

სიონისტური ჯგუფის საქმიანობა 1920-1930-იანი წლების თბილისში <sup>24</sup>THE MISSION OF THE ZIONIST GROUP IN TBILISI IN THE 1920s-1930s<sup>25</sup>

მიხეილ მეფარიშვილი

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უნივერსიტეტი

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<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0700-1119>**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** დავით ბააზოვი, სიონისტური ჯგუფები, ებრაული თემი**Keywords:** David Baazov, Zionist group, Jewish community

## ABSTRACT

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish community of Georgia underwent a fundamental transformation. Previously, important settlements for Georgian Jews included Kutaisi, Oni, Surami, Tskhinvali, and Akhaltsikhe. However, during the 1920s, many Georgian Jews began migrating to Tbilisi, which became the center of the Jewish community's renaissance. The Soviet government, in its efforts to combat those involved in trade and commerce and to transform unreliable "elements" into reliable workers, established collective farms, special labor schools, and cultural associations for Georgian Jews. It is noteworthy that Rabbi David Baazov and his group played a key role in initiating the establishment of schools, cultural associations, and the allocation of agricultural lands to Jewish citizens of Soviet Georgia. They requested the Soviet government to take measures for the cultural and economic revival of Jewish families. These mutual efforts were driven by different motives: while the Soviet government sought to mold all ethnic and national groups into a unified mass of workers, David Baazov aimed to make Jews politically active, educate them (especially by promoting Hebrew language and Jewish history), and encourage Aliyah to Eretz Israel. This context explains why, in the 1920s and 1930s, Georgian Jews enthusiastically engaged in or led new initiatives. The Jewish cultural union *Tarbut* was founded in 1923, and the Jewish drama troupe *Kadima* was formed based on the 102nd Jewish Labor School. In 1924, the newspaper *Makaveeli* (named after the Maccabees) began publication, but only three issues were released before the fourth volume was banned by state censorship. In 1927, Soviet officials declared war on

David Baazov and "Baazovism." The Soviet government persecuted Baazov and his associates for their efforts toward the cultural and economic renewal of the Jewish community. Gertzel Baazov, a novelist and playwright and the son of David Baazov, was executed in 1938. David Baazov himself was sentenced to death, though his sentence was commuted to exile in Siberia until 1945. Other members of the Zionist group also faced repression. The fear of Soviet persecution shaped the lives of Georgian Jews. This paper seeks to address three key questions: (1). How did the formation of the Zionist group occur within the Soviet context? (2). What was the program of the Zionist group? (3). To what extent did the group's activities contradict Soviet ideology? The goal of this research is to understand how the texts of interest were created within a specific social context, how they were used in everyday interactions, and how they influenced the formation of the reader's identity. Qualitative content analysis is the most appropriate method for carrying out the research objectives. This method allows for a detailed and systematic analysis and interpretation of texts to reveal specific content, themes, or trends. Texts gain meaning in relation to a particular context, discourse, or purpose. We always read texts with a certain aim in mind, seeking ways to uncover and explore specific issues. In this research, different types of narratives concerning the identity of Georgian Jews (including newspaper publications, literary texts, and memoirs), as well as Soviet national, economic, scientific, and cultural policies and their influence on the newly formed Jewish identity, have been identified and studied.

<sup>24</sup> ნაშრომი შესრულებულია შოთა რუსთაველის საქართველოს ეროვნული სამეცნიერო ფონდის გრანტით დაფინანსებული პროექტის *ებრაული იდენტობა საქართველოში: საბჭოთა გიანს-ფოხმაცია (1921-1941)* (FR 23-8490) ფარგლებში.

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This paper examines the establishment of Zionist ideas and the formation and development of Zionist organizations in Georgia under the Soviet occupation. Also, it strives to explain the influence of the Zionist movement on the formation of the identity narratives of the Jewish community in Soviet Georgia.

The study of identity formation and transformation in different political and ideological contexts is one of the most relevant directions of cultural studies. Moreover, the study of a given episode of the past will make a significant contribution to the rethinking of the Soviet occupation of Georgia.

The Soviet transformation of the identity of Georgian Jews is scarcely studied in the scientific literature. The present study is one of the first attempts to collect and analyze the activities of the Zionist group in the 1920s and 1930s and its impact on the identity formation of Georgian Jews. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the study examines the Soviet transformation of Georgian Jewish identity.

Qualitative content analysis is used as a **research method**. It allows detailed and systematic analysis and interpretation of the text to reveal specific content, themes or trends. Texts acquire meaning in relation to a certain context, discourse or purpose. We always read texts with a certain purpose and try to find ways of detecting certain issues or dealing with problems in them. As the goal of this study is to determine how texts of interest to us were created in a certain social context; how they were used in everyday interaction and how they influenced the formation of the reader's identity, qualitative content analysis is the best method for carrying out the tasks set within the research.

#### The research questions are:

- 1.) How did the formation of the Zionist group occur within the Soviet context?
- 2.) What was the programme of the Zionist group?
- 3.) To what extent did the group's activities contradict Soviet ideology?

## INTERIM RESULTS OF THE STUDY

### EMERGENCE OF THE ZIONISM MOVEMENT

The political activation and public revitalization of the Jewish community of Georgia is related to Zionist ideas. We can consider the year 1890 as one of the starting dates, when Rabbi Abram Khvoles arrived in Tskhinvali and with the support of the local Jews founded a Cheder in 1906, where 400 children from Tskhinvali and surrounding villages studied. It is noteworthy that the enlightened rabbi also accepted girls in the school. For those who did not continue their Torah studies, he created craft courses to abstain them from petty trading. However, along with recognition, he was often met with suspicion and his school was often threatened with closure due to lack of funds (Ben-Oren, 1992: 54). David Baazov, a distinguished disciple of Rabbi Khvoles, is considered a

founder Zionist organisations in Georgian urban settlement with significant Jewish communities. David Baazov received higher education in Yeshib of Belarus and Lithuania (Vilnius and Slutsk) where he married Rakhil Racine, supporter of socialist ideas. After getting married, the couple returned to Georgia and settled in Oni and began actively working to revive the Jewish community (ბააზოვი, 2000: 11). Even after returning to Georgia, David Baazov maintained connections with the Zionists of Vilnius and Slutsk. In a letter dated 1901, he gives the activity report to his teacher Rabbi Menachem Ushiskin and writes that a Zionist organisation was founded in Kutaisi, Baazov hoped that Zionist organizations would be established in other cities of Georgia. At the same time, he spoke about the fierce resistance he faced from the locals (ბააზოვი, 2000: 242-243). An important debate about Zionism took place in 1915 in Kutaisi around the planned but never held rabbinical assembly to discuss the modernization of the Jewish community. The main opponent of holding the meeting was the influential rabbi of Kutaisi, Reuben Eluashvili. David Baazov, the initiator of the meeting, was "blamed" for Zionism and for trying to popularize it in Georgia. Zionism and Zionist ideas were not accepted by a part of Georgian Jews. Popularisation of Zionism was considered as an act of enmity towards Georgian Jews, which aimed to detach Jews from Georgians (წიწუაშვილი, 2014: 93-95).

According to the teachings of David Baazov, the components of nationality were (1) homeland, (2) language, (3) tradition/morals, (4) culture; (5) typical face of the nationality. For Baazov, Jewish nationality and religion were identical concepts (წიწუაშვილი, 2014: 96-97). Considering the Georgian Jews as a part of Jewish nation and connecting them with the Jews living in different parts of the world did not prevent them from loyalty to the Georgian state (წიწუაშვილი, 2014: 111-112). Despite the obstacles, David Baazov did not give up. In 1918, he founded the newspaper Voice of the Jew (*khma ebraelisa*) in Oni. Through the newspaper, he introduced the current issues in the Jewish world to the local Jews, introduced Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau. With the help of the newspaper, he criticized the ardent anti-Zionist rabbis and the influential party Agudat Yisrael (Anonymous, 1919: 1). According to Mordekh Biniashvili, Hakhams tried to prevent Jews of Georgia from reading the Voice of the Jew. Moreover, David Baazov formed informal groups of young people, with which he spread Zionist ideas. One of them was *Ezrahim Yehudim* formed under the leadership of Gershon Megrelishvili, an informal group consisting of 15 members. David Baazov gave them assignments, spread proclamations and engaged in agitation. The group was active during the years of Georgia's independence and then during the Soviet occupation (ბააზოვი, 2000: 258-260).

The policy of the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, with which Agudat Yisrael had a good relationship, was the target of Baazov's criticism. The approach of the democratic republic, which separated Georgian Jews and Ashkenazi Jews, was unacceptable

to Rabbi. Baazov criticized Rabbi Reuben Eluashvili's son-in-law, Rabbi Moshe Davarashvili, a member of the founding assembly with the quota of Agudat Yisrael, with the motif that he did nothing for the community he was representing in the parliament (ბააზოვი, 2000: 249). Gershon Megrelishvili vividly describes the struggle of political parties for Jewish votes after the revolution of 1917 using the example of Lailashi village in Lechkhumi. After the overthrow of the emperor Nikolas II, a representative of the Social Democratic Party came to the village and called on the Jews for support, then a representative of Agudat Yisrael visited them with the same request, and finally David Baazov addressed Lailashi dwellers. Many people then learned that there was a Zionist organization. Baazov spoke about Theodor Herzl, Zionist congresses, Pogroms of Chisinau and pogrom of 1905, Beilis trial, examples of bravery and heroism of the Jewish military units fighting for the liberation of Eretz-Israel (ბააზოვი, 2000: 245-246). According to Gershon Megrelishvili, by 1918 the Zionist organizations operated in Kutaisi and Oni. Zionists were very weakly represented in Tbilisi. An exception was Bandza, where, thanks to Rabbi David Ajiashvili, the majority of Jewish electorate (1000 inhabitants) voted for the Zionists. Also, thanks to Rabbi Abram Khvoles, the Jews of Tskhinvali (2000 inhabitants) voted for the Zionists (ბააზოვი, 2000: 249). By 1920, the number of Zionists reached several hundred. According to Megrelishvili's observations, David Baazov captured the hearts and minds of everyone during his sermons, however, when it came to the elections, Agudat Yisrael received the majority of the votes (ბააზოვი, 2000: 250).

The political turbulence of the first two decades of the twentieth century had a particularly heavy impact on the fate of the Jewish community living in different regions of Georgia. During political turmoil and military conflicts, David Baazov was remembered as a dedicated leader of his community/nation. For example, in 1918, when David Baazov served as a rabbi in Akhaltsikhe, during the current war between Georgia and Ottoman Empire, when Ottomans occupied Samtskhe, the Jews of Atskuri awaited exile and death. David Baazov went to the Pasha of Akhaltsikhe and with his permission and help arrived in Atskuri and saved 40 families from death by starvation (ბააზოვი, 2000: 268-271). Similarly, when in the winter of 1921, the Soviet Russian army invaded Georgia from the Mamisoni pass and entered Oni, they arrested many "white-handed" citizens, among whom were cult servants, including David Baazov. In the end, the Soviet commandship, which had to take care of hungry and poorly clothed troops, heeded the advice of the locals to release David Baazov, along with other prisoners who were awaiting death penalty, as he enjoyed a high reputation in the local community (ბააზოვი, 2000: 54).

#### FIRST YEARS OF OCCUPATION (1921-1926)

During the occupation, the Zionists tried to benefit the Jews of Georgia from the changes promised by the

revolution. Considering the policy of the Soviet government to fight against the bourgeois class and the merchants, the Zionists tried make accessible secondary, higher and professional education for the trade-dependent Jews and thus get rid of anti-Semitic stereotypes on the one hand, and on the other hand, to avoid the hostile attitude of the Soviet government, as Jews were primarily associated with the exploiting bourgeoisie of the proletariat. In 1922, the Baazov family moved from Oni to Tbilisi at the invitation of Jews of Tskhinvali community in Tbilisi. During this period, son of David Baazov lawyer, writer and playwright Gertzel Baazov, emerged as an influential socialite in the public arena (ბააზოვი, 2000: 336). In 1924, David Baazov and Nathan Eliashvili obtained the right to publish the newspaper Maccabees (*makaveeli*). According to the editorial staff, Maccabees, the national hero of the ancient kingdom of Judea, embodied the indomitable genius of the nation, the ability of eternal struggle and the symbol of Jewish national-cultural revival. The newspaper aimed at national self-determination through cultural revival, fought assimilationist tendencies and tried to bring the Jews of Georgia to the culturally high intellectual level reached by Jewish brothers and sisters in different parts of the world (ბააზოვი, გ., 1924: 1). As ambitious as the goals of the newspaper were, so modest was its editorial office, which was located in Jerusalem lane, in the bedroom of David and Rakhil Baazovs (ბააზოვი, 2000: 20). The editorial team of the newspaper believed that a small number of intelligentsia could not improve the situation due to the coldness of the masses, the government should open workshops and agricultural schools, labor schools, libraries and reference libraries throughout Georgia. Along with general education, Jewish children had to learn the Hebrew language, history, and values of the Jewish national culture (მოშიაშვილი, 1924: 2). David Baazov demanded cultural autonomy for Jews: "Our political rights are intertwined with the Georgian people. Whatever the Georgian people will have, they will spare nothing for us. Our attitude and that of Georgians was, is and will be brotherly and friendly" (ბააზოვი, 1924: 1).

Davit Baazov called on the People's Commissariat of Education from the pages of Maccabees to grant permission for the establishment of the Tarbut organization, which they had been waiting for for more than a year. The purpose of Tarbuti was to spread Jewish culture among the Jews of Georgia, to open libraries and to organize lectures. Tarbut would have a central board in Tbilisi and branch offices in the regions. Thus, for David Baazov, the minimum programme was "our school, helping the poor and Tarbut". A total of 3 issues of Maccabees were published, the fourth issue did not pass the censorship and was closed in 1924 on the grounds that it was an expression of Jewish nationalism (წიწუაშვილი, 2014: 137). As for the Tarbut, its charter was approved in 1924, but in fact it did not begin working, because it was perceived as a center of Jewish nationalism (წიწუაშვილი, 2014: 136).

After the defeat of Tarbut and the closing of Macca-

bees, the group of Zionists drew their efforts to fight for the improvement of the difficult economic situation of the Jews. Nathan Eliashvili and David Baazov met with the head of the Communist Party of Georgia, Philippe Makharadze, with the proposal to allocate agricultural land for Jews to establish Jewish settlements, which was declined due to the shortage of cultivable land (ბააზოვი, 2000: 348). In October 1925, after long efforts, David Baazov received permission from the authorities to travel to Mandatory Palestine, from where he brought hundreds of certificates for the settlement of Georgian Jews in Eretz-Israel. Baazov managed to send only 50 families there, including Natan Eliashvili, after that the Communist government restricted immigration to Israel (ბააზოვი, 2000: 313). The Baazov family also wanted to join Aliyah, but they did not manage. A cardboard box full of clothes for the trip to Eretz Israel was kept in their house. Rakhil would periodically unpack clothes, hats, shoes, untie them, put them under the Sun, and then tie them again, hoping that someday they would definitely go to Israel (ბააზოვი, 2000: 56).

An important event in the life of Georgian Jews was the founding of the 102nd Jewish Labor School in Tbilisi by Nathan Eliashvili in 1921 with the permission of the Soviet regime. The purpose of the school was to spread literacy among the Jews. The classes were mixed by age, because the students of the school were collected from the streets and put in one class according to their level of knowledge (ბააზოვი, 2000: 33). Charity events were organized to help the 102nd labor school, where donations were collected for shoes, clothes, and hot breakfast for poor children (ბააზოვი, 2000: 44). At the initial stage, Gertzel Baazov worked as the head of the educational section and as a teacher of ancient Hebrew language and literature. In the early 20s, when Gertzel Baazov and Nathan Eliashvili worked at the school, the main goal of the education was to instill national spirit in Jewish children. However, from the second half of the 1920s and especially from the 1930s, the direction of the school changed distinctly. Hebrew language subjects were removed and a pioneer squad was created in the school (ბააზოვი, 2000: 34). According to the resolution of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party of September 18, 1926, the teaching of the Hebrew language in Jewish schools was prohibited (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 55).

In 1924, the drama troupe *Kadima Advance* was formed on the basis of students of the 102nd Labor School for the elimination of illiteracy among Jews (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 76). With the directorship of Dodo Antadze the troupe staged Meckler's drama *Khasa Givash* in the officers' house. Before the performance Communist International was performed by the pupils of the 102nd school in the ancient Hebrew language. Kadima also staged Gerzel Baazov's play "Secret Apartment", as well as Chirikov's famous play "Jews". The members of Kadima were inexperienced and illiterate young people who engaged in trade and peddling during the day and went to rehearsals in the evenings (ბააზოვი, 2000: 366-367). The performances of Kadima acquired a huge

national significance for the Jews of Georgia. During the cultural evenings hundreds of Jews walked proudly in the halls and foyer of the theater with arrayed chests with a badge portrait of Theodor Herzl crafted by the students of the Jewish School (ბააზოვი, 2000: 348-352).

Baazov and his group were thwarted in every direction, while the Soviet government later implemented the projects that the Zionists suggested. By the decree of December 25, 1927, the Land Development Society of Working Jews (*memsi*) and the Land Development Committee of Working Jews (*memki*) were formed. From 1925 to 1936 Jews joined collective farms and new rural settlements in a compulsory manner. In 1928, 288 Jewish families expressed their desire to work in agriculture. 11,000 ha of land was at the disposal of the Land Development Society of Working Jews. Jewish collective farms were established in Lagodekhi ("Red Hill"), in Tiriphon Valley, in Adjara (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 30). The changes that took place in the Jewish community of Georgia are described in many novels and plays of Gerzel Baazov, in which he described the liberation of Jews from petty trading and superiority and authority of rabbis and rich merchants by establishing collective farms or artels. The protagonists of these works are worker or revolutionary Jews (ბააზოვი: 1960; ბააზოვი 1962). After the 1940s, collective farms created on the basis of ethnicity began to dissolve (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 10). In the 1928 Aiding Committee of Poor Jews (*gharebkomi*) was established with the aim (1) to transform the socio-economic status of poor Jews, (2) to prepare a cadre of craftsmen and workers among Jews, (3) to liberate Jews from the influence of the synagogue (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 30).

The government opened libraries and reference libraries in Tbilisi (in 1926), Kutaisi (in 1927) and Akhaltsikhe (in 1928) (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 60-61). On November 23, 1933, the Historical-Ethnographic Museum of Jews was founded (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 66). The establishment of the museum made a great contribution to finding, studying and publishing archival materials on Jewish history (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 83). During this period, important steps were taken in the direction of equity between men and women. In 1924, the first women's delegate council was established in the Jewish quarter (ვადაჭკორია, 2005: 62). From the second half of the 1920s, the first communist cells were established in Kutaisi (1927), Tbilisi (1928), Senaki Mazra (1928). The number one task of the communist organizations was to politicize the youth, to instill the faith of loyalty to the Soviet ideology and obedience to it, which was to be achieved by strengthening the anti-religious work among the Jewish youth (ვადაჭკორია 2005: 64).

#### AFTER 1928, BEFORE THE REPRESSIONS.

Struggle against Trotskyists and those with "right deviation" also included David Baazov and his group. Bolsheviks tried to prepare the ground for the opposition of the Jewish community towards Baazov. For this



purpose, the Communist party did utilize the board of the Vardzieli reference library. On November 20, 1927, at the session of the National Minorities Sub-Division under the Central Executive Committee of Georgia, David Baazov and his supporters were officially declared as petty-bourgeois-nationalists and supporters of the “right deviation”. The views of Baazov were labeled as Baazovism. 1928 session of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party adopted a resolution to take the class line and fight against chauvinism among Georgian Jews (ვადაჭორია, 2005: 56-57). Controversy also reached the 102nd school. According to Polina Baazov’s memoirs, the parents confronted the Baazov family, as if Polina Baazov undeservedly received high marks. The controversy was so intense, in which the principal of the school also participated, that Polina was transferred from school 102nd to the First Experimental School (ბააზოვი, 2000: 45). Rabbis opposed to Zionism also fought against David Baazov. He was no longer allowed to visit synagogues and *bimah* (raised platforms in synagogue where Torah is read), and he mainly prayed at home (Baazov, 2000: 144-145). The Baazov family was worried about the current repressions, and it’s obvious that they anticipated the calamities they would face. Polina Baazov recalls that in February of 1938, Gertzel Baazov reassured her mother that she was not threatened with repression, as he had not committed anything against the government. As it turned out, this was the last meeting of the mother and son. According to the testimony of Gershon Megrelishvili, in the March of 1938, Gertzel Baazov appeared scared as someone had filed a complaint against him on charges of Zionism. Gertzel Baazov was arrested on April 25, 1938 as a member of the Zionist counter-revolutionary organization and an agent of the United Kingdom. The family was initially hopeful, believing that the mistake would be altered soon, especially in light of the fact that after his arrest on June 2, 1938, his play dedicated to Jewish revolutionary Itska Rizhinashvili with the similar title was staged in the Marjanishvili Drama theater. The family expected Gertzel to appear on the stage after the performance, but their expectations didn’t fulfill (ბააზოვი, 2000: 89-90). On October 11, 1938, Gertzel Baazov was tortured to death by Georgian security workers in the Ortachala prison, Tbilisi (Baazov, 2000: 97-99). In July of the same year, David and Khaim Baazovs were also arrested. The trial lasted for a year, the verdict was announced on April 2, 1939. They were accused of spreading Zionist ideas, underground activities, emigration of Georgian Jews to Israel by deceiving the Bolshevik government (ბააზოვი, 2000: 94). According to the court’s decision, Khaim Baazov, as a member of Tzeirei Zion, was sentenced to 5 years in prison, and David Baazov was sentenced to death. As a result of his daughter Fani Baazov’s persistent efforts and the appeal of the sentence, David Baazov’s execution was replaced by exile to Siberia. He returned from exile in 1945 and died in 1946 (ბააზოვი, 2000: 95).

## CONCLUSION

The goal of the Zionist group, to reach national-cultural revival of Jews of Georgia in 1921-1940 proved unattainable, because the aim of the Soviet policy was to create a working Jew who would be a part of the proletariat, not the Jewish nation. Although the desire of the Zionists to promote education, to encourage the Jews joining professional unions instead of trade, to free them from the influence of rabbis and religious groups seemed to coincide with the desire of the Bolshevik party. In the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks pursued a relatively mild policy in the newly occupied Georgia. Since the second half of the 20s, the repressive machine is getting stronger. At first, they pursued only the exclusion and marginalization of David Baazov from Jewish community; from the second half of the 1930s, the repressions also affected the unfavorable Zionists. Despite the repressions, the activities of the Zionist group left a significant mark on the Jewish community of Georgia, which is the subject of another and future scholarship.

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