanding. All languages were spoken there, with the exception of German, and French was the dominant language of communication.

Dartigues observed that the most challenging periods for Tbilisi were those spanning November to December 1917 and January, February and March 1918. The city was beset by a multitude of challenges, including ethnic tensions, conflicts of interest, desertion, and deliberate German propaganda. The Russian army was no longer a viable unit, and the Caucasian front was in a state of collapse. Over the course of several days, approximately half a million individuals, influenced by the ideologies of Tavarshism and Bolshevism, departed from the front and moved to the Navtlug station near Tbilisi, coinciding with an influx of immigrants from Asia Minor.

In the period between 8 May 1917 and 15 May 1918, the French hospital received not only wounded personnel from the Caucasian front but also French officers dispatched to various locations across the Caucasus, Armenia and Mesopotamia. Additionally, French officers and soldiers who had returned to Tbilisi from Erzurum and Trebizond were present. Furthermore, the French hospital received individuals of diverse nationalities, including Russians, Georgians, Armenians, Tatars, Syrians, Persians, English, Scots, Irish, Americans, Belgians, Poles, Romanians, Serbs, Swiss, Greeks and even a delegation of Chaldean envoys.

The French medical mission in Tbilisi enjoyed close relations with members of the French community in the city. Dartigues also notes the presence of a small Swiss community in Tbilisi, the majority of whom taught French in the city's secondary schools. Additionally, there was an English colony that had its own club in the city.

#### **Information from a British intelligence officer about the population of Tbilisi (1919)**

British intelligence officer Colonel Sir Alfred "Toby" Rawlinson was stationed in Tbilisi from February to September 1919. In his essay, he provides a comprehensive account of the impressive uniforms of the Georgian military officers, which were adorned with numerous cartridge cases. Their weaponry included inlaid daggers and pistols, and they wore Persian lamb (astrakhan) caps. The colonel observed that the Georgian nobility had a tragic fate due to their lack of financial resources, which compelled them to sell their belongings. Princesses were forced to find work as maids or accept any position that would provide enough income to support their parents or children. However, the impoverished Georgian nobles displayed pride and refused assistance from the British.

#### **Information from a British journalist about the population of Tbilisi (1919)**

British journalist and World War I veteran Carl Eric Bechhofer Roberts spent a considerable amount of time in southern Russia and the Caucasus between the winter of 1919 and the spring of 1920. This period coincided with the First Republic of Georgia. Roberts observed that in Tbilisi, in addition to traditional instruments such as drums, flutes, and the duduk, popular songs from the First World War, including "Tipperary" and "Who Were You With Last Night?", were performed in restaurants with piano accompaniment. At the Kimerioni cabaret in Tbilisi, he encountered the Georgian poet Paolo Iashvili, the Georgian writer Grigol Robakidze, as well as the artists Savely Sorin, Sergei Sudeikin, and the dancer Lydia Johnson, who had arrived from Petrograd and Moscow. The cabaret also performed gypsy songs and American Negro musicians played popular ragtime. That's where Roberts met

the guru and writer George Gurdjieff, who took the English journalist to some lesser-known Georgian and Persian restaurants, including the underground cellar, Marani. The first time Gurdjieff is mentioned in an English-language book is in Roberts' book.

### **Information from a French teacher about educational institutions in Tbilisi (1925).**

In 1925, during the Soviet era in Georgia, Maurice Wullens, a French teacher and trade union representative, conducted a visit to Tbilisi educational institutions from 17 to 20 September. Wullens provides an overview of the ethnic composition of Tbilisi based on the languages taught in schools. He notes that in Georgia, where the majority of the population (2.5 million people) spoke Georgian, this language was the priority. Russian and German were taught as foreign languages. In educational institutions for children of national minorities in Tbilisi, instruction was conducted in Armenian, Turkish, and Greek.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, in the early 20th century, prior to the outbreak of World War I, travellers arriving in Tbilisi – including Alfred Martel, Claude Anne, Hermine de Rohan, and Maurice Rondet-Saint – provided insight into the ethno-religious composition of the population based on the languages spoken in the city. Their reports indicate that North Caucasians and Persians were still present in the streets and markets of the Old Tbilisi area.

The reports of Dr. Dartigues, who was in Tbilisi for nine months in 1917-1918, demonstrate that due to the collapse of the Caucasian Front, Tbilisi functioned as a significant transit centre. This period was characterised by a notable intermingling of people from diverse nationalities, a phenomenon that had never been previously observed in the city. It is noteworthy that the language of communication with the Georgian, Armenian, Russian and Tatar educated society of Tbilisi was French. Information regarding the existence of a small Swiss community in Tbilisi, in addition to the French colony, is also of interest. However, due to the political context, Dartigues makes no mention of the German colony in Tbilisi.

In 1919, during the period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Colonel Rawlinson, who was in Tbilisi, noted the plight of the Georgian nobility. The journalist Roberts also provided information about the bohemian environment of Tbilisi. Both Englishmen noted the weakness of the Georgian army.

Maurice Wullens, who arrived in Tbilisi in 1925, discusses the issue of education in the city, emphasising the importance of knowledge of the Georgian language. He also provides information about the repressions carried out against the Georgian nobility after the 1924 uprising.