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CONNECTING TRABZON TO RUSSIA: BATUMI-TRABZON MILITARY RAILWAY PROJECT (1916-1917)

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to study the Batumi-Trabzon Military Railway Project, which began in 1916 after the occupation of Trabzon by the Russians. During the First World War, Russia took the opportunity to expand its territory towards Anatolia. In 1916, Russian forces captured Erzurum, Erzincan, Gümüşhane, and Trabzon. Due to the progress of the Russian army towards the inner parts of Anatolia, they moved away from their main logistics bases. Russians planned to solve this problem by building a new military railway line between Batumi and Trabzon approximately in one year.

Key Words: Trabzon, Batumi, Railway, Russia.

Introduction

In XIX century, with the annexation of Caucasia, Tsarist Russia got the chance to control the region between Black Sea and Caspian Sea. This expansion also gave the chance to the Russian Empire to rule the regional trade and transport. Thus, to connect the annexed Caucasia with the other parts of the Russia, railway connection was a useful agent. For this reason, by building new railway lines, Russian were connecting these newly annexed regions to the central lands both commercially and militarily. As a result of these constructions, in Russia, before the WW I, the length of the completed railroad line was 424 km in 1909, 278 km in 1910, 1.309 km in 1911, 998 km in 1912, 1.165 km in 1913. In the end, during the WW I, between the 1914's and 1916's, there

occurred a noticeable spurt in the railroad construction and in a short span of time, the longest total railway line, namely, 10,929 kilometres, in the history of Tsarist Russia was built (Ames, 1947, p. 58).

The newly constructed railroads built in the occupied Ottoman regions was one of them that is to say, in Batumi, Kars, and the others. With the start of the war, the Russian military forces captured Erzurum in February 1916, Trabzon in April and Gümüşhane, Kelkit and Erzincan in July (Acar, 2009, p. 362). Especially for some military purposes, these lands should be connected to central lands. In this framework, after the occupation of Trabzon, the railway line between Trabzon and Gümüşhane was completed. Furthermore, the line was planned to be extended to Erzincan and also Erzurum. However, according to Odabaşoğlu, only 35 kilometers of the 119-km length Trabzon-Gümüşhane railway line was in use (Kaleli, 2011, p. 162).

The Reasons behind the Project

One of the most important reasons, for the construction of the Batumi-Trabzon railroad was the fact that the Russian army, which had advanced to Anatolia as a result of invasion of Lazistan, Erzurum, and Trabzon, had moved away from their main supply base. The sea connection could be an alternative. However, the sea connection between Batumi and Trabzon had some difficulties. For example, the stormy weather was one of them and also the bombardments by the allied ships was the other (Tsipkina-Selivabova, 2014, p. 119).

Thus, there was a need for a logistical support to the Russian Army in the Trabzon region in order to maintain their military operations and meet their daily needs (Sioridze, 2011, p. 77-79). Owing to all these aforementioned disadvantages, the Russian army had lost their connection with the Russian military base in Batumi. Sergei Rudolfovich Mintslov, appointed as the acting director of Trabzon to supervise the municipal tasks, states that the ships could not carry the flour and salt stored in the Batumi port to Trabzon due to the waves. Mintslov also states that “...since there was no salt, bakers baking bread were kneading the dough with sea water. However, a large amount of flour and salt had accumulated in nearby Batumi” (Uzun, 2008, p. 37).

Without doubt, being far away from motherland had negative effects on the Russian civilian and military officials. The sea transportation was not seen as safe and reliable, the posts and the newspapers were coming later. All the Russian officials were thinking of the temporary stationing of them in this remote and boring town on the rear front. The coastal part of the Black Sea not having railway or highway connection with Russia, simple scaffolds were built in Rize, Trabzon, and Polathane (Akçaabat), which were open to development over time. These intense construction activities had both psychological impacts on local residents and civilian and military Russian officials in the city. The present construction projects of main highways and railroads to connect Batumi to the Russians convinced that soon they would be connected to the motherland.

The construction of the railway activities was also effects on the local population. According to Akarca; “*The effect on the locals was no less. The region had not seen construction project at that scale. The Batum-Trapezund highway and railroad impressed the locals as all other large Russian construction efforts. These were demonstrating the will of the Russians to stay in the occupied areas. Moreover, as some of the Muslim witnesses of occupation confessed, they even came to resent the end of the Russian rule*” (Akarca, 2014, p. 98-99). Dr. Kefeli also in his memoirs remarks the relation between local people and Russians; “...even if they are not against Russia, they are still citizens of Turkey who fought with us” (Kefeli, 2013, p. 81).

In addition to the military and logistical importance of Batumi-Trabzon railway project, it

also would enable transport the rich copper mines, fruits such as oranges, lemons, and the other agricultural products to Russia via Batumi. In this way, trade relations between occupied territories and Russia would have increased (Building and Engineering News, 1917, p. 21). At the same time, the construction of the railroad would reduce the load on Russia's transport fleet in the Black Sea and ensure the connection of the army with the Empire (Ayrapetov, 2015, p. 201).

Construction of the Railroad

The construction of Batumi-Trabzon railway project started in 1916. However, it was a project that the Russians had planned to carry out in the 19th century. As a part of Russia's efforts to integrate the Caucasus into Russia. In this context, two railways were completed: Tbilisi-Poti in 1872 and the Baku-Tbilisi-Batumi in 1883. With the completion of these lines, oil was carried from Baku oilfields to Batumi from where it was shipped to the world markets. Before long through the port of Batumi, delivery of goods to the interior of the Caucasus and Russia increased and Batumi port became one of the best ports in Black Sea. In order to increase the commercial relations of Batumi with the surrounding regions, especially Ottoman Anatolia, some railway projects were planned. In an Ottoman archive document, dated March 10, 1900 according to the newspaper *Chernomorski Vestnik*, in Petersburg and Moscow for the economic cooperation of Russia and the Ottoman states, the importance of the projects of Batumi-Trabzon and Kars-Erzurum railways was mentioned (BOA, HR.TO. 356-67). Also almost the same time in 1915, Batumi-Kars railway project was planned to pass through Batumi-Artvin-Kars. The railroad was designed by the Batumi Municipality to provide transportation of goods in Artvin and the surrounding regions to the port of Batumi. It was expected that this line would shorten the distance from Iran to the Russian border by 200 versts, also meet the local needs of Artvin, Ardahan, and Kars. But the project was cancelled due to construction cost and geographical conditions (Soorujeniya Batum-Karsskoy Jeleznoy Dorogi, 1916, p. 1-11).

For this purpose, in order to carry out the construction works of Batumi-Trabzon railway project called "*Upravlenie rabot po postroyke voennoy shirokokoleynoy jeleznoy dorogi Batum-Trapezund*", Colonel M.A. Verdervskiy authorization was granted in May 1916. On 14 December 1916, *vremenniy polojenie* (provisional by-law) approved by Tsar Nikolai II., Verderevsky was given unlimited authority. For the construction works, Batumi was the main station, equipped with all kinds of equipment and a large number of engineers and technicians. For the construction of the line, 25 million rubles were allocated. In May, exploratory works began for the railway line, construction works started simultaneously in different regions from Batumi to Lazistan in August. As a first work on the line, the necessary infrastructure works began for the laying of the rails in the low areas where the railroad passes, then was planned to excavate tunnels in the mountainous regions. In the construction of the railroad, thousands of workers from different regions of Western Georgia were employed. At different points on the line, lumber factories, workshops, and barracks for workers were built. A large number of trucks, vans, and similar vehicles were used in the construction works. At the request of the Batumi-Trabzon Railway Administration, for the construction sites and mechanical workshops for the workers, an area of 1.8 hectares outside the city was allocated by the Municipality of Batumi (Sioridze, 2011, pp. 7-79). Construction works progressed in many points until the end of the year (Supplement to Commerce Reports, 1919, p. 42) and the line was planned to be completed by the end of 1917 (Kefeli, 2013, p. 95).

Batumi-Trabzon railroad, starting from the Batumi station of the South Caucasus railway, reached through the Black Sea coast to Trabzon and along the Supsa station, which is the side-line of the South Caucasus railway to Ochemçira.^[1] The steps to be taken in the construction of the line

were indicated step by step. Accordingly, the distance between stations on the line will not exceed 30 versts, on the railway line, 1 passenger and 19 military trains would be operated and the number of trains could be reviewed according to need. On the line for technical and construction works, factories were established. The train stations were to be built at the intersection points of the main commercial centres with population. In these regions, attention would be paid to the availability of water resources needed for the station, the quality of the water and easy access to the nearby settlements (Batumi-Trapezundskaya Voennaya Jeleznaya Doroga: Tehničeskiya Usloviya Proektirovaniya i ooruženiya Batumi-Trapezundskoy Voennoy Jeleznoy Dorogi, 1916, pp. 1-6).

It seems that the railway construction works were being also followed by the Ottoman authorities. It is possible to find some details about the construction of the railroad in Ottoman archival sources. According to an article, published in Sweden in February 1917, it was mentioned that the railway between Batumi and Trabzon would be extended to Russia and that construction works had already started (BOA, HR.SYS, 2377-23). In addition to the workers, brought from West Georgia, the local people and Muslim refugees in the occupied territories were used for this work (Akarca, 2014, pp. 144-145).

While the Batumi-Trabzon railway line was under construction, the Russians were able to achieve a large extent of contact with the rear after the massive attack with the Ottoman Third Army. Meanwhile, Sarikamış-Erzurum and Trabzon-Gümüşhane decovol lines were completed. Thanks to these lines, the Russian army was able to meet the food needs in the region including Trabzon, Erzincan, Muş, and Van. On the other hand, the railroad Iğdır-Beyazıt-Karakilise was completed and grading had begun for the extension from Karakilise to Tutak and Malazgirt, through Armenia. According to news received by Turkish authorities, Djulfa-Tabriz was to be extended to the east of Urumia Lake (Sanders, 1927, p. 155).

Due to the urgent need for electrical energy, on 13 February 1917, a hydroelectric station was established in the Çoruh River by Batumi-Trabzon Railway Administration, at a distance of 12 versts to Batumi. The city's electric poles were used in the distribution of electricity. In order to supply electricity to the construction field, it was decided to put a total of 152 lampposts beginning from the Artvin road to the streets, construction expenses were covered by the Road Administration (*Upravlenie Dorogi*) (BOA, YB.(21) 9-13). In January 1917, the Batumi-Trabzon railway was offered to connect the South Caucasus railway via a station in Batumi. For this purpose, a mixed commission was established under the leadership of *Deistvitelnogo Statskogo Sovetnik* S. G. S. Kikodze. This commission included representatives of the Batumi-Trabzon Railway, South Caucasus Railway, Batumi city council, military units, Mihialovski Fortress, commercial and military representatives in Batumi. At the end of January, it was decided to connect the line to the South Caucasus line (Sioridze, 2011, p. 78-82). However the February Revolution has changed all plans. Liman Von Sanders explains the sudden termination of Russian plans as follows: “*Grand Duke Nikolai meant to provide sufficient bases for his army before resuming operations; his hand was felt everywhere. These far-reaching plans were checked by the Russian revolution*” (Sanders, 1927, p. 155).

After the February Revolution, on April 1, 1917 in Tbilisi, as chairman OZAKOM (*Osobyi Zakavkazskiy Komitet-The Special Transcaucasian Committee*) V.A. Kharlamov's meeting with military and industrial representatives in South Caucasia, it was stated that due to the current situation in the country, having difficulties in the provision of rail and other building materials required for construction of railroads. Due to the economic downturn in the empire, the necessity of building narrow railway lines instead of wide lines was offered to reduce costs. However, at the end it was decided that this measure for the reduction of expenditures was not sufficient and that it was

quite costly in the mountainous and rocky areas of Lazistan in the coastal strip, tunnelling, and railing. Under the circumstances, it was decided to stop the works “*Nemedlenno priostanovit raboti po postroyke Batum-Trapezundskoy jeleznoy dorogi*”. As a result of this decision, in order to provide the necessary logistics by sea to the army in Trabzon, it was decided to build a military port in Trabzon and the decision was approved by the Temporary Russian government. As a result of this decision, on 27 April, by OZAKOM for the purpose of liquidation of the current project, under the administration of Engineer A.E. Lash. a commission was established in Batumi. With the work of the commission, the materials used for the railroad construction were transferred to Trabzon fortifications. In the financial controls conducted by the commission, it was understood that 21 million of the 25 million roubles allocated for the project had been spent and compared to the money spent, little work was done. In very low areas, some construction works were carried out for the route and rail laying, but the work in the mountainous areas had not even started. Beside the corruptions in the construction of the railroad, some of the money allocated for this work was stolen in the occupied Turkish territory. For this reason, in July 1917 General Governor Romanovsky, Colonel Cunkovskiy, and other middle-ranking officials were dismissed (Sioridze, 2011, p. 78-82).

By reason of the fact that the Revolution and after the economic depression, the construction of the railway has been cancelled. With the withdrawal of the Russian army from the region, the line remained abandoned. The rails of the line have been used over time by the local people in Rize and its surroundings as building materials^[2] and for different functions.

Conclusion

The progress of Russia in the Caucasus continued with the invasion of some regions in Anatolia. In this process, the most important policy of Russia, in order to keep the newly occupied region under the control, was to connect the regions with the Russian centres via a railway. This policy was also continued during the occupation of Trabzon and the South Caucasus. In this framework, a new railway network was projected and planned to be expanded to Trabzon with a new line. The main intention was to support for the Russian army logistically, connect Trabzon to Russia through Batumi. Despite the high importance given to the construction, the work was stopped due to the economic downturn after the Revolution. The partly built railways, probably fear of a new Russian invasion, were dismantled by the local population and used in the areas they needed.

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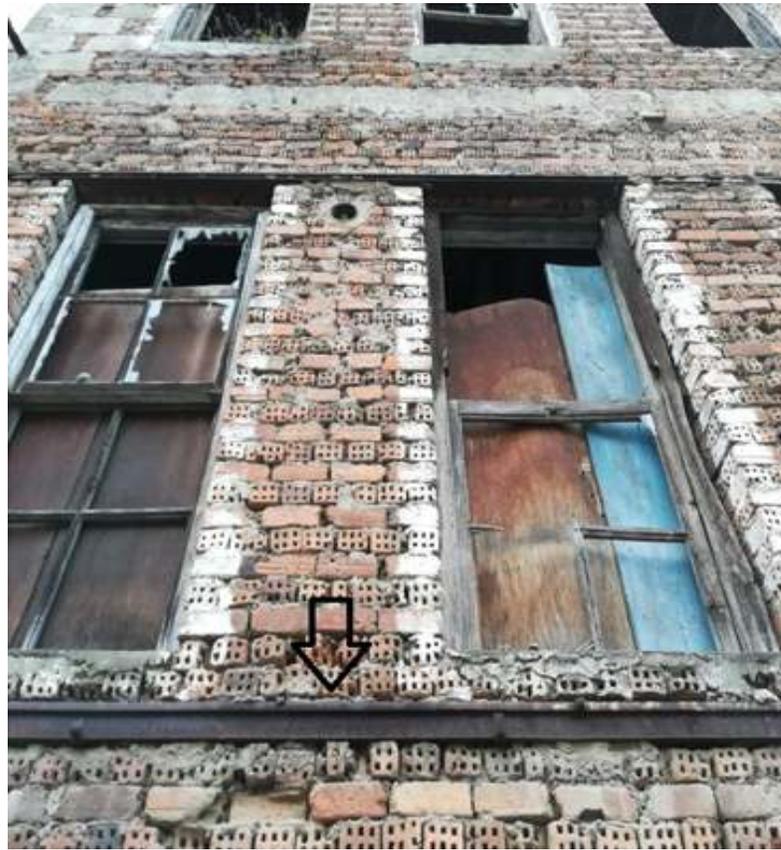
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Appendix

Photos: As an example of the use of rails as a building material in Black Sea region in Rize







^[1]Seaside city on the Black Sea coast of Abkhazia.

^[2]<http://www.rizedeyiz.com/Form.php?Sayfa=Yazdir&f=4&id=395>, (Eriřim tarihi 30 Eylöl 2018).

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