The Gurians' Fight for Freedom by Marjory Wardrop

The movement in Guria began on purely economic grounds. Most of the land is in the hands of noblemen who let it to the peasants. Seldom does one find a peasant with as much as five acres of land and most have less than two acres. In the years 1901 and 1902 failure of the harvest brought matters to a crisis. The desiatin of land produced only 20 to 30 poods of maize instead of 80 to 120 poods. The landlords demanded their rent as usual, the priests demanded the usual fee of 30% for burial or marriage services and government taxes were continually increasing. The peasants flocked into the towns especially [pg 2] Batum seeking for work. In 1902 there was a general strike of factory hands in Batum and the Gurians who had been at work there returned to their villages and taught the people how to fight against their landowners by strikes in the country in the same way as they were fighting the capitalists in the towns. The peasants eagerly listened while their brothers drew a bright picture of the future, where there would be no private property in land or in instruments of production, where all would work for each and each "for all" when the day of freedom, equality, brotherhood would come upon earth. The Gurians were ready pupils in the school of socialism, and when their landlords demanded ½ the harvest in cases where the land was fertile and ⅓ the harvest where it was less productive they refused to pay. Everywhere they gathered together and demanded that the rents for land should be lowered.

The landlords informed the police that the peasants were in an agitated state and the district chief arrived with Cossacks to "pacify" them. The deputation, sent to explain their grievances, was arrested and imprisoned. But the peasants insisted on the demands and resolved to pay nothing to the landlords or priests until these were satisfied. Some of the squires and priests yielded, but soon after this the governor arrived to enquire into the agitation among the peasants. Again the peasants chose a deputation, which explained to the governor their [pg 3] desperate state and explained to him the necessity of reducing the rents and of abolishing the excise on spirits and indirect taxes in general. The only reply of the governor was to arrest the deputation, most of whom were sent to Siberia, and to insist that the peasants should fulfil all the

demands of the squires, who were commanded not to yield in the slightest degree. The surprise and indignation of the Gurians knew no bounds, for hither to, in spite of the repressive measures of local [unintelligible], they had been loyal and believed that the government would support them in their just demands. Before leaving, the governor demanded that the ring leaders should be given up, but as these were not forthcoming, he produced in paper, read out the names of various peasants and ordered their arrest. A young Gurian who cried out "Tell us for what crime you are punishing us" was arrested too and sent to prison with the rest.

As the Gurians were firm in their refusal to pay the landlords, the priests an executzia was sent. Cossacks and soldiers broke into the peasants' houses, broke open coffers, seized all they had and sold it for a mere song. So the taxes were paid. From this time the peasants knew that they could get no more justice from the government than from the nobles and the movement became political as well as economical. From this time they recognized no administrative [pg 4] power. They chose from among themselves the most intelligent and honest peasants and inserted them with power. Each Gurian village had such an elected council which issued regulations; a secret armed militia was formed to support the council. The council settled all quarrels among the peasants, judged ill doers and punished them. For ordinary crimes the culprit received a severe rebuke and was forced to labour for a set period for the good of the community making roads, building bridges and so forth. If the crime was more serious, the delinquent was boycotted or driven out of his village for a certain time. One man was caught who had stolen a poor neighbour's cow. The judges ordered him to be punished thus: he was to take the cow and make the tour of the village calling out the villagers and telling them that he had stolen this cow, that he felt ashamed of himself before his brothers and that he would never do such a thing again. And, indeed, after this punishment he astonished everyone by his honesty. He willingly chose the hardest work and did all in his power to expiate his fault. In a short time robbery and theft disappeared from Guria. It is interesting to note that even the nobles betook themselves to these peasant lawgivers finding their judgment much more rapid as well as more just than that in the government law courts. Nobody frequented the law courts [pg 5] and at last every tribunal in Guria was closed.

In 1903 a general strike directed against the landlords began all over Guria. The socialist propaganda yielded rich results among the Gurians who assimilated socialist ideals with astonishing ease in spite of the fact that they do not belong to the proletariat, but are mostly small

farmers. They had founded public libraries and eagerly read newspapers and books. Every day the children went to school, often running five miles barefooted. Women tried to broaden their minds so that they might be worthy mothers and train their children, especially their boys in a free revolutionary spirit. The peasants met together and pronounced ardent speeches. Naturally, the officials would not tolerate such a state of affairs and betook themselves to their usual methods: Cossack whips cracked, masses of peasants were arrested and imprisoned in Kutais while many were exiled to Siberia; and the libraries were closed. But the Gurians were not cowed, on the contrary, they determined at all costs to carry on the struggle for freedom to the end. They saw that the only method of fighting the police was by acts of terrorism. In a short time many rural policemen, district chiefs, and constables were killed. Every outrage on the peasants met with speedy reprisals. The intended victim was warned by the secret committee to quit the service: if he obeyed the warning he was spared, if he persisted in remaining [pg 6] at his post he was murdered. Soon such a panic seized the government officials in Guria that whenever one received a warning he resigned.

In the beginning of 1905 the chief of the Ozurgeti district and his assistant resigned in a hurry at the request of the Guardians and for some time no one could be found to fill the posts. Finally a Price Nakashidze police inspector, in default of another candidate, was appointed chief. But he soon brought upon himself the wrath of the Gurians. In Batum the workmen killed the gendarme Prince Gurieli; a descendant of the ruling princes of Guria, for having personally beaten strikers. His body was brought to Ozurgeti for internment in the family vault. But the committee gave orders that the prince was not to be buried, No priest could be found to perform the burial service, no sexton would dig the grave. Prince Nakashidze took a soldier to dig the grave and then Prince Gurieli was committed to his unblest tomb. As Prince Nakashidze was going home after the burial a Gurian, wrapped in a burka, met him and told him that for disobeying the orders of the committee he must resign, otherwise he would be killed. Within a week Prince Nakashidze had left the service.

By February 1905 Guria was completely independent. Political refugees, instead of fleeing abroad, fled from Tiflis, Kutais, and Batum to [pg 7] Guria, where they were quite safe. The local adminstrat finding itself powerless applied to the Commander in Chief, General Malama, asking him to send troops from Tiflis to reconquer Guria. The first Gurian campaign began. A vast army with artillery moved towards Ozurgeti, Guria was threatened with complete

ruin as the peasants had not enough arms to resist the troops. The whole Georgian nation was roused. Editors of the Georgian papers and leading members of the community besought General Malama to delay military operations and to send Sultan Krim-Girei to enquire into the causes of the peasant agitation. They assured the General that the administration was mistaken and that there was no rising in Guria. Malama sent orders that the army was to wait and Sultan Krim-Girei visited all the villages in Guria listening to the demands of the deputies. The Gurians were pleased that he had come among them without an escort, they themselves formed a trusty guard for their guest, as they called him, lest some "provocator" should attempt his life.

Sultan Krim-Girei was struck by the progress the Gurians had made. In every village alike the peasants explained the causes which had driven them to the struggle and formulated the same [pg 8] demands. In the village of Khidistavi, Krim Gerei was met by many thousands. Among the deputies were women as well as men. One young Gurian spoke to him as follows: You have come among us to learn from ourselves why we are agitated and what it is we strive for, This is quite new to us. The officials of the government had never taken the trouble to investigate the cause of the people's struggle against them; without any discussion they beat us with whips, shut us up in prison and sent us to Siberia. But you have come among us without escort trusting in our honesty. We answer you in the same spirit and frankly lay before you our aspirations. Before everything else we need land. We cannot understand why those should possess the land who do not cultivate it. Surely the land was not made for the squires! We are dying of hunger, while the barns of the landlords are full of that maize which we sowed and which we reaped. Could there be greater injustice! We toil and others enjoy the fruits of our toil. Only he who labours on the land should profit by it and yet those own it who have no sort of desire to work on it. We have not land, we have to rent it from the landlords, who take from us in the shape of rent almost all we earn by our toil. Such injustice should be done [pg 9] with Cossack whips. We felt the necessity of investigating our position, of understanding the reasons of so unjust a social organization. We eagerly read the newspapers, but there we find not a word on our needs. But we read revolutionary proclamations; in these our position, our needs , our aspirations are wonderfully clearly set forth. Why is it not possible to write of these things in the newspapers! Therefore we demand liberty of the press and of meeting. We bought books in order to instruct ourselves, but the government has closed our libraries. Why does the government want to keep us ignorant! Is it not because it is easier to exploit an ignorant unenlightened

people? We must have instruction, therefore we demand free compulsory education for children of both sexes till the age of 16 years. Our soldiers are not allowed to serve in Georgia, they are sent North, they cannot stand the severe climate and two out of three die. The army is made with the people's money. They are told to defend the country from external and from internal foes. The external foes, we may suppose to be Japanese, but who are the internal foes? Surely it cannot be that we are these foes, we peasants and workmen who feed the army and all other classes by our unbearable stubborn toil? Surely the internal foes are not the workmen, whose blood crimsoned the streets of Petersburg on Jan. 9! The army should defend the realm from enemies, but instead of that it shoots down its brothers. Therefore the army should be disbanded and replaced [pg 10] by a national militia. We, Jews and Russians, Armenians and Georgians are all brothers and if a foe attacks our land we can all offer the necessary resistance. These are our demands and they are the demands of all the [left blank] thinking part of the Russian people. For asking this many are languishing in prison, many are perishing in Siberia. We demand their release. We know well that the present government cannot satisfy these demands; it can only rule by whips and bullets. But this does not trouble us. We will fight for truth and justice and for a better lot. Our pledge for victory is that all the working classes in Russia are fighting for the same demands. When this class shakes off the present government and hands over the power to the representatives of the people chosen by universal direct, equal, and secret voting, when the people obtain the means of ordering their own lot, then only shall we breathe freely, then only will happiness reign upon the earth.

Krim Girei hears similar speeches in all the villages of Guria. By his report, the government realized that bayonets and guns would be powerless against the awakened people, and it was decided to withdraw the army. Thus ended the first campaign in Guria. The landlords resolved to make concessions. During the whole period of the peasant agitation no land has been rented from them and no peasant has worked the land for them. They agreed to let [pg 11] them have the land, and for the time the agitation in Guria ceased.

During the summer of 1905 all was quiet. For all practical purposes the Gurians had gained their freedom, for the government no longer interfered in their affairs. They still had their own chosen judges, and they ignored completely all government institutions. Every week there was a village meeting at which the chosen judges gave an account of their stewardship. In Guria there was complete freedom of speech, assembly, and association. But the people knew well that

until they had shaken off the autocratic government they would be robbed of their freedom sooner or later. The outskirts of Russia, Georgia, Poland, and Finland had long prepared for an armed rising, but in the centre (of Russia) the people were not yet thoroughly aroused. Profiting by this fact, the government wished to give the movement a national character and assured all that it was only the subject races who were agitated and that they wished to separate from Russia. It was clear that no definite end could be gained until all the working people of Russia rose to the defense of their rights which had been trampled on for so long. So the Gurians waited impatiently for the moment when the Russian nation would rise.

At least the newspapers brought [pg 12] away with, and it can only be done away with by handing over the land to the workers, without any compensation. The peasants who have bought their shares from the landowners should receive their money back. To divide the land fairly committees of peasants chosen from the whole population, should be established.

We are oppressed by the priests no less than by the landlords. They strive to cloud our brains by various sermons on patience and submission in order to despoil us more easily. For all these virtues they promise us after death the kingdom of heaven, paradise. But we leave the kingdom of heaven to them, the priests; let them give us the means of living here on the earth in a human way. Indirect taxation is also a terrible burden on the poor population, Kerosene in Batum costs 40 kopeks a pud. We pay 1 rouble 20 kopeks a pud and our kerosene is much cheaper abroad than in our own country. It is necessary to abolish taxes on spirits, sugar, iron, in a word, on all goods of prime importance. We demand the establishment of a progressive income tax and those who have a yearly income of not more than 500 rubles should be exempt. The judges do not understand us, our interests are foreign to them, therefore they should be replaced by elected judges. Life becomes more and more complex, and we must meet together and discuss our needs. But the government disperses the most harmless meeting. [pg 13] The joyful news that at Moscow all railways had struck and that in the whole of Russia a general political strike was beginning. The Gurian Councils gave orders for an immediate general strike throughout Guria. This strike began on Oct. 15th 1906. In many places railway bridges were blown up, telegraph wires were cut. On Oct. 16th in Chokhatauri the Gurians fell on the police station and ordered them to yield. In reply the inspector and guards opened fire. After a short interchange of shots the Gurians took the house and disarmed the police; two had been killed and two wounded, the rest were made prisoners. When the district chief, Lazarenko, heard of this he sent a letter to

the governor of Kutais begging him to send troops and artillery. Twice the messenger bearing the letter was arrested on the road by Gurians. Then he tried to send a man to Batum, but he too was seized by the Gurians who were determined at all costs to prevent communication between the towns. It was easy to do this as the railways and telegraph strikes were universal. The letter which Lazarenko wrote was as follows. 18 Oct. midnight the Ozurgeti district is completely cut off from the rest of the Empire. I have twice tried to communicate with the governor of Kutais, but my runners have been seized on the road. The whole of Guria is enveloped in the flames of revolution. I have very few troops, only 700 infantry. I beg you to lend at once a sobuia of Cossacks [pg 14] and a mountain battery. Then he announced that he was going himself with a sobuia of Cossacks to rescue the inspector. The Gurians, having read this hastily, worked out a plan of resistance.

On Oct. 19th Lazarenko with 130 Cossacks arrived at Chokhatauri where the inspector had been arrested. But in the meantime the Gurians had led their prisoners to another place. An engagement took place on the same day between a detachment of Cossacks and the peasant militia. Two Cossacks were killed and three wounded, on the peasants' side only one was killed. Lazarenko stayed two days in Chokatauri and on the 20th decided to return to Ozurgeti. Only one part of the peasant militia followed Lazarnko, determined at whatever cost to fall upon the Cossacks and seize their arms. It was a quiet, moonlight night. Countless stars lighted up the narrow path which twisted snake-like between two woody hills. In the very narrowest part of the glen the Gurians erected barricades. Lazarenko with his detachment took every precaution. He sent out guards far in front who shouted in Georgian, "Comrades, where are you? Be ready the army is behind us!" But the Gurians were wary and knew that it was not their comrades calling. They lay hidden in their ambush and nearer and nearer came the Cossacks. At last the command was heard: Halt, there are obstacles in the road! The guards began to fire aimlessly. Suddenly there was a deafening explosion. Bombs had been thrown and the advance part of Lazarenko's detachment with the transport was blown to pieces. Then followed a well-aimed volley from the ambush and more guards fell dead from their horses. The Cossacks leaped [pg 15] their horses, lay on the ground and opened fire. The Gurians replied. After an hour's engagement the Cossacks were forced to retreat. They occupied a high hill and again opened fire. The whole night the combat continued. At dawn the chief of the Gurian militia addressed himself then to his warriors: Comrades! Yesterday the enemy was twice as strong as we were. Today we are equal in

number. Shall we storm them or not? At all costs we must have their weapons. The brave peasants surrounded the Cossacks' position on three sides and opened a murderous fire. The Cossack ranks were thinning and the Gurians came nearer and nearer. At last they fled leaving behind them many rifles and cartridges. On the road to Ozurgeti there was another engagement in which another Cossack was wounded and one killed. The Gurians celebrated their victory by singing revolutionary hymns and decided the next day to attack the town in order to get the arsenal. But the next day workmen arrived on foot from Kutais with the news of the publications of the manifesto of Oct. 17.

The Gurians received the manifesto with indifference, realizing that the government merely intended to stem the revolutionary tide with fair promises; nevertheless, they decided to stop military action. No one imagined that after such a manifesto the government would organize a counter [pg 16] revolution. On 22 Oct. a sobuia and Cossack troops marched on the villages. About a mile from Ozurgeti they came upon an old man of 65 who was washing at a spring. The old man greeted the soldiers with the Russian words used when greeting soldiers (*Здорово, молодцы*) [Hi there, fine fellowsl. In reply the order was given, Bayonet him! And fell pierced by twelve bayonets, the poor old man. The Cossacks burned several villages. When they reached the scene of the engagement they buried their dead and carried the wounded back to Ozurgeti. On their way back they indulged in such ferocious behaviour that the inhabitants forsook their villages and fled. The Cossacks fell upon the deserted dwellings, collected the bedding and all the peasants belongings and burned them.

Soon all the villages near Ozurgeti were in flames. The peasants in grief and terror watched while the Cossacks in one day alone burned 90 of their homes. The Gurian militia decided to attack the Cossacks in spite of their resolution to stop hostilities, but Lazarenko hearing of their approach and knowing his inferiority in numbers gave orders that looting was to cease and retired to Ozurgeti. Having received reinforcements and artillery he determined to engage in a campaign to conquer Guria. The Gurians on their side decided not to attack Ozurgeti, but not to allow a single Cossack to come out of the town. For three days nothing happened, the news came that a larger [pg 17] force with mountain artillery had left Batum. The Gurians were determined to shed their last drop of blood in the struggle and even dreamt of capturing the enemies' guard.

Thus began the second Gurian expedition, The Georgian community again begged the Viceroy to recall the troops and to send Sultan Krim Girei to pacify the peasants. The Governor of Kutais Staroselsky, a very humane man, went to Tiflis in order to persuade the Viceroy to withdraw the army. At the same time there arrived in Tiflis a deputation of peasants of the Jora valley, E. of Tiflis. Having ridden over 60 miles the deputation made a demonstration in front of the viceroy's palace singing Georgian warrior songs. They announced to the Viceroy that the Gurians were the vanguard of the movement for freedom and the flower of the Georgian nation, that if the troops were to annihilate them, every Georgian, to a man, would rise. With them would rise all the Georgian mountain tribes and all the Caucasian mountaineers would join them. The Russians would then be forced to reconquer the whole of the Caucasus. Again the administration decided to recall the troops, but commanded that the Gurians should pay the government taxes and that recruits should appear on Oct. 26th to fulfill [pg 18] seemed like missed a page but the numbering seems correct? the rebels fell on a company of 100 soldiers at Tquibuli and ordered them to yield. The soldiers refused and an encounter ensued in which 3 soldiers were killed and wounded while the revolutionaries had 10 casualties; only after a sofuia of Cossacks and company of infantry arrived from Kutais did the peasants retreat. In Kutais rumours began to circulate that two companies of soldiers had been taken prisoners so it was decided to recall the soldiers from all along the line to town. From Bielogory, in the Shorapans district, a company under the command of Davidov set out, but met with determined attack vessels from B. After a short encounter Davidor was killed, also the now commissioned officer who replaced him. The company was put to flight. Some of the soldiers went to Kutais station where another company was guarding the treasury. The revolutionaries surrounded the treasury and ordered the soldiers to capitulate. The soldiers refused and a fight began. It lasted an hour. Javakhov, commanding the company, was killed at the beginning of the engagement. After a stubborn resistance the soldiers hoisted a white flag. Their arms were seized and the soldiers (116) were sent to the villages where they were very well treated by the peasants. The revolutionaries collected 201.000 roubles from the treasury. Cossacks were sent to deliver the prisoners, but the [pg 19] commander having severely wounded himself accidentally, the men returned to Kutais. Then Staroselskey, governor of Kutais went to Kvirila without escort and on his repressed actions the prisoners were given up, but the Gurians refused to return the arms and money.

In the early days of January news of the failure of the uprising in the center of Russia reached Tiflis, on the 3rd the Georgian workment decided to abandon the railway strike and to offer no hindrance to the troops from restoring communication between Tiflis and Batum. A detachment of troops marched from Batum and another from Tiflis. The Tiflis detachment met with no resistance until it came to the Suram tunnel, nevertheless the troops mercilessly destroyed the villages with artillery fire. The army demanded that agitators and rifles should be given up. The peasants replied that they did not know the agitators and they gave up old arms. Destroying everything in their path the detachment reached the station of Mikhailovo. Here the workmen offered some resistance but after a fierce bombardment the station was stormed and burnt. The same fate befell Suram. The detachment did not go farther as on the other side of the Suram pass were well armed revolutionary militia. General Alikhanoff, appointed military governer of the Government of Kutais, assured the representatives of the nobility that he was going with troops not to perform acts of repression but to restore railway communication. This news flew quietly through the district of Shorapan and the revolutionary militia withdrew and allowed the troops to pass into Western Georgia. But General Alikhanoff's soldiers, in spite of his assurances, set village after village on fire. The Gurians meantime knew nothing of what had happened in the rest of Russia nor even of the doings of the troops in the neighbouring district of Shorapan. They only learnt when a detachment of troops under Colonel Krylov descended upon Ozurgeti and destroyed the town by fire. Krylov began to send separate bands into the villages of Guria and demanded the handing over of agitators and 3000 Berdan rifles. These villages which refused to give up their comrades and guns were razed to the ground. In spite of this not one village gave up agitators. Then Krylov insisted only on the rifles, and many old weapons were given up while the new ones were hidden. For the time the movement was crushed.