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From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus

The Soviet Union and the making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh

Arsène Saparov

ROUTLEDGE

From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus

This book is the first historical work to study the creation of ethnic autonomies in the Caucasus in the 1920s – the transitional period from Russian Empire to Soviet Union. Seventy years later these ethnic autonomies were to become the loci of violent ethno-political conflicts which have consistently been blamed on the policies of the Bolsheviks and Stalin. According to this view, the Soviet leadership deliberately set up ethnic autonomies within the republics, thereby giving Moscow unprecedented leverage against each republic.

From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus questions this assumption by examining three case studies – Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh which are placed within the larger socio-political context of transformations taking place in this borderland region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It examines demographic, social and economic consequences of the Russian colonization and resulting replacement of traditional societies and identities with modern ones. Based on original Russian language sources and archival materials, the book brings together two periods that are usually studied separately – the period of the Russian Civil War (1917–20) and the early Soviet period – in order to understand the roots of the Bolshevik decision-making policy when granting autonomies. It argues that rather than being the product of blatant political manipulation this was an attempt at conflict resolution. The institution of political autonomy, however, became a powerful tool for national mobilization during the Soviet era.

Contributing both to the general understanding of the early Soviet nationality policy, and to our understanding of the conflicts that have engulfed the Caucasus region since the 1990s, this book will be of interest to scholars of Central Asian studies, Russian/Soviet history, ethnic conflict, security studies and international relations.

Arsène Saparov received a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics, UK, in 2007. He now teaches Russian/Soviet and Caucasian history at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. His research focuses on ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus, and Russian and Soviet history.

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28 Growing Up in the North Caucasus
Society, family, religion and education
Irina Molodikova and Alan Watt

29 From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus
The Soviet Union and the making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh
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For my parents:
Karen Sergeevich Saparov (1936–2010)
Elisabeth Mikhailovna Miasnikian (1937–92)

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Contents

Figures

Tables

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Note on transliteration and place-names

The Library of Congress system of transliteration is used in the text, except for names for which there are commonly accepted English forms. The spelling of some geographic terms presents a problem, as there are not always established English terms for place-names. The term Transcaucasia (*Zakavkaz'e*), which reflects the vision from Moscow (both imperial and Soviet), is currently being replaced by the more neutral South Caucasus. However, in some cases Transcaucasia is employed to refer to some instances of the official usage during the tsarist and Soviet periods. For example, the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Republic – *Zakavkazskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Federativnaia Sovetskaia Respublika* (ZSFSR) cannot be translated as South Caucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. In some cases the name used in the nineteenth century was spelled differently from the twentieth century accepted usage. Examples are: Tiflis and Tbilisi, Erevan and Yerevan, Batum and Batumi, Kutais and Kutaisi, etc. I use both spellings for corresponding periods. A number of geographic terms became the subject of hot political debate as conflicting parties proposed their own versions (often completely different). To avoid taking political sides, the geographic terms used in the Soviet Union are employed when dealing with the Soviet or post-Soviet periods.

Abbreviations and terms

AONK	*Avtonomnaiia Oblast' Nagornogo-Karabakha* (Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh); since 1936 changed to NKAO.
ChKa	*Chrezvychainaia Kommissia* – Extraordinary Commission – Soviet Secret Service and predecessor of the GPU, OGPU, NKVD and KGB.
Kavburo	The Caucasian Bureau was a representative of the *TsKa RKP(b)* in the Caucasus. It was created on April 8, 1920 in place of the KKK. Initially its members included Ordzhonikidze, Kirov, Nazarpetian, Orakhelashvili, Smilga and later Stalin. It functioned until February 22, 1922, when it resigned its powers to the *Zakraikom* (Transcaucasian Regional Committee).
KKK	*Kavkazskii Kraevoi Komitet* was the Bolshevik primary policy- and decision-making body in the Caucasus. It was superseded on April 8, 1920, by the *Kavburo*.
Korenizatsiia	An affirmative action policy of indigenization implemented within the USSR in the 1920s.
MVD	*Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del* – Ministry of the Interior.
Narkomat	*Narodnyi Kommissariat* (People's Commissariat); early Soviet term for "ministry."
Obkom	An acronym of *Oblastnoi kommitet* – Regional Party Committee.
OZAKOM	The *Osobyi Zakavkazskii Komitet* (Special Transcaucasian Committee) was created on March 22 (9), 1917 [new and old calendar style – Russia changed its calendar system after the February revolution so during 1917–18 two dates are used] by the provisional government, to function as a local government. After the Bolshevik coup in October/November 1917, OZAKOM was replaced by The Transcaucasian Commissariat on November 28 (15), 1917.
Raikom	*Raionnyi kommitet* – District Party Committee.
Raion	District – the lowest level administrative division within the USSR.
Revkom	Revolutionary Committee, an extraordinary unelected authority responsible for establishing Soviet power and acting as a temporary government.

Revvoensovet	*Revoliutsionnyi Voennyi Sovet* – Revolutionary Military Council.
RKKI	*Raboche-Krest'ianskaia Inspektsiia* – Worker-Peasant Inspectorate.
Uchastok	Tsarist administrative unit, sub-division of *uezd*.
Uezd	Tsarist administrative unit, sub-division of *gubernia* (province).
VAK	*Vysshaia Attestatsionnaia Komissiia* – the Soviet academic body that approved the award of candidate and doctorate degrees.
Zakraikom	The *Zakavkazskii Kraevoi Komitet* (Transcaucasian Regional Committee) was elected at the First Congress of the Communist Organizations of the South Caucasus to replace the *Kavburo* in February 1922. Its main functions remained the same as those of the *Kavburo* – to oversee the implementation of Moscow's policies in the region.
ZSFSR	*Zakavkazskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Federativnaia Sovetskaia Respublika* (Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic) – a Federation of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia from 1922 until 1936.

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Introduction

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 was accompanied by a series of violent ethno-nationalist conflicts in the Caucasus. Witnessing these events first hand stimulated my interest in understanding the roots of such conflicts. After all, nationalism in the Caucasus replaced the dominant Soviet ideology of the friendship of people with inconceivable ease. What is also noticeable is that the large-scale violence occurred only in the autonomous territories of the South Caucasus. Despite the fact that according to the 1926 Soviet Population Census the Caucasus was home to more than 100 different ethnic groups, violent conflicts occurred only in Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia – all three of them autonomous regions. Why were other ethnic groups not involved in this violence? Is there any particular reason why these autonomies were created? These are the questions that have held my attention in the two decades that followed the Soviet collapse. In my search for answers I eventually turned to early Soviet history, during which time the state structures were shaped. However, hardly anything has been written about the construction of the Soviet state in the South Caucasus. This book is to a very large extent a product of a personal quest to understand and explain these conflicts and attempt to fill existing gaps in the current historiography.

A good place to start this inquiry would be to look at how the Soviet historians themselves addressed this question. History works that deal with the Soviet Union are sharply split by the Cold War divide into a Western historiography, and a Soviet one. The Soviet historians were writing within an authoritarian system and were subjected to strict ideological and censorship controls. The Soviet leadership saw history as an important social science discipline which was fulfilling an essential ideological goal. Soviet historians had to write under the auspices of the Marxist school of thought. The entire world history was to be studied through the prism of class struggle. Traditional nineteenth century emphasis on the history of great men and great deeds was abandoned in favor of what was essentially a social history. However, Soviet enactment of this social history was rather peculiar. Not only was Marxist theory the only theoretical tool of inquiry available to Soviet historians, at the same time they had to confine themselves to the nuances of the internal ideological climate.

The period of history from the Bolshevik revolution onwards was particularly affected. If historians of previous periods had been comparatively free to inquire

into the social and political forces, as long as they remained within the Marxist discourse, then from October 1917 those limits became more rigid. The depiction of social and political events had to convey the unconditional support of the masses for the Bolshevik revolution. The leading role of the Bolshevik leadership had to be constantly highlighted. Because the set of leading personalities at the top of the Soviet Union hierarchy was constantly changing, historians had to carefully select facts that would express social support by workers, peasants and soldiers for the Bolsheviks, while at the same time avoiding discussion of instances when these very same social groups turned against the leadership. With Soviet historians having to distort the basic facts to fit the accepted discourse is it worth considering their works at all?

There are two periods when, despite all the associated shortcomings, the Soviet works provide valuable source material. The decade of the 1920s is extremely important as at that time numerous debates took place within the Soviet system which would disappear in the 1930s. On the one hand, there were frequent discussions of the constitutional organization of the Soviet state that shed light on the fluidity of state structures in the early period. On the other hand, this period saw the publication of a number of memoirs by recent participants in the revolution and the civil war. A careful contextualized reading of these sources can reveal a great deal about the internal workings of the Soviet decision-making system.

The relatively liberal first decade of Soviet rule was closed off in the 1930s – with only sterile works appearing thereafter until the death of Stalin. The other period when valuable sources reappeared was during the thaw under Nikita Khrushchev. He embarked upon a de-Stalinization campaign, liberalizing the system, allowing a limited public debate, and encouraging a revision of the previous excesses. Part of this campaign was publication of works critical of Stalinist errors. The Stalinist excesses in the Caucasus often occurred in the area of nationality policy; redressing these issues inevitably involved addressing existing minority grievances and invoking concessions to nationalist sentiments. From this point onwards the latent elements of nationalism remained embedded in the cultural production emerging from the region. The works from this period serve as a useful source of inquiry into the subtle development of nationalism within the USSR. The use of academic publications in the Caucasus as tools of nationalist mobilization was aptly shown by Viktor Shnirel'man (2001, 2003).

The other aspect of Khrushchev era publications is their direct value as a source of documents and decisions hitherto unknown to the general public. In order to pave the way for the desired changes within nationality policy a number of documents were published that demonstrated the wrongdoings of the Stalinist epoch. Abkhaz historian Sagariia (1970) was the only one who addressed directly the question of the creation of the autonomous formation in the South Caucasus. His writing was carefully positioned within the Soviet official discourse, and he always stopped short of showing Abkhaz grievances, but his presentation of documents and various decisions by Soviet authorities left no doubt that such decisions could only be seen as injustices of the nationality policy. The

Ossetian historians writing at the same time were also able to publish controversial early Soviet documents that richly illustrated their grievances. Unlike Abkhazia or South Ossetia, Nagorno Karabakh was lacking any publications dealing with the formative years of the Soviet Union. By Soviet standards, where every autonomous *oblast'* published numerous mandatory volumes on the struggle to establish Soviet power, the Karabakh case stands out as a clear anomaly. However, the absence of publications emerging from Karabakh was compensated for by those emerging from the Armenian SSR. It is from this period that we learn about Stalin's role in the decision to grant the disputed Karabakh region to Azerbaijan (Kharmandarian 1969). Stalin's role was probably purposefully exaggerated to highlight the illegality of the decision. In the same manner, Armenian historians published Soviet decrees revealing that Karabakh had been granted to Armenia on several occasions – all of which was intended to show the illegitimate nature of the final decision to grant Karabakh to Azerbaijan. But despite the challenging statements behind them, all such publications remained within the permitted discourse.

But though publications containing documents and facts from the early Soviet period continued to be published, sporadically, for several years after the ousting of Khrushchev, they had completely dried up by the early 1970s. Until the commencement of *perestroika* no more revealing publications emerged from Soviet historians.

Overall the Soviet historical works remained ideologically conditioned and severely limited in their ability to openly address various issues. Yet, despite these obvious shortcomings, some aspects of the Soviet historical publications remain underestimated. They often contain a wealth of material hidden among ideological pulp that point at the subtle fissures appearing in the foundations of the Soviet state. Their careful use and contextualization can still enrich our understanding of Soviet history.

In striking contrast to the Soviet historians, their Western colleagues had the benefit of working in an ideologically unrestricted environment and were free to explore any aspect and theme of Soviet history. Their creative freedom was limited only by the inaccessibility of Soviet archives, especially in the early years of the Soviet studies discipline.

Soviet studies as a discipline came to prominence immediately after the Second World War. The international political environment seems to have had a profound impact on the direction the discipline took. It was a period when the USSR emerged as the main rival of the West, replacing the defeated Nazi ideology. Ideological differences between the West and the Soviet Union were tremendous – while one supported private property, capitalism, democratic elections and the protection of privacy, the other was its complete opposite – rejection of private property, the building of communism, and massive invasion of privacy through the state surveillance architecture. Expansion of the Soviet Union into Eastern Europe was perceived as part of a greater expansionism aimed at global domination through the overthrow of capitalism. It is little surprise that the main approach dominating the field in the formative years of Soviet

studies was the so-called totalitarian school. The Soviet Union was seen as a monolith; an essentially Russian state in which a Communist elite enjoyed total control over its population. Against this set of premises about the USSR it is no wonder that all attention was focused towards the center; the periphery, society and minorities were justifiably excluded from consideration since within a totalitarian state they became voiceless objects of the policies initiated by the center.

But despite such an overwhelming focus on the center, the question of nationalities was brought into focus very early on. One of the influential early authors on the subject was Richard Pipes, whose 1954 work *The Formation of the Soviet Union* provided a sweeping account of the civil war and the establishment of the Soviet Union, covering nearly the entire Soviet periphery. His explanation for the Soviet success was that the Bolsheviks were able to win the civil war by skilfully manipulating to their own advantage the nationality question. The Bolsheviks never intended to make good on their civil war time promises to minority groups. The disparity between the stated ideological goal and actual nationality policy was interpreted as political maneuvering rather than any genuine shift in the ideology; it was designed exclusively to win the support of national minority groups and undermine the position of the white forces. It was a clever decoy to fool minority groups at the periphery of the tsarist empire; the Bolsheviks never intended to fulfil their promises.

These early studies firmly established a framework through which the Soviet nationality policy was viewed for decades to come. The Soviet nationalities were, as one of the early studies suggested "captive nations" (Smal-Stocki 1960), while the Soviet Union itself was a nation-killer or nation-breaker as another study put it (Conquest 1972, 1991).

The Khrushchev era saw a departure from the extreme totalitarian view of the Soviet Union. More attention was now devoted to the Soviet nationalities – the 1960s and 1970s saw numerous monographs published, dealing with particular case studies. The focus remained on the nationalities within the Soviet Union. They highlighted existing tensions within the Soviet system, but allowed little agency to the minority groups (Simmonds 1977; Azrael 1978; Benningsen and Broxup 1983).

Particularly important were the works of French scholar Helen Carrere d'Encausse (1979, 1991). In these two books she focused on the nationalities problem in Central Asia and predicted the collapse of the USSR – albeit as a result of the demographic changes in the Soviet Muslim population of Central Asia. The general mood of Western scholarship remained pessimistic about the possibility of a strong national movement within the USSR. The steady decline in the number of different ethnic groups from nearly 200 in the 1926 census, to just 90 in 1979, was seen as an evidence of assimilationist policies.

This brief analysis of Soviet era Western scholarship reveals that in the absence of the same rigid ideological constraints that were to be found in the Soviet Union, the historical discourse in the West demonstrated a large degree of flexibility, and it fluctuated significantly. What is interesting, however, is the degree to which it closely followed and adjusted to political developments, if not

political needs. But the absence of censorship did not prevent Western scholarship from following the mainstream political discourse of the West. At the outset of the Cold War, Western studies presented the Soviet Union as an imperial power bent on territorial expansion. Stalinism, with its purges, had uninterrupted links with Leninism and showed a close resemblance to defeated Nazism. This view of the Soviet Union fitted well into the confrontational politics that characterized the beginning of the Cold War. With the death of Stalin and the relaxation of the Soviet system under Khrushchev the academic discourse also changed – it allowed for more flexibility in internal Soviet affairs and recognized some of the achievements of the Soviet nationality policy. It was now accepted that Moscow did not exercise total control over the lives of the Soviet population, which made it possible to take into account the Soviet periphery and ethnicities. This close correlation between the political climate of the day, on the one hand, and the historical works on the other, continued into the late Soviet period and is evident also after its collapse. When the *glasnost'* campaign resulted in a surge of nationalism that quickly spiraled out of control and led to the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union, everyone was caught by surprise. Several authors predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union but none foresaw that reform initiated from the top would lead to the crumbling of the entire edifice. This can probably be explained by the legacy of totalitarian theory that portrayed the Soviet leadership as being in total control of the country. Subsequently, it was difficult to imagine the extent of ignorance among the top levels of Soviet leadership.

The old view of the Soviet Union as a unitary authoritarian state was inadequate in explaining the unexpected rise of nationalism and Soviet disintegration. A new paradigm emerged in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse that challenged the established Cold War view of the Soviet Union and offered a new interpretation of Soviet history that accounts for the rapid rise of nationalism.

Ronald Suny (1993b) was the first to suggest that the Soviet Union was willingly creating nations among its peripheral minority groups, and that policies in support of this were not merely a farcical smokescreen for concealing the truth behind an authoritarian reality. The Bolsheviks, armed with a scientific analysis of historical development, genuinely believed that nationalism was a by-product of capitalism and that it would disappear naturally with the advance of socialism. As such it was an unavoidable part of human development; it was futile to struggle against it. Instead, by encouraging the development of national cultures the Bolsheviks hoped to speed up the historical process. In their view such policies would create a short-cut to socialism by leapfrogging an unfortunate but unavoidable phase of human development. This argument was carried on by Yuri Slezkine (1994) and others, who pointed out that the first decade of Soviet rule was characterized by a *korenizatsiia* campaign – a genuine attempt to develop national cultures and celebrate ethnic diversity. This policy was pursued at the time as a way to overcome the grievances caused by Russian imperialism. Even though the *korenizatsiia* project was over by the early 1930s – even the word *korenizatsiia* altogether disappeared from the Soviet vocabulary, dictionaries and encyclopedias – it nevertheless made a long-lasting impact on Soviet politics.

In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse the weight of inquiry firmly shifted to the periphery of the Soviet Union. The second half of the 1990s saw the emergence of new works that built upon the revisionist challenge and carried the investigation of the Soviet periphery to a new level. These new authors benefited from the opening up of previously inaccessible Soviet archives. Jeremy Smith (1999) looked at the formative years of the Soviet Union, analyzing the build-up of Soviet ethnicities during this crucial period. In another powerful study Terry Martin (2001), using detailed case studies of nationality policy in Ukraine and Belarus in the early Soviet period, demonstrated how the Bolsheviks actively promoted and even imposed the development of local culture – and by so doing shaping national identity there. This policy was often forced by the center against the wishes of the ethnic Russian administrators, but also (and rather surprisingly), against the wishes of the local population which on many occasions did not want to learn "their" language, preferring to use Russian instead. This research dismantled the old paradigm that perceived the center as a suppressing and assimilating power.

A number of well-entrenched clichés that saw most of the Soviet nationality policy decisions as a deliberate, long-term, strategy for ruling over "captive nations" were scrutinized to reveal a much more nuanced and complex nature behind the early politics in the Soviet Union. Daniel Schafer (2001) demonstrated that the creation of Bashkiria was not a plot to divide the Tatar nation – as it had traditionally been interpreted – but rather was largely a response to the demands of the local elites; Bashkiria emerged as a separate autonomous region because of the conflict between Tatar and Bashkir elites rather than as a result of Kremlin manipulation. In a similar vein, Central Asian scholars challenged the totalitarian school that saw Soviet delimitation there as an attempt to forestall development of a pan-Turkic identity in the huge region known as Turkestan (Haugen 2003). It was convincingly demonstrated that the picture was much more complex. The local elites were not passive recipients of central policies but rather played a critical role in shaping Soviet policies. The local leaders dwelled on existing identities and embraced the nation-building project advocated from Moscow. They were quick to learn the new bureaucratic language of class struggle (Edgar 2004). On many occasions the creation of the new nation occurred as a joint effort of the ethnographers from Moscow and the local elites (Hirsch 2005). The guiding principle for the creation of the nations was the delimitation of different ethnicities.

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a triumph for the revisionist historians who pointed at the early Soviet nationality policies as a source of its downfall. With the new studies demonstrating the extensive nation-building practices of the early years, the conservative view of the USSR as a nation-breaker was significantly challenged. It is therefore especially ironic that the conservative and sometimes even totalitarian view of the USSR was gaining currency within the former Soviet space at the same time as it was being seriously challenged at home. In a way this is understandable – people within the Soviet Union were force-fed the official narrative of the benevolent Soviet power developing the

backward periphery and promoting cultural development of the various ethnicities. At the same time political history, discussion of ethnic issues, as well as criticism of the Soviet policies, were strictly forbidden. It is hardly surprising that these values were met with scorn and rejected outright when the Soviet Union collapsed. Hence, the new revisionist discourse emerging in the West at the time of the Soviet collapse was seen by the people of the former Soviet Union as a new reincarnation of the old Soviet fairy tales. At the same time, the conservative discourse forbidden until now was embraced as a new and fresh interpretation exposing the crimes of the Soviet regime.

The conservative view of Soviet history became especially important in those former Soviet republics that had recently become independent states. The conservative discourse was used to strengthen their legitimacy by challenging the Soviet past. Delegitimization of the Soviet regime became commonplace – from claims that the October Revolution was a coup d'état by a tiny fanatical minority that did not represent any significant strata of the population, through to total rejection of all Soviet-made institutions.

A particular twist occurred in the Caucasus where the collapse of the USSR and the removal of ideological restraints were accompanied by violent ethnic conflicts. Ethnic nationalism, fuelled by recent conflicts, was propelled into the dominant position as an accepted vision of history. The nationalist discourse came to dominate completely post-Soviet scholarship in the Caucasus. The past was reinterpreted through the nationalist lens very often by the same authors who had until then viewed the entire history as a manifestation of the friendship of nations and class struggle. Such an uncompromising approach sometimes ran into profound confusion concerning events that did not fit the nationalist vision. A good example of this can be found in Abkhazia, where the post-Soviet reality of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict informed the writing of history. The brief Bolshevik takeover of Abkhazia, led by ethnic Abkhaz Efrem Eshba, and their conflict with the Georgian Republic in 1918, is portrayed by the modern Abkhaz historians as evidence of the Abkhaz struggle for independence against Georgia. Yet this does not sit comfortably with the fact that the majority of Bolshevik supporters were Mingrelian peasants and that the very same Bolshevik forces dispersed and arrested the nationalist Abkhaz People's Council. The social conflicts are completely subordinated to the nationalist struggle.

The other problem with the new historiography emerging from the post-Soviet Caucasus is the notable decline in basic standards of historical writing. While many of the authors have had access to, and make use of, archival documents (often inaccessible to their Western colleagues), the sources are often unreferenced – or incompletely referenced – the acronyms of the archives are often unexplained, and worst of all some documents are purposefully distorted to fit the necessary narrative. All of which demands caution when using them. Despite this, there exist some extremely valuable collections of documents, as well as some innovative works by local historians (Tsutsiev 1998).

Analysis of the Soviet and Western academic literature dealing with the interpretation of Soviet history shows the divergent trajectories these traditions took

after the collapse of the USSR. One thing is obvious from the overview of historiography – with only a few exceptions (Reynolds 2011; Marshall 2011; Lehmann 2012) the Caucasus remains largely overlooked by the rapidly growing literature that explores the early Soviet nation-building efforts and builds upon the newly available sources. Most of the new works focus on Central Asia or the Western periphery of the Soviet Union: Ukraine and Belarus.

Meanwhile, the Caucasus was far from being outright ignored by Western scholarship. The region possesses one of the world's most complicated and diverse mosaics of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. The people of the Caucasus often inhabit the sort of rough terrain that has provided ideal conditions for sustained guerilla warfare – as was demonstrated by the long mountain-based resistance to the Russian advance in the nineteenth century. The numerous violent ethnic conflicts that emerged in the wake of the Soviet collapse in Chechnia, Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia might seem rather localized, but they have a tremendous destructive potential since a spillover can easily trigger the involvement of regional and Great Powers. The Georgian-Ossetian conflict that set off the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 is just one such illustration. All these aspects make the Caucasus a unique region that provides a number of useful variables for the study of ethno-political conflict. Unsurprisingly, the region has attracted a large body of political science and conflict-resolution literature in the last two decades. Most of these works focused on the recent conflicts and advanced various explanations – Stuart Kaufman (2001) broadly follows Donald Horowitz (2000) in looking at group entitlement and the politics of symbols in the Caucasus that eventually resulted in violent conflicts. Kaufman convincingly demonstrates that symbolic politics played an enormous role in igniting conflicts in the South Caucasus. His work places most emphasis on the conflicts that escalated to full-scale ethnic wars, and leaves relatively unexplored the role of institutions in those conflicts.

Among the studies that advocate the institutional, rather than emotional and psychological, origins of the ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus are several works by Svante Cornell (2001, 2002). He contends that the presence of political autonomy dramatically increases the chances of ethnic conflict. He maintains that autonomy is the most conflict-enhancing element among other variables which he identifies as cultural difference, ethnic national conception, past conflicts and myths, rough terrain, relative demography, existence of ethnic kin, economic viability, radical leadership and external support (Cornell 2001: 110–27). The presence of autonomy strengthens national identity and provides the minority population with ready-made state structures that can be used to seek separation from the "host" republic. This explanation offers an effective way to combine the causes of conflict; such as economic grievances, manipulative leadership and the security dilemma. Autonomy can serve as a container for these causes, and magnify their impact. However, this approach overlooks some important questions – such as why some ethnic groups sought autonomy while others did not, or why autonomy was granted in the first place? What makes people equipped with autonomy use its capacity against the "host" republic? The possible answers

to these questions indicate that a different approach to understanding the causes of ethnic conflicts should be employed.

These are the main approaches to the study of conflicts in the Caucasus. While this book is a historical study I do hope that it can contribute to the current debates among political scientists working in the Caucasus. Its main focus is on the creation of the autonomous regions for ethnic minority groups that flared up into conflict at the time of the collapse of the USSR. Establishing the origins of these autonomies will explain the trajectories of these minority groups during the Soviet period. It is also necessary to state what this book does *not* focus on – two areas in particular are excluded mainly for reasons of space as to do so would expand the present volume beyond any reasonable size.

First of all, there are two autonomous regions that were not established for ethnic minority groups – Ajarian ASSR within Georgia, and Nakhichevan ASSR within Azerbaijan. They mainly came into existence as a result of external pressures on the Soviet state – both were contested with Kemalist Turkey and were retained by Georgia and Azerbaijan on condition they were granted autonomy.

Second, there are several large ethnic minority groups that had no provision of autonomous status. Very often they were more numerous than the groups that were granted autonomy. For example, the last Soviet population census recorded 123,987 Armenians and 307,556 Azerbaijanis compactly settled in Georgia; 84,860 Azerbaijanis living in Armenia; 171,395 Lezgins, 44,072 Avars and 21,169 Talsyh living in Azerbaijan. Some of these people developed a set of grievances against their host republics but none of them was successful in attaining de facto independence. The absence of political autonomy seems instrumental in their failure to launch secessionist movements. The main reason why Soviet authorities did not grant such groups autonomous status is the absence of the sort of violent ethno-social conflicts during the civil war that would require the granting of autonomous status as a solution.

Book structure

The book starts with a chapter that focuses on the period of Russian imperial rule over the Caucasus. Its main objective is to account for the social, political and identity transformation that the region experienced through its integration into the Russian Empire. The chapter follows two lines of investigation – I needed to provide a general account of the Russian conquest and integration of the region – and consequently it follows the traditional narratives that focus on the principal centers and ethnicities of the region. The main shortcoming of this approach is that it omits from the picture the developments in the periphery of the Caucasus – the processes taking place in Abkhazia, Karabakh and South Ossetia throughout the nineteenth century are usually overlooked. But I have tried to show how these peripheral regions experienced integration into the Russian Empire, how they interacted with the central parts of the region, and how the socio-economic changes occurring in the nineteenth century affected them.

The central part of the book deals with the three case studies: Abkhazia, Karabakh and South Ossetia. These regions are located on the fringes of the Caucasian states which themselves are usually treated as a Russian periphery. Few studies that looked at this region at the time of the Russian Civil War have focused on the interaction between Moscow and the Caucasian states. As a result, the periphery of the Caucasus – Abkhazia, Karabakh and South Ossetia – are usually understudied. The other intention is to provide a link between the period of independence and the early Soviet era when the political-administrative arrangements were finalized. Therefore, all three case studies start during the period of the civil war and continue into the early Soviet era when the political status of these regions was finally determined. These case studies are concluded by a short chapter that looks at parallels existing between them. It attempts to understand the logic of Soviet decision-making in each case.

The goal of the final chapter is to provide a connection between the early Bolshevik policies in the Caucasus, and the eruption of the violent conflicts in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. My main interest was not in the conflicts per se – which are extensively covered in the current academic literature – but in the internal developments throughout the Soviet period that prepared a fertile ground for the emergence of violence once the central authority weakened. The chapter looks at the set of political and cultural institutions established by the Soviet authorities within autonomous republics, and their role in the shaping of the identities, perceptions and discourses of the population – as well as the reaction among other republics in the Soviet Union to these developments. All of these factors, taken together, can reveal how the conflicting identities were established, thus making the transition to violence possible once the disintegration of the USSR was under way.

1 Caucasus between empires (1801–1918)

The Caucasus Mountains stretch for nearly 1,200 km between the Black and Caspian Seas, separating the Eurasian steppe from the Middle East. Throughout history these mountains have presented a formidable obstacle to the movement of people and goods, while at the same time serving as a refuge for numerous ethnic groups – shaping their economic, political and military organization, and creating one of the world's most diverse ethnographic regions.

Historically, there have been two ways to cross this natural barrier. One short-but-difficult route traversed the mountains. From early antiquity several mountain passes were in use. The easiest one was known as Alan Gates (after the name of the tribe that controlled it), which followed the Darial gorge of the River Terek in the central part of the mountains, connecting Georgia with the North Caucasus. Another route, longer but much less hazardous, bypassed the mountains along the Caspian Sea coast. In order to control this strategic route a fortress at Derbend (meaning closed gates) was built in the sixth century CE on a narrow strip of shore between the mountains and the sea.

There was no road along the Black Sea coast. Unlike the Caspian coast, the Black Sea littoral was littered by dozens of small turbulent mountainous rivers that often changed their course. Building a coastal road with numerous bridges was an impossible task for the pre-industrial societies who instead relied upon small-scale coastal navigation. Only in the last decades of the nineteenth century did the Russian authorities build a coastal road, and on the eve of the First World War railroad construction began, which was only completed in 1942 (Vereshchiagin 1885, 1878; Argutinskii-Dolgorukov 1896; Shanidze 1968; Sagratian 1970: 146).

Through its history the Caucasus remained at the periphery of great empires that strove to control it; Parthians and Romans, Sasanids and Byzantines, Arabs and then Mongols, Ottomans and Safavids all competed for control of this remote region. It seems that the peripheral location and mountainous terrain allowed the Caucasus to elude complete assimilation by any of these great rivals. On the eve of the emergence of Russia as a major power in the Caucasus, the region had since the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab been split between the Ottoman and Iranian Empires (Hurewitz 1975: 25–8). Iran dominated in the larger eastern portion of the region with its Muslim-ruled principalities, and in the two

Georgian kingdoms of Kartli and Kakheti. The Ottoman Empire, meanwhile, acquired the western part – the Georgian kingdom of Imeretia and several smaller principalities. But neither the Ottoman Empire nor Iran exercised centralized control over the South Caucasian principalities.

No single power succeeded in fully conquering and integrating both the North and the South Caucasus prior to the Russian conquest in the nineteenth century (Halashi-Kun 1963). While acquisition of the South Caucasus occurred relatively easy between 1801 and 1828, the process of conquering the North Caucasus lasted for decades until the final subjugation and expulsion of the Circassian tribes from Western Caucasus in 1864.[1] This was achieved at tremendous human cost – hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers and local inhabitants perished in this war.

Why would the Russian Empire want to capture this remote, poor and inhospitable terrain – conquest of which would involve wars with the Ottoman Empire and Iran – when the economic benefits of controlling the region would only be felt in the latter decades of the nineteenth century? It seems that there was no single reason but rather a multitude of strategic and tactical decisions that brought the Russian Empire to the South Caucasus.

It was during the reign of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century, when, driven by economic considerations, the Russian Empire briefly captured the western and southern shores of the Caspian Sea. The idea that trade with India would make nations prosperous was popular in Europe in the eighteenth century. Peter the Great, who established Russia as a European power, intended to find an overland route to India. Inspired by this idea but equipped with incorrect geographic information, Peter initially sent a 4,000-strong force to find a waterway to India via Central Asia. This initial attempt ended in disaster when the entire Russian army was massacred by the Khan of Khiva in 1717. Attention then shifted to the Iranian shore of the Caspian Sea, from where it was incorrectly believed to be only two weeks travel to India (it was in fact eight). An additional benefit of capturing the southern shore of the Caspian Sea was control of the lucrative silk trade, the bulk of which was based in the provinces located there (Kurukin 2010: 14–30).

The conclusion of the Northern War with Sweden in 1721 coincided with intelligence emanating from Iran that the Safavid Empire was on the verge of collapse. The murder of Russian merchants at the hands of Lezgin rebels in the town of Shemakha in August 1721 provided the convenient excuse for a Russian invasion. The 40,000-strong Russian army and fleet, led by Peter himself, marched from Astrakhan along the Caspian coast in 1722. The expedition advanced as far as Derbent, but stalled there. The initial plan to join forces with combined Georgian and Karabakh-Armenian troops near Ganja failed due to the continuing rebellion by Lezgins in Shirvan. The following year the Russia resumed its expansist ambitions, capturing the eastern and southern coast of the Caspian Sea and imposing a peace treaty on the Persian Envoy in St Petersburg (Iuzefovich 1869: 185–9).[2] The treaty, however, was never ratified by ousted Shah Tahmasp of Iran.

At first glance it might seem that the Russians easily achieved their goals. However, not only did India prove much further away than had initially been thought, the lucrative silk production of the region collapsed as a result of the civil war in Iran. What is more, Russian activities caused great uneasiness in the neighboring Ottoman Empire – which intervened in order to check further Russian advances, and also to annex some Iranian territories. A clash between the two rival powers was avoided when an uneasy peace treaty was signed in 1724 – a treaty which divided Iranian possessions in the Caucasus between them. Russia retained the coastal parts while the Ottomans captured the remaining South Caucasus.[3]

When Peter the Great died unexpectedly in 1725, Russian interest in the newly acquired Caspian possessions had begun to decline. The new territories brought no revenue, and instead were becoming a financial burden upon the empire. More importantly, an unfamiliar climate and the garrisoning in swamp-infested locations of many Russian soldiers resulted in huge fatalities. In 1727 alone Russia lost 8,334 men, only 15 of whom were killed in action (Kurukin 2010: 207). In view of such difficulties the authorities in St Petersburg decided in 1726 to abandon their Iranian conquests (Kurukin 2010: 166).

This was not, however, a simple matter of troop withdrawal. Russian incursions into Iranian territory had triggered Ottoman involvement. In a situation of ongoing civil war in Iran, abandoning conquests meant that the Ottomans would certainly capture the Caspian provinces – an act that would threaten Astrakhan and be most unwelcome for Russia. Consequently, Russia retained a presence in the region for another decade, until the emergence of a strong Iranian leader – the future Nader Shah. The Treaties of Resht (1732) and Ganja (1735) restored all previous Russian conquests to Iran, and Russia abandoned the South Caucasus for decades to come (Iuzefovich 1869: 194–207).

The restoration of Iranian control over the South Caucasus proved to be short-lived, and came to an abrupt end with the assassination of Nader Shah in 1747. Iran sank into renewed civil war and the principalities of the South Caucasus became virtually independent as a result. The Georgian kingdoms benefited most from this power vacuum and revived their authority. Particularly important was the unification of two Georgian kingdoms – Kartli and Kakheti – under King Erekle II in 1762 (Lang 1957: 159). The new, unified, Georgian kingdom emerged as one of the most important actors in the South Caucasus, imposing tribute to the neighboring Muslim Khanates of Ganja and Erevan. At the same time, the western Georgian kingdom of Imeretia struggled to preserve its autonomy from the Ottomans, and so concluded a treaty with the new Georgian kingdom of Erekle II.

The Georgian kings attempted to court external support in such troubled times by appealing to the Russian Empire (Lang 1957: 150, 154–5, 161). However, during the reign of Empress Elisabeth, Russian foreign policy was mostly preoccupied with affairs in Northern Europe and showed no interest in the Caucasus. It was only during the reign of Catherine the Great in the late 1760s that Russian interest in the South Caucasus was revived as a result of the southward expansionist ambitions of the empire.

Russian involvement in Polish affairs sparked the outbreak of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–74. While the main theater of war was in Bessarabia and Ukraine, Catherine planned to create a diversion by deploying an expeditionary force against the Ottomans from the South Caucasus, to operate in cooperation with the Georgian kingdoms.

The small Russian contingent of fewer than 4,000 troops arrived in Tiflis at the end of August 1769. It was led by adventurer General Gottlob Totleben, who soon proved to be unfit for the job (Gvosdev 2000: 30–45). Totleben's conduct immediately led to bitter conflict with the Georgian kings, a situation made worse by his failure to cooperate with his own allies on the battlefield. Rumors soon reached the empress, who admitted: "I think that he [Totleben] is more likely to ruin our affairs in Georgia than improve them."[4] Totleben was relieved of command in January 1771 and the remaining Russian troops were withdrawn.

The Russian expeditionary force that operated in the South Caucasus during the war of 1768–74 was a brief and improvised venture rather than a sign of any systematic Russian expansion into the region. Immediately after the Russo-Turkish War, Russian interest in the South Caucasus waned.

However, Russian gains arising from the Kuchuk-Kainarji Treaty of 1774 – which awarded Russia Kabarda, access to Black Sea at Anapa, and granted independence to the Crimean Khanate – made future Russian involvement in the South Caucasus almost inevitable (Hurewitz 1975: 92–101). The most important consideration shaping Russian policy was perhaps the continuing power vacuum in the eastern part of the region in the aftermath of the collapse of the Safavid power in the early eighteenth century. The possibility that this area might now fall into the hands of a revived Iran, or to an Ottoman Empire so close to the new Russian border, was unwelcome. Other tactical considerations also featured in Russian thinking – notably the greatly exaggerated wealth of the silver mines of Georgia and the unrealistic notion that control over the southern slopes of the mountains would allow an occupying force to encircle and subdue the mountainous tribes of the North Caucasus (Gvosdev 2000: 80).

Within a decade, Russia had consolidated its gains from Kuchuk-Kainarji and absorbed Crimea in April 1783. Simultaneously, Russians began to seek a foothold in the South Caucasus and in this regard approached the Iranian vassal king of Kartli-Kakheti, Erekle II, who was not averse to the idea of Russian protection. As a result the Treaty of Georgievsk was concluded between Russia and Georgia in July 1783.[5] By signing the treaty, Erekle II formally renounced his allegiance to Iran and accepted instead a Russian suzerainty. In practice, after the death of Nader Shah in 1747, the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti was only nominally dependent upon Iran. However, this change of overlord occurred at a time when Iran was beginning to emerge from decades of internal strife.

At the conclusion of the Georgievsk Treaty the Russians deployed a small military contingent to Kartli-Kakheti which participated in repelling raids of mountaineers. However, with the outbreak of a new Russo-Ottoman War in 1787, Russia evacuated its troops from Kartli-Kakheti and even abandoned the fortress of Vladikavkaz – which had been built four years earlier to help resupply

troops in Georgia (Butkov 1869: 195). The Ottomans were similarly uninterested in opening up a new front in the Caucasus, and Kartli-Kakheti was spared participation in the Russo-Ottoman War. At the end of the war, in 1792, Russian troops did not return to Kartli-Kakheti but remained at the Caucasian Line from where it was thought they could be sent – should they be needed – to assist Erkele II.

At the same time, the civil war in Iran that had resumed with the death of Nader Shah in 1747, was drawing to its conclusion –Aga Mohamed Khan Qajar emerging as undisputed master of Iran. Having subdued most of Iran by 1794, he then started preparations for a campaign in the Caucasus – the last of the Safavid possessions that remained outside his control. On the eve of his campaign he sent letters to the local rulers demanding submission (Tsagareli 1902: 146–7, 164–5).[6] Some saw this as an opportunity to settle scores with neighbors, and welcomed Aga Mohamed; but others were prepared to defy him. King Erekle II, counting on Russian help, refused to submit, claiming to be a subject of the Russian Empire. But Russian help was not forthcoming – the commander of the Caucasian Line, General Gudovich, wanted approval from St Petersburg before he would intervene. As a result of such indecisiveness, Aga Mohamed invaded Kartli-Kakheti, routed the Georgian army, and sacked the capital Tiflis, killing and enslaving its population. Following this victory Aga Mohamed proclaimed himself as Shah of Iran in 1795.

The sack of Tiflis, and the failure of the Russians to come to the aid of their protectorate, was a humiliating blow to Russia's prestige (Lang 1957: 219). The affront could not be left unpunished, and retaliation was planned on a grand scale – a punitive expedition was mobilized against Aga Mohamed.

Catherine appointed the younger brother of her favorite – Valerian Zubov – to lead the Russian troops. The army set out in April 1796, following in the footsteps of Peter the Great along the Caspian coast some 75 years earlier. The campaign achieved moderate success – local rulers preferred not to engage with the large Russian force and Derbent, Baku and Ganja were easily occupied, thereby establishing communications with Kartli-Kakheti. However, the main goal of the expedition – to engage Aga Mohamed – was not achieved. He withdrew to Iran. With the death of Catherine the Great in November 1796, her successor, Emperor Paul, immediately reversed his mother's policies – Zubov's force was recalled, and by summer 1797 the last Russian troops had left the South Caucasus (Butkov 1869: 374–422; 565–92). Soon after the Russian departure Aga Mohamed launched a new invasion of the South Caucasus. But the Iranian campaign came to an abrupt end with his assassination at the fortress of Shusha in 1797. The Qajar army disintegrated, and the immediate danger of invasion was nullified.

King Erekle II never recovered from the disaster of 1795 and died three years later. His son – the new king of Kartli-Kakheti, Giorgi XII, continued with the pro-Russian orientation of his father but faced increased internal and external pressures. The Georgian state was severely weakened after 1795, and its dependency on Russian military support increased. At the same time, some of the local

elites blamed Russia for failing to help Georgia in her desperate hour of need in 1795. By the time of the death of Giorgi XII, in December 1800, the pro-Iranian party of the Georgian royal house was gaining an upper hand. In this situation the Russian government had a choice: either allow Kartli-Kakheti to fall back under the Iranian sphere of influence – or annex it. Against this international context Emperor Paul I took a decision to annex the Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in January 1801.[7]

Russian conquest of the South Caucasus (1801–13)

The annexation of Kartli-Kakhati in 1801 created a curious geopolitical situation. The Russian Empire acquired a foothold in the center of the southern slope of the Caucasian range, but there was no common border with the newly acquired territory. The unconquered and hostile lands of the Caucasian mountain regions – Daghestan, Chechnia, Ossetia, Kabarda and Circassia – lay between Russian territory and the newly acquired kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti. The nearest Russian outpost – the fortress of Vladikavkaz – was connected with the Georgian capital Tiflis by a precarious 200 km-long path traversing the main Caucasian range. This path was frequently cut off during winter, and even in summer the journey could take up to a month. In fact, the most convenient communications between Russia and Georgia lay along the Caspian coast and then across the Muslim khanates of the eastern South Caucasus.

Russian annexation of Kartli-Kakheti was bound to annoy the traditional Great Powers of the region – the Ottoman Empire and Iran. For Iranians it was a direct challenge to the prestige of the new dynasty of Qajars. Even though these principalities had not been under direct Iranian suzerainty since the assassination of Nader Shah in 1747, they were traditionally considered an inalienable part of Iranian domains. A number of Iranian rulers (Shah Ismail I, Nadir Shah, Aga Mohamed Khan Qajar) proclaimed themselves shahs of Iran after successful campaigns in the Caucasus. The Ottoman Empire was equally suspicious of Russian intentions so close to her own domains.

To the semi-independent Caucasian principalities the appearance of the new Great Power, Russia, upset existing power structures. While some (usually immediate neighbors of Kartli-Kakheti) felt threatened by this new development, others saw it as an opportunity to challenge their overlords.

The initial aim of the Russian Empire did not go beyond providing security for the newly acquired territories. It also appears that at this point there was no general strategy for how to deal with the region as a whole (Gvosdev 2000: 101). In September 1802 Tsar Alexander I appointed Pavel Tsitsianov as commander of Georgia. In his personal letter the emperor granted wide-ranging powers to rule over the new possession, but ruled out expansion into neighboring principalities.[8] In line with the emperor's orders, an energetic Tsitsianov began attempting to restore security at the Georgian borders where Lezgin tribesmen, organized into so-called "free societies" from the Jaro-Belokany region, continually launched raids into the countryside regions of Kartli-Kakheti. In March

Figure 1.1 The Caucasus at the end of the eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Great Powers and local principalities.

1803 the Russians dispatched a punitive expedition to the affected areas and in April 1803 a treaty was signed with representatives of the villages.[9] But the submission of Jaro-Belokany was nominal; the mountaineers refused to pay tribute.[10] It was becoming clear that in order to guarantee the security of Georgia it would be necessary to control the Muslim principalities of the South Caucasus.

At the same time, the system of power relationships in the region was such that for a new actor it was practically impossible not to become involved in local disputes. The first appeal for Russian involvement came in March 1803[11] from the ruler of the small principality of Mingrelia – which was being harassed by its more powerful neighbors, Imeretia and Abkhazia. Prince Dadiani of Mingrelia was vassal of King Solomon II of Imeretia, both of whom owed allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. Involvement in Mingrelia would be in violation of the initial strategy of non-expansion, yet Mingrelia offered a number of advantages. It offered access to the Black Sea coast, even though an Ottoman garrison was stationed in Poti. It also offered the possibility for putting pressure on the stubborn and uncooperative King Solomon II of Imeretia. In June 1803 Tsar Alexander I sanctioned limited involvement in Mingrelia[12] and on July 4, 1803, Prince Dadiani accepted Russian suzerainty (Dubravin 1866: 513–16).[13] The acquisition of Mingrelia gave leverage against Imeretia and in theory gave Russia access to the Black Sea. In practice, however, the coast and the fortresses along it remained under Ottoman control.

Meanwhile, relations between Kartli-Kakheti and its eastern neighbor – Javad Khan of Ganja – remained tense. During the rule of King Erekle II, Ganja was a tributary of the Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti. In the wake of Aga-Muhamed Qajar's devastating invasion of Georgia, Javad Khan sided with the Iranians – terminating his dependence upon Kartli-Kakheti and laying claim to the small border province of Shamshadil'. With the Russian annexation of Georgia the territorial dispute over this marchland principality continued to simmer; but the Russians did not have enough troops to safeguard it, and as a result it was constantly raided by the khan of Ganja.[14]

After a series of rude exchanges between Tsitsianov and Javad Khan Russian troops attacked the khanate, laying siege to Ganja in November 1803.[15] The month-long siege was proving ineffective, and in January 1804 a desperate Tsitsianov stormed the citadel, killing Javad Khan and some members of his family. The khanate of Ganja was conquered, abolished, and turned into a mere province of Georgia. The town itself was renamed Elisavetpol in honor of the emperor's wife, and use of the old name was forbidden under pain of a fine.

Soon after success in Ganja, St Petersburg re-evaluated its strategic goals in the South Caucasus. No longer was Tsitsianov tasked solely with providing security for Georgia – he was now encouraged by Count Vorontsov "to direct efforts to Imeretia whose king Solomon gives all the reasons to do so."[16] Tsar Alexander I added that capture of Imeretia would establish unhindered access to the Black Sea and thus "all obstacles caused by the Caucasian Mountainous

Range, whose gorges serve the only route, will disappear." The tsar also instructed the immediate conquering of lands between Kura and Araxes "especially now, as the Shah needs to worry about his throne."[17]

With this imperial blessing Tsitsianov unleashed a campaign of harassment and conquest on the principalities of the South Caucasus. In April 1804 Imeretian King Solomon II was coerced into accepting Russian suzerainty.[18] In June Tsitsianov embarked upon the conquest of the Erevan khanate but failed to capture the citadel, and, after suffering heavy losses, was forced to retreat. The only success of the Erevan campaign was annexation of Shuragel Province in March 1805.[19] Following failure in Erevan, Tsitsianov directed his energies towards the eastern khanates. Threats of military intervention succeeded in securing the submission of the khans of Karabakh and Sheqi in May 1805,[20] and Mustafa Khan of Shirvan followed suit by submitting to the Russian Empire on December 25, 1805 (January 7, 1806).[21] Tsitsianov's campaigns ended in February 1806 when he was killed in an ambush while trying to force the submission of the khan of Baku.

The alarming pace of Tsitsianov's expansion triggered the Russo-Iranian War (1804–13). The Iranian army engaged the Russians for the first time during the siege of Erevan in summer 1804, forcing the latter's army to retreat. Thereafter the war turned into a low-intensity conflict featuring few major confrontations. Each army possessed a number of advantages that it tried to exploit. The European Russian army relied on the use of artillery and infantry, and sought to engage in decisive battles. The Iranian army was organized around concepts of tribal cavalry, and preferred to launch countryside raids and avoid pitched battles where the Russians held an advantage. In November 1808 the Russians once again tried (unsuccessfully) to capture Erevan – a failure that ended the career of Russian commander General Gudovich. The war briefly intensified in 1812 when the Iranians tried to take advantage of Napoleon's invasion of Russia and the subsequent fall of Moscow. But Russian victories at Aslanduz in 1812, and Lenkoran in 1813, and the collapse of Napoleon's army on the western front, led to an end in hostilities and the signing of the Gulistan Treaty of 1813. Iran lost all its territories in the South Caucasus apart from Erevan and Nakhichevan Khanates.[22]

Simultaneously with the Russo-Iranian War, the Russians had been engaged in a similarly low-intensity conflict with the Ottoman Empire since 1806. The Ottomans, like the Iranians, were alarmed by the Russians' advance into their region of the Caucasus – Mingrelia and Imeretia – and tried to dislodge Russians from there. Despite concurrent hostilities against a common adversary there were very few instances of coordination between Iranian and Ottoman forces. The low-intensity war dragged on for six years, until 1812, when the Treaty of Bucharest was signed between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. While the text of the treaty remained extremely vague about the precise borders in the Caucasus (Iuzefovich 1869: 52–3) it appears that Russia preserved control over Imeretia and Mingrelia, as well as continuing its presence in Abkhazia (Gvosdev 2000: 132).

Russian incorporation of the Caucasus (1813–67)

The first phase of Russian expansion into the South Caucasus was completed with the establishment of borders with the Ottoman Empire and Iran by 1813. The conquered region represented a curious mix of different forms of rule. Some areas came under direct Russian control. Their former ruling elites were either removed – like that of the Georgian royal family, or khan, of Quba;[23] escaped – like the khan of Baku and the king of Imeretia; or were killed – like Javad Khan of Ganja. Those rulers who chose to accept Russian suzerainty retained control over their principalities as long as they paid a tribute and accepted a Russian garrison to ensure their loyalty. In all cases the introduction of Russian rule hardly changed anything for the majority of the population; Russian officers might have replaced the princes and khans but at a lower level the administration remained unchanged and continued to be run by native civil servants.

It appears that the authorities in St Petersburg had no consistent plan about how to administer the newly conquered territories. Several policies were tried and abandoned. The first visible move towards closer integration with the Russian Empire came during the rule of Aleksei Ermolov (1816–27). He used every opportunity to provoke, intimidate and expel local rulers. During the decade of his rule he placed under direct Russian administration the khanates of Shaqi in 1819,[24] Shirvan in 1820,[25] Karabakh in 1822,[26] Talysh in 1826, and finally, under his successor, the Georgian principality of Guria came under Russian administration in 1828.[27]

Following a brief war with Iran in 1826–28 the Russian Empire acquired new territories in the Caucasus. The Treaty of Turkmenchai awarded Russia the khanates of Erevan and Nakhichevan. These newly conquered territories were reorganized into *Armianskaia Oblast* (Armenian Province) which existed in the period 1828–1840.[28] To strengthen control over these borderlands the Russian authorities undertook the resettlement of the Christian Armenian population that had been deported from these territories by shah Abbas in 1604 during the Safavid-Ottoman wars. The arrival of some 57,000 Armenians from Iran and the Ottoman Empire, and the exodus of some 12,000 Muslim nomads dramatically changed the demographic situation (Shopen 1852: 541). The proportion of the Armenian population rose from some 18 percent prior to Russian conquest to 50 percent in 1832 (Shopen 1852: 525–40).

By the 1830s three types of Russian administration could be distinguished in the South Caucasus. The former Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti was considered sufficiently secure and became *gubernia* [province] receiving Russian civilian administration. The former Georgian principalities of Imeretia and Guria, as well as Muslim principalities of the eastern South Caucasus, were considered too troublesome to warrant civil administration and were placed under Russian military administration while retaining civil courts and lower level native administration. Finally, vestiges of semi-autonomous rule survived only in the western part of the region – the principalities of Mingrelia, Svanetia and Abkhazia were still ruled by their traditional elites.

Such diversity of administrative types, and the persistence of local forms of government, was viewed with increasing annoyance in St Petersburg. This frustration was expressed by the new governor of the Caucasus, Ivan Paskevich, in his 1830 report to the tsar:

> Everywhere the [state] institutions are temporary … there is a strange mixture of the Russian governing style with the Georgian and Muslim … there is no unity either in the form of government or in the legal or financial system. This results in significant damage [to Russian rule] in addition to complications and inconvenience.
>
> (Esadze 1907: 66)

Paskevich suggested that the best way to eliminate these problems would be to introduce a homogeneous Russian form of government in all of the South Caucasian provinces and as a result

> the population [would] draw closer to Russia.…[I]t [the population] would be less alienated from the other parts of the state; meanwhile, at present the old customs and the old administration remind them of their independent existence and of their difference from the Russians.[29]

This idea appeared very appealing in St Petersburg, where bureaucrats had little practical knowledge of the region. Initially it seemed an easy task to implement the centralizing reforms in the Caucasus, and St Petersburg was eager to go ahead despite the lack of enthusiasm of the newly appointed governor of the Caucasus, Baron Rozen (1832–37). The man appointed to take charge of the reforms was Baron Hahn, who had served in the Russian diplomatic service and had no appropriate experience for conducting reforms in the Caucasus (Esadze 1907: 69; Rhinelander 1975). Arriving in the Caucasus in 1837, Hahn's commission began its reforms without preparing a local survey of the region and it soon produced an exact replica of the Russian provincial administration for the Caucasus. The new administrative proposals did not take into consideration the complex ethnographic, economic and geophysical features of the region. The emperor approved the project on April 10, 1840, and by January 1, 1841, the new administrative system was in place.[30]

The reform divided the Caucasus into two parts: Gruzino-Imeritinskaia *gubernia* (the Georgian-Imeretian Province) with the capital city of Tiflis; and Kaspiyskaia *Oblast'* (the Caspian Province) with its capital, Shemakha. Abkhazia, Mingrelia and Svanetia were not affected by the reforms and preserved their autonomy. The most important aspect was complete replacement of the local elites in all administrative positions by Russian bureaucrats, and the overnight imposition of Russian law. The reform soon proved too radical and led to rebellions in Guria, Ossetia and Belokany and to the dissatisfaction of the local elites. The failures of the reform were so obvious that emergency changes had to be made. The local laws were reinstated and administrative changes were

made –Tushino-Pshavo-Khevsurski, Gorskii and Osetinskii *okrugs* were created while Belokan *uezd* was made another *okrug* in 1842 (Esadze 1907: 79). Thus, the first attempt at imposing Russian institutions in the South Caucasus failed and St Petersburg soon realized that the region required a special approach that would take its peculiarities into account.

Realization that the Caucasus was different from the rest of the empire led to complete reversal of the centralization policies and establishment of the Caucasian viceroyalty in 1845.[31] Count Vorontsov, who became the first Caucasian viceroy, was granted unprecedented authority – exercising the rights of imperial ministers when dealing with any aspect of the Caucasian administration. Moreover, the decrees of imperial ministers applicable elsewhere in the empire could not be enforced in the Caucasus without the approval of the viceroy (with the exception of those of the ministry of finance). The administrative structures also received a complete overhaul. The region was initially divided into four provinces (Tiflis, Kutais, Shemakha and Derbent) by the decree of December 14, 1846.[32] Later, the additional Erevan *gubernia* was created (1849)[33] and Elisavetpol' *gubernia* in 1868.[34] This administrative set-up survived with minor changes until the collapse of the tsarist empire in 1917.

Another notable aspect of Vorontsov's rule was the continuation of the trend of abolishing autonomous principalities, a process completed under Vorontsov's successor Boriatinskii (1856–62). The Crimean War of 1853–54 and the final stages of the Russian conquest of the North Caucasus largely shaped the course of administrative reforms in the South Caucasus. The surviving autonomous areas bordering the resistant mountainous regions were first to be affected. The entire area of the Southwest Caucasus immediately adjacent to the North Caucasus was transformed into the Kutais General Governorship on August 16, 1856.[35] The most important feature of this unit was that it included not only Kutais *gubernia* but also the Autonomous Regions of Abkhazia, Samurzakan, Tsebelda, Svanetia and Mingrelia. In 1857 Mingrelian autonomy came to an end after it was placed under the rule of the Russian council on account of the death of its ruler and the young age of its prince. With completion of the Caucasian War, Abkhaz autonomy was abolished in 1864. Finally the Mingrel prince "voluntarily" surrendered his dynastic rights in exchange for financial compensation when he became of age in 1867.[36]

The elimination of political autonomy was accompanied by changes at a symbolic level. After the administrative reforms of 1840 and 1846, traditional names of the districts that once gave evidence of either ethnic affiliation or former principality started to disappear. First to go was Armenian Province in 1840; the names Georgia and Imeretia survived the 1840 reform in the form of Georgian-Imeretian Province, but already the Imeretian *uezd* was replaced by Kutais *uezd*.[37] More changes occurred in 1846. The words "Georgia" and "Imeretia" disappeared altogether to be replaced with "Tiflis" and "Kutais" *gubernii*. Guria *uezd* became Ozurget *uezd*, and the former *uezdy* of eastern South Caucasus that still bore the names of former khanates were changed – Shirvan into Shemakha *uezd*; Karabakh into Shusha *uezd*; Sheqi into Nukha *uezd*; Talysh became Lenkoran *uezd*.[38]

Similarly, Mingrelia disappeared without a trace, becoming part of Kutais *gubernia*,[39] while Abkhazia became a Sukhuim *okrug* in 1866.[40] The Ossetinskii *okrug* was assimilated into Tiflis *gubernia* and Vladikavkas *okrug* in 1859.[41]

Whether this was a deliberate policy or a simple standardization of the names of administrative entities with their main township remains a subject of debate. What is clear, however, is that the removal of associative historical names of provinces further undermined the association of their local populations with the former semi-autonomous principalities, thereby facilitating assimilation of the region into the Russian Empire.

Russian educational policies in the Caucasus were also radically altered under Vorontsov's administration. Previously, education was mostly neglected in the South Caucasus since the main concern of Russian administrators was military. The new educational policy was seen as a way of tying the region to the empire by bringing the local population within reach of the Russian educational system. Vorontsov ordered a survey of the Caucasian educational system and the result was the creation of a separate Caucasian educational district in 1848. A number of *gimnasias* were opened, and a number of *uezd*-level schools were expanded to attract representatives of disadvantaged aristocrats and officials to state service. The government also provided some 60 scholarships to facilitate Caucasian graduates' attendance at imperial universities (Rhinelander 1975: 218–35, 1981: 15–40, 1996: 98–9; Rozhkova 1946: 196–7).

In line with such educational policies, Vorontsov abandoned the previous policy of appointing bureaucrats from Russia to all local positions. Instead he gave preference to local elites who had been educated in Russian and European universities.[42] The decade of Count Vorontsov's administration, and his policy of accommodation of local elites, laid the foundations for closer integration of the region with the Russian Empire.

But the short-term strategic considerations that brought the Russian Empire into the South Caucasus, and the relative ease with which the region was conquered, was offset by the long and difficult incorporation of these new territories into the imperial structure. At the same time, becoming part of the Russian empire heralded unprecedented change for a region that for centuries had preserved a semi-autonomous existence at the periphery of the great empires. Elimination of the local principalities, and their slow incorporation into the administrative structures of the Russian Empire, first of all created conditions for the fusion of larger economic units based around *gubernia*; and second, started to undermine old loyalties centered on feudal principality or nomadic tribe. The educational policies introduced by Vorontsov might have brought the region closer to the empire but at the same time they forged new intellectual elites among the native population. The last five decades of tsarist rule saw dramatic economic change coupled with a growth of class and national identity among the local population. However, before turning to the last decades of tsarist rule over the Caucasus it is first necessary to look in detail at developments in three regions that would receive autonomous status during the establishment of the USSR – Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh.

Abkhazia under Russian rule (1810–1905)

By the time of the Russian advance into the South Caucasus the Abkhazian principality was a vassal of the Ottoman Empire. Falling within the Ottoman sphere of influence after collapse of the Byzantine Empire, its elites converted to Islam. Likewise, the majority of the Abkhaz population converted, but there remained some pockets of Orthodox Christianity. With the Russians establishing their presence in Mingrelia in 1803, Abkhaz ruler and Ottoman subject, Kelesh-bey Shervashidze, tried to play these two powers to his advantage. He secretly converted one of his sons to Orthodox Christianity so as to have stakes in both the Ottoman and Russian camps. His scheming came to an end in 1808 when he was killed in Sukhum in mysterious circumstances.[43] His death sparked a dynastic rivalry between his sons – pro-Ottoman Muslim Aslan-bey seized the Sukhum fortress and proclaimed himself ruler of Abkhazia. His converted brother, Sefer-bey (Giorgi), lacking support within Abkhazia, accused Aslan-bey of masterminding the murder of their father and sought Russian backing through his Dadiani Mingrel relatives.

Russia, which for some time had wanted to control the Black Sea between Crimea and Mingrelia, found this a convenient excuse to extend their influence to Abkhazia and thus recognized Sefer-bey (Giorgi) as legitimate heir to the Abkhazian princedom. In February 1808 Giorgi (Sefer-bey) Shervashidze made a formal appeal to become a subject of the Russian Empire.[44] The tsar approved the request in October 1809,[45] giving the Russians a formal reason for intervening to install him in power in Abkhazia.

But the Russians grossly underestimated how unpopular their chosen pretender was in Abkhazia. Giorgi (Sefer-bey), lacking support and feeling unsafe in Abkhazia, preferred to reside in neighboring Mingrelia.[46] The Russian commander bitterly remarked that Giorgi was

> so weak in the land granted to him that he feared to receive the Imperial deed [there] and did not dare to travel to his own house in Abkhazia for fear of his brother…but since the matter was done and renouncing his [Girogi's] protection was impossible nothing else remained but to conquer Sukhum in order to support him.[47]

In July 1810 the Russian fleet bombarded and stormed the fortress at Sukhum.[48] Grigori (Sefer-bey) moved back and was proclaimed ruler of Abkhazia. Thus, in 1810 Abkhazia became a Russian dependency, though during the first decades the rule of the Russian appointee remained tentative at best.

The Abkhaz ruler had little popular support and totally depended on the Russian garrison at Sukhum. The Russian army in Abkhazia controlled a few isolated coastal fortresses, but they lacked overland communication between them. The report of the Russian commander of Sukhum in 1810 illustrates the conditions very well: "[I]t is dangerous to walk 100 steps away from the [fortress of Sukhum]" – locals would ambush and shoot at Russian soldiers.[49] The

mountainous parts – Tsebelda, Pskhu and Dzhigetia did not even acknowledge the rule of Giorgi. Giorgi Shervashidze completely depended on his Russian suzerains until his death in February 1821.[50] In the wake of his brother's death, Aslan-bey started a rebellion against the Russians and could count on large-scale popular support for his ambition to reclaim Abkhazia.[51] The Russian authorities quickly appointed Giorgi's son Dmitry, who was at court in St Petersburg, as new ruler of Abkhazia in April 1821.[52] In October 1822 Dmitri Shervashidze died,[53] allegedly poisoned by a servant.[54] Finally, in February 1823 another son of Giorgi – Prince Mikhail Shervashidze – was appointed to rule Abkhazia by the tsar.[55]

The early years of Mikhail Shervashidze's rule were little different from that of his father. His influence in Abkhazia was limited and depended on the Russian army stationed there. However, within several years Prince Mikhail managed to build a certain support base for his rule. Simultaneously, the Russian Empire expanded its presence in Abkhazia. In 1830 a fortress at Gagra was built on the border with the independent tribes in the north. Several punitive expeditions against Tsebel'da and Pskhu were organized. In 1834 Mikhail Shervashidze unsuccessfully tried to extend his control into the bordering region of Samurzakano that his grandfather Kelesh-bey, under Russian pressure, had returned to Mingrelia. But the Russians warned Mikhail Shervashidze that the village of Ilory was part of Mingrelia and that the River Galidzga was the border between them.[56]

In the late 1840s and early 1850s relations between the Abkhaz ruler and the Russian imperial administration became strained. In the previous decade the Russian presence in Abkhazia had become stronger, and so also had the position of Mikhail Shervashidze. Relations between them reached their lowest ebb during the Crimean War. In the early stages of the war the Russian army had to abandon Abkhazia. The absence of overland roads prevented the resupply of its coastal fortresses and the local population quickly turned hostile and sided with the Ottomans. Prince Shervashidze, who had initially left Abkhazia with the Russian troops, realized that Russia might be forced to cede Abkhazia to the Ottoman Empire in which case he would lose his princedom. In the midst of the war Mikhail Shervashidze returned to Abkhazia and entered into negotiations with the Ottoman commanders to guarantee his position as ruler. He also tried, once again, and with the help of Ottoman troops, to annex Samurzakano District, rule over which had been long-contested with Mingrelia.

Despite defeat in the Crimean War, Russia retained Abkhazia. In view of the disloyal behavior of Mikhail Shervashidze, the Russian viceroy in the Caucasus – General Murav'ev – in his 1856 letter to the tsar, recommended that Mikhail Shervashidze be exiled and either replaced by his son or Abkhazia placed under direct Russian military rule as was the case with most other principalities in the South Caucasus.[57] Nevertheless, the Russian government decided to leave Prince Mikhail Shervashidze in charge of Abkhazia, apparently because removing him would create more problems than leaving him in charge.[58]

Thus, Mikhail Shervashidze was allowed to continue his rule in Abkhazia for eight more years, until 1864. By that time the Russians had completed the conquest of the Western Caucasus, which changed the geopolitical situation – Abkhazia and its ruler were no longer needed as a buffer against the mountainous regions of the North Caucasus. A few months after the end of the war, in June 1864, the Abkhaz princedom was abolished and Mikhail Shervashidze was ordered to leave Abkhazia. His refusal to obey the order led to his arrest and exile in Voronezh, where he died in 1866. Abkhazia was reorganized into a *Sukhumskii voennyi otdel* (Sukhum military department) and the long-disputed Samurzakano District was finally incorporated.[59]

Abkhazia was the last of the principalities of the South Caucasus to be placed under direct Russian administration – more than 54 years after it acknowledged Russian suzerainty in 1810. The unusual longevity of Abkhazia's survival as a dependency was due to the weakness of both Russia and the pro-Russian Shervashidze princes in Abkhazia – both parties needed each other in order to retain control; neither was strong enough to control it alone. Once the western North Caucasus was conquered the Russian Empire no longer had a need for an Abkhaz principality.

Demographic change (1866–1905)

Dramatic demographic change occurred in Abkhazia after its suzerain status was terminated in 1864. Emigration from Abkhazia was not an unusual phenomenon. Since the early encounters with the Russian Empire, the Abkhaz opposing Russian rule tended to seek refuge in the Ottoman Empire. Initially such emigration patterns were limited to the nobility, but after mass disturbances the peasants followed their lords. Important Abkhaz emigration patterns occurred in the aftermath of the Crimean War when the population that had largely sided with Ottoman forces left Abkhazia following the restoration of Russian rule. Yet the population drain from Abkhazia remained relatively low. This changed with the completion of the Caucasian War and abolition of the Abkhaz principality.

The end of the war in the Western Caucasus was accompanied by mass expulsion of the mountain peoples into the Ottoman Empire – a process that became known as *Mokhajirstvo*. The Russian government had ambitious plans to colonize the depopulated Black Sea coast with Russian settlers. Abkhazians were initially spared expulsion, but in 1866, as a result of a clumsy Russian attempt to introduce land reforms in Abkhazia, the population rebelled. In 1867, after the rebellion had been suppressed, approximately 20,000 people mostly from the mountainous region of Tsebel'da left for the Ottoman Empire (Tsvizhba 2001: 78). Another wave of Abkhaz emigration occurred after Russian-Turkish War of 1877–78. Once again Russian troops abandoned Abkhazia which was invaded by the Ottomans. The Abkhaz population rebelled and joined the Ottomans. After the end of the war Russian troops recaptured Abkhazia and some 30,000 Abkhaz left for the Ottoman Empire (ibid.: 82).

While the exact population of Abkhazia is difficult to estimate it is clear that it halved as a result of emigration following the abolition of the Abkhaz principality. The exodus of the Abkhaz created an abundance of free land suitable for colonization. The first settlers started to arrive to Abkhazia in the mid-1860s but mass colonization took place only in the 1880s. Three types of settlers can be distinguished among new arrivals.

The tsarist authorities encouraged Russian and European settlers to move to Abkhazia, and to facilitate this process a special legal framework was created along with generous land allocations for Russian and European settlers moving there. However, despite favorable conditions, Russian colonization ran into difficulty – not only was there no road connecting Abkhazia with the main economic centers of Southern Russia, the settlers were unfamiliar with the local climate and agricultural production methods. Malaria also claimed a large number of the new arrivals (Tsvizhba 2001: 96).

Another group of settlers consisted of Ottoman subjects – Greeks and Armenians who lived on the Ottoman Black Sea coast. Unlike Russian and European settlers, this group was not encouraged to move to Abkhazia and therefore lacked state support. Nevertheless, these settlers had certain advantages over the Russian and European colonists – Abkhazia offered a familiar climate and agricultural production methods were the same as on the Ottoman coast.

A third group of settlers caused much concern to the Russian authorities. Mingrel peasants living just across the border from Abkhazia comprised the most numerous group of migrants. They were experiencing an acute shortage of land, which, combined with their proximity to vacant lands in Abkhazia and their familiarity with local agriculture and climate, made them the best positioned group for settlement of Abkhazia. But lacking state support, and facing legal restrains, Mingrel peasants were marginalized as agricultural labor (Tsvizhba 2001: 97).

Tsarist population surveys from the late nineteenth century provide us with a snapshot of ethnographic changes occurring in the Sukhum District (Müller 1998: 218–39). In the decade between 1886 and 1897 nearly 40,000 migrants arrived in Abkhazia. The largest group were Mingrels who, together with Georgians, made up nearly a quarter of the total population in 1897 (5.2 percent in 1886). They were followed by Greeks, Armenians, Russians, Germans and Turks who made up 18.5 percent of the population (6.3 percent in 1886).

The movement of Mingrel settlers to Abkhazia that had so much alarmed Russian authorities – who saw them as an impediment to Russian colonization – also caused a political confrontation between tsarist authorities and Georgian intellectuals. The Georgian intellectuals perceived Russian activities in Abkhazia with a great deal of suspicion and encouraged the settlement of Mingrels.

Before the rise of the Ottoman Empire, Abkhazia was within the realm of Georgian cultural influence – they shared Orthodox Christianity and the high culture and written language of the Abkhaz nobility was also Georgian. This Georgian cultural tradition in Abkhazia was undermined by Ottoman rule when Islam replaced Christianity among the Abkhaz population and nobility. In the

early years of Russian rule it seemed that Georgian influence in Abkhazia might experience a revival – some of the princes of the Abkhaz ruling house converted to Orthodox Christianity and intermarried with Mingrel princes. However, Georgian cultural influence was replaced with the Russian one – several cultural developments introduced by the Russian administration broke continuity of Georgian cultural tradition in Abkhazia. In 1862, Russian linguist Uslar created an Abkhaz alphabet based on the Cyrillic script – undermining Georgian language tradition in Abkhazia. Russian authorities undertook a restoration of Christianity in Abkhazia, but the new priests were ethnic Russians. Such cultural practices undermined Georgian influence in Abkhazia and were perceived as a general threat to Georgian culture. Russian colonization plans for Abkhazia were seen by Georgian intellectuals as a part of process of replacing Georgian influence there. But the movement of landless Mingrel peasants into the vacant lands of Abkhazia offered an effective possibility for upsetting Russian designs and expanding Georgian influence. The Russian authorities responded with legal measures to restrict the settlement of Mingrels in Abkhazia.

By the early twentieth century Sukhum *okrug* was a remote multinational district of the Russian Empire where not a single group held an absolute majority. Georgians – consisting mostly the inhabitants of Samurzakano and Mingrel migrants – were the largest group, accounting for nearly half of the population; followed by the Abkhaz who made up approximately 30 percent; and then other settlers. From the social point of view the Abkhaz and Russians were the well-off group that held control over large portions of land, and were well represented by nobility and among the tsarist bureaucracy. Another group, mostly involved in the tobacco growing industry, was made up of Armenians and Greeks. Mingrel settlers were the most disadvantaged group, marginalized as agricultural workers and experiencing severe restrictions on their residential status.

Ossetia (1801–1905)

At the time of the Russian annexation of Kartli-Kakheti, Ossetian peasants living in the South Caucasus inhabited the mountainous gorges in the basins of the Rivers Ksani and Liakhvi – tributaries of the Kura River – as well as area near Mount Kazbek near to the main road connecting Tiflis and Vladikavkaz. Ossetian peasants living in the middle and lower courses of the rivers paid tribute to Princes Eristavi and Machabeli. Ossetians living in the upper stream region were nominally subjects of the Georgian lords but retained more freedom since the authority of the Georgian princes did not extend into the inaccessible mountain areas. The economic activities of the Ossetians differed – with agricultural production predominating in the lower parts and animal husbandry dominating in the high mountains.

One important characteristic of Ossetian territory was the absence of any native nobility; as a result there was no specifically Ossetian political entity in the South Caucasus prior to the Russian conquest. The majority of Ossetians living in Georgia were peasants; the small number of Ossetian families that were

gentrified by the Georgian kings were not recognized by the tsarist authorities. Ossetian peasants inhabited lands that belonged to several Georgian noble families. Most important among these were the Machabeli princes, who ruled the lands of the Liahkvi River basin, and the Eristavi lords, who controlled the lands of the Ksani River basin (Vaneev 1956: 72, 77).

Both the Machabeli and Eristavi families jealously resisted the centralizing efforts of the Georgian king, leading to considerable tensions between them. King Erekle II confiscated the Machabeli domains in 1772 – as a punishment for alleged disloyalty – but restored them in 1776 (Vaneev 1956: 72). By the time of the annexation of Kartli-Kakheti the rights of Machabeli princes over the lands of the Liakhvi River basin were undisputed.

The situation of the Eristavi princes was somewhat different. Eristavi were not owners of these lands but rather were appointed governors. Their family name is a Georgian term for "governor." However, in accordance with the Iranian political tradition, such offices were hereditary and remained within a single family. Over time, the governors came to see these provinces as hereditary fiefs, which contributed to tensions between the king and the Eristavi family. As a result of a conflict with Erekle II their domains were confiscated in 1777 and turned into royal property (Vaneev 1956: 77, 258).

The arrival of the Russians in the early nineteenth century changed this situation. When some members of the Georgian royal family rebelled against Russian rule and took refuge among the Ossetian highlanders – cutting vital communication lines with the North Caucasus[60] – the dispossessed Eristavi lords sided with the Russian authorities. The Russians saw them as useful allies, and after the Eristavi made an appeal to the tsar their rights over the Ossetian peasantry were restored in 1806 (Vaneev 1956: 79).

For decades after the establishment of Russian rule the Ossetian populated areas remained troublesome and rebellious districts. The entire first half of the nineteenth century was characterized by intense struggle between the Ossetian peasants and their Georgian lords. The Ossetian peasants living in remote inaccessible mountainous areas frequently refused to pay taxes and fulfil duties to their lords. The Russian authorities tried to suppress them through numerous punitive expeditions, but recurrence of the rebellions testifies to the inconclusive results of such attempts. The sheer number of Ossetian rebellions – in 1802, 1804, 1807, 1809–10, 1812–13, 1817–24, 1830, 1839–42 and 1848–50 – demonstrates the magnitude of the problem and the restive nature of the Ossetian population.

The situation was aggravated by misrule by the Russian authorities. Several rebellions were caused by attempts to force Ossetians to maintain and repair the strategic road connecting Tiflis with Vladikavkaz. The maintenance allowance was, however, often appropriated by corrupt Russian officials and the Ossetian peasants were therefore forced to repair the road unpaid.

Another aspect of the problem was that Russian rule strengthened the rights of the Machabeli and Eristavi lords over the Ossetian peasants by providing a legal framework backed by the might of imperial authority. The Georgian lords

tried to improve the collection of taxes from the Ossetian peasants, but counting on Russian military support to enforce this exacerbated tensions.

The cost of suppressing the various Ossetian rebellions was so high that the Russian commander, Paskevich, advocated a policy of confiscation of the Eristavi domains on the grounds that they had been restored in 1806 under dubious circumstances. Paskevich argued that the Eristavi princes completely depended on Russian military strength to rule the province. He succeeded in confiscating the Eristavi domains in 1830, but after his departure the Senate in St Petersburg restored them once more, in 1835 (Vaneev 1956: 89, 209).

When the shortcomings of the 1840 administrative reform became apparent the Russian authorities separated the troublesome regions into special districts (in 1842) (Esadze 1907: 79). The *Osetinskii okrug* (Ossetian District) encompassed the Ossetian populated territory of the North and South Caucasus. The term *okrug* indicates that this territory was placed under military rule as requiring special attention. It was at this point that the name Ossetia appeared for the first time on the administrative map of the South Caucasus. This entity existed for about 17 years and was dissolved in 1859.[61] The northern section of the disbanded district was made part of Vladikavkaz *okrug* while southern was divided between the Dushet and Gori *uezdy* of Tiflis *gubernia*.

The termination of the Ossetian *okrug* became possible with the cessation of the Ossetian rebellions. This was largely achieved after 1852 when the Russian authorities decided to buy off the personal dependence of the Ossetian peasants from their Machabeli lords (Vaneev 1956: 264–6). The Machabeli received monetary compensation from the Russian government for their loss of personal control over the Ossetian peasants but preserved ownership of the land and continued to receive annual land tax revenue from the Ossetians. Termination of serfdom in the South Caucasus in 1864 also freed the Ossetian peasants from their Eristavi lords (Vaneev 1956: 280).

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the effects of capitalist development that the region had been experiencing since the 1870s began to be felt in the Ossetian populated areas of Tiflis *gubernia*. Some peasants began to leave their villages in search of seasonal industrial work in the towns (Vaneev 1956: 317–18). Another aspect of industrialization also began to affect the lives of the Ossetian peasants, stirring up new conflicts as a result. The end of nineteenth century saw the decline of the traditional landed nobility and the Machabeli princes began to sell their land to developers who wanted to establish sawmills (Vaneev 1956: 446–7). While this industrial development did not affect the agricultural lands directly, it nevertheless led to conflict since until this time Ossetians had been able freely to use the resources of the forests.

Thus, on the eve of the First World War, the Ossetian populated parts of Tiflis *gubernia* remained centered on the agricultural regions, with very limited industrial development. The majority of Ossetians were peasants lived on land belonging to the Georgian noble families. For the use of this land they paid tax to their landlords. Even the small number of Ossetian workers making a living outside the rural areas usually maintained close ties with their native villages. This

created a dichotomy whereupon social class coincided with ethnicity. This later became one of the important contributing factors in the transformation of social conflict into ethnic conflict in the aftermath of the collapse of the Russian Empire.

Karabakh (1750–1905)

After the collapse of the Armenian Bagratid kingdom in the eleventh century there followed several centuries of endemic warfare between various nomadic dynasties, until finaly the Safavid Empire emerged. During this period the limited self-rule of Armenians was preserved in the mountainous area that came to be known from the thirteenth century as Karabakh.

Several clans of Armenian princes, called Meliks, retained a semi-autonomous rule over the Armenian population in the mountains of Karabakh. The plains to the east were home to various independent tribes of Turkic nomads. The entire region was subordinated to the Safavid provincial governor seated in Ganja. The political status of the Armenian Meliks was confirmed by Shah Abbas I as reward for their services during the Safavid-Ottoman wars. His successors also confirmed the hereditary rights of Armenian Meliks.[62]

By the early eighteenth century the Safavid state was in decline and after the Afghan invasion of 1722 the central authority collapsed, resulting in political chaos. The Ottoman and Russian Empires intervened, capturing large portions of the South Caucasus. In this situation a coordinated attempt by Armenian Meliks and the Georgian king to secure military aid from Peter the Great, failed. Once the central authority in Iran was restored by Nader Khan (future Nader Shah 1736–47) he once again confirmed the rights of the Meliks.

With his assassination in 1747 the brief period of stability in Iran came to an end. In the chaos following his death the deported nomads returned to the plains of Karabakh where the leader of a smaller tribe, Panah, consolidated within a few years his rule over the other nomads of Karabakh. Several of his initial attempts to establish a permanent stronghold failed after suspicious neighbors from the khanates of Shirvan and Sheki, together with Armenian Meliks, razed his fortresses. But an opportunity for Panah emerged when, as a result of a feud between the Armenian Meliks, one of them sought help against his rivals by inviting Panah to build a fortress at Shusha in the mountains of Karabakh in 1750. At around this time Panakh Khan proclaimed himself khan of Karabakh and was confirmed by Nader's descendant. The recognition of Panah Khan by the Iranian ruler signified the emergence of a new political entity in the South Caucasus and the formal end of the rule of Armenian Meliks over the mountainous districts. From his stronghold at Shusha Panah Khan started to extend his rule over the remaining Meliks and the other nomads of Lowland Karabakh. After his death in 1763 his son Ebrahim became khan of Karabakh.

During the long rule of Ebrahim Khan (1763–1806), Karabakh became one of the most powerful principalities of the eastern South Caucasus. Ebrahim Khan finally succeeded in undermining the power of the Meliks, extended his influence

to the smaller neighboring khanates and cooperating with the Georgian King Erkele II. A complex network of shifting alliances and dynastic marriages regulated relations between these principalities. The rise of Karabakh and the other khanates of eastern South Caucasus was possible as long as there was no central authority in Iran. However, this situation was about to change with the emergence of the Qajar dynasty in Iran towards the end of the eighteenth century and renewed Russian interest in the region.

The immediate threat was posed by Iran when the founder of the Qajar dynasty, Aga Mohamed, invaded the South Caucasus to re-establish Iranian control over the region in 1795. On his way to the Georgian capital Tiflis, Aga Mohamed besieged Shusha, and though he failed to take it he succeeded in laying waste to the domain of Ebrahim Khan. After the sacking of the Georgian capital of Tiflis Aga Mohamed withdrew to Iran.

The destruction of Tiflis prompted Catherine the Great to send a military expedition to punish Aga Mohamed; Count Zubov arrived with a large Russian army but found no trace of him. The local rulers, including Ebrahim Khan, reluctantly cooperated with the Russians – nominally accepting their suzerainty as long as Russian troops remained in the vicinity. However, upon Catherine's death the expedition was recalled. The following year Aga Mohamed returned to the Caucasus to complete his conquest of the region. This time Ebrahim Khan offered no resistance and abandoned his stronghold, escaping to a relative in Daghestan. It was the assassination of Aga Mohamed in Shusha that enabled Ebrahim Khan to return to Karabakh. However, a new threat was posed – this time by the Russian Empire, which, after its annexation of the Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801, stepped up its expansionist policies in the South Caucasus. In 1805 Ebrahim Khan reluctantly accepted Russian rule and allowed a Russian garrison in the fortress of Shusha. The following year he was killed by the Russian detachment while trying to defect to Iran. His son Mehdi Khan (1806–22) became the last ruler of the Karabakh khanate.

The demographic composition of Karabakh is the subject of great deal of controversy and political manipulation. Detailed ethnographic data became available only in the nineteenth century. The most important sources of data are the tsarist 1823 tax survey, the 1886 rural population survey, and the 1921 agricultural census conducted by Soviet Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, the well-known tsarist and Soviet population censuses of 1897 and 1926 contain no settlement-level data. The changing administrative boundaries make a direct comparison between ethnographic data from different periods particularly difficult.

Prior to and during the Russian conquest the population of the eastern South Caucasus was highly volatile. Not only did the nomad population change its grazing grounds as a result of war or famine, the sedentary population frequently left their lands because of raids, taxation or disease. Thus, the khanate of Karabakh was no stranger to dramatic population shifts. Nader Shakh deported the Jevanshir nomads into the Iranian heartland – Khorasan – for their disloyalty in the eighteenth century. Armenian Melik Fridon moved to Georgia, along with all his peasants, in 1797,[63] and only returned to Karabakh after 1805.[64]

As a result, the numerical strength and ethnographic composition of the khanate could vary greatly from one year to another. At the time of the submission of Karabakh in 1805 its population stood at an estimated 10,000 families but dramatically declined to some 3,000 families in the aftermath of the Russian-Persian War of 1806–12.[65] The cessation of hostilities resulted in the return of the population and by 1817 Ermolov reported some 7,872 families living in Karabakh.[66] In an effort to boost the population, in 1820 Ermolov arranged for the resettlement of some 2,000 families of Persian Shahsevan nomads in Karabakh.[67]

The earliest detailed demographic survey of the Karabakh khanate was conducted by Russian authorities immediately after the last khan fled to Iran in 1823. This survey, undertaken exclusively for the purposes of taxation, contains valuable village-level ethnographic data and reveals the intricate relationship between the demography and the economic structure of Karabakh in 1823 (Bournoutian 2011).

The entire population of the khanate was estimated at around 18,000 families, split almost equally between 7,791 nomad families that occupied 289 encampments, and a sedentary population living in 340 settlements. Even though the ethnicity of nomads is not revealed they can be safely identified as Turkic and Kurdish. By contrast, the ethnicity of the sedentary population is almost always identified as 3,845 Armenian families inhabiting 169 villages; and 3,339 Tatar families living in 170 villages.

The nomads occupied the lowlands between the Kura and Arax Rivers, while the sedentary Armenian population lived in the mountainous area of the eastern slopes of the Karabakh range to the northwest of the Arax and Kura Rivers. Sedentary Tatars occupied lands in the intermediate zone between the lowlands and the mountains.

The nomads of Karabakh engaged in cattle husbandry and depended on access to the mountains for their livelihood. During the scorching summers the nomads migrated with their herds into the alpine pastures of the Karabakh Mountains crossing the sedentary settlements. These annual migrations would cause continuing tension between sedentary and nomadic populations throughout the nineteenth century.

Following the Russian abolition of the khanate in Karabakh in 1822 its territory was reduced to the status of *uezd*. During the unsuccessful reforms of 1841 Karabakh *uezd* became part of Caspian Province. Five years later it was renamed Shusha *uezd* and made part of Shemakha *gubernia*.[68] In 1868 it became part of the newly created Elisavetpol *gubernia* but was split into Shusha and Zangezur *uezdy*.[69] Despite all the administrative changes and fragmentation into smaller *uezdy*, the internal administrative divisions largely corresponded to those of Karabakh khanate.

Its former capital and the only town – Shusha – was an important trading post on the road to Erevan *gubernia*. Its population grew to nearly 26,806 people in 1886 (56 percent Armenians and 43 percent Tatars). The town of Shusha and its several surrounding villages were an area of important Turkic settlement in a

mountainous part of Karabakh otherwise dominated by Armenians. The economic development of the latter part of the nineteenth century had little direct effect on the former khanate of Karabakh – with the exception of a small brick-making factory in Agdam; and carpet-making, leather, candle and soap-making, cottage industries in Shusha. But the main occupation of the population remained agriculture and pastoral nomadism.[70] While this pastoral nomadism remained an important and integral part of the economy of Karabakh, it also served as a source of simmering tension between the settled and nomadic populations. The annual migration of the cattle herds into the alpine pastures allowed for a trading period when products of the nomad economy could be exchanged for agricultural goods. At the same time, the passing of the nomadic herds resulted in the frequent destruction of crops and vineyards, leading to instances of violence. These tensions were usually contained by the presence of the imperial authority.

The development of the oil industry in Baku towards the end of the nineteenth century created a market for seasonal labor. The seasonal migration from Karabakh to Baku was facilitated by relatively easy railroad access. There the workers were drawn into an emerging ethno-class system surrounding the Baku oil industry – which stratified class along ethnic lines and channelled social frustration along those same lines (Suny 1972).

By the beginning of the twentieth century the territories of the former khanate of Karabakh were integrated into Elisavetpol *gubernia*. Despite the development of capitalist industries the region remained isolated from the effects of development. There were subtle social and ethnic tensions that visibly resurfaced when the central authority weakened – as was the case during the 1905 revolution, which in the eastern South Caucasus took the form of ethnic clashes that engulfed an entire area inhabited by Armenians and Turkic Muslims.

Capitalism, socialism, nationalism (1870–1914)

The last five decades of the tsarist rule in the Caucasus saw a number of important developments. There was the final expansion of the Russian Empire in the aftermath of the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877–78 that brought the Kars, Ardagan and Batum regions within the tsarist domain. More importantly, this was a period of tremendous economic and social transformation. These changes have been explored by a number of historians (Suny 1993a, 1994; Swietochowski 1985; Gregorian 1972; Jones, S. 2005). I will therefore provide a brief summary of these developments rather than trying to explore them in depth.

The Russian conquest of the South Caucasus in the first decades of the nineteenth century brought about an extended period of stability in the South Caucasus during which the region was shielded from the devastating effect of war. This had an important impact on socio-economic development. The initial result was the visible growth of the trading bourgeoisie. This new wealthy class was particularly heavily represented by Armenian merchants, who acquired a dominant economic position in Tiflis – the historical capital of Georgia. Another trend that became noticeable in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was

industrialization of the region. This process was facilitated by the exploration of oilfields around Baku and simultaneous railroad construction. A capitalist society with a large working class and an industrial bourgeoisie emerged in Baku. Along with European, Russian and Muslim entrepreneurs, the Armenian bourgeoisie occupied a prominent position there.

These rapid economic and social transformations brought about by capitalist development eventually led to the emergence of tensions. In Georgia, the traditional elite – the landowning Georgian nobility – was increasingly losing its economic power. In Baku, social tensions also ran along ethnic lines, with workers from different ethnic groups occupying different segments in the hierarchy of skilled and unskilled labor.

Hand-in-hand with economic and social transformation came the emergence of political parties and the growth of national identities. Towards the last decades of the nineteenth century the Russian Empire experienced a growth in the popularity of socialist ideas among the educated strata of society. In the Caucasus, where social tensions were often interwoven with ethnic ones, the emerging socialist parties unsurprisingly embraced the national agenda as well as creating a blend of national and socialist ideology.

The impoverished Georgian nobility turned towards socialism in great numbers as a way of challenging the assimilating policies of tsarism and the economic domination of the Armenian bourgeoisie. Armenian intellectuals concerned with the plight of their compatriots in the Ottoman Empire saw socialism as a way of improving the condition of Armenians there. The Muslim population of the eastern South Caucasus experienced a growth of secularism among its intellectual classes – who were now challenging the values of traditional Muslim society.

The accumulation of these factors over a period of several decades came to a head during the 1905 Russian Revolution that followed in the wake of Russian defeat by the Japanese. If in Georgia the revolution took on the form of social protest – leading to the emergence of a peasant republic – then in the eastern part of the region, where the Armenian and Muslim Turkic population was intermixed, it took the form of violent inter-ethnic clashes that claimed thousands of lives in Baku with the violence spreading to the countryside and resulting in the destruction of scores of villages. The traumatic experience of the 1905 conflict between Armenians and Turkic Muslims contributed to the rise of a national consciousness among the Muslim populations of the South Caucasus.

Russian entry into the First World War was largely greeted at home with enthusiasm, while in the Caucasus Armenians saw it as an opportunity to liberate historical territories now in the hands of the Ottoman Empire. Hardly anyone in 1914 could imagine that this would spell the end of tsarism.

Unlike the war on the Western Front, where the tsarist armies suffered significant territorial losses, the situation in the Caucasus was more favorable for the Russians. Despite brief initial success in 1914, the Ottoman army was steadily losing ground to the Russians. One of the developments of the war that had a direct consequence for the South Caucasus was the extermination of the

Armenian population within the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the Turkish defeats of 1915. This resulted in complete removal of the Armenians from their historical lands within the Ottoman Empire but also led to the flow of several hundred thousand Armenian – as well as Greek and Assyrian – refugees into the Russian Caucasus. The arrival of this desperate mass of people exacerbated existing ethnic tensions and affected the demographic situation, a fact usually overlooked since it was not recorded in major population censuses. By the end of 1916 both sides were exhausted and reached a stalemate with no active operations being undertaken.

From collapse to independence: October 1917–May 1918

After the Bolshevik coup of October 1917 the war-weary Russian army started to collapse. Soldiers deserted en masse and hurried back to Russia to participate in the Bolshevik-promised land redistribution. By the end of January 1918 practically no Russian troops remained on the Caucasian front, which was now defended by a hastily composed contingent of Armenian and Georgian corps, and some volunteers. In these new favorable circumstances the Turkish army, faced with inadequate defences, had an opportunity not only to reclaim the territories occupied by the Russian army during the war but also to recapture the strategic towns of Batum (ceded to the Russian Empire in 1878) and Baku, and establish a link with Central Asia (Ludshuveit 1966: 168).

The menacing state of military affairs in the Transcaucasia was exacerbated by the political turmoil in Petrograd. The local leaders were ill prepared to deal with the situation arising from the collapse of the empire – the very notion of independence was absolutely foreign to them (Kazemzadeh 1951: 80). Until then they had, at most, envisaged some form of limited self-rule set firmly within the Russian state (Burdett 1996: 480).

When the provisional government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks in Petrograd the *Zakavkazskii Komissariat* (Transcaucasian Commissariat)[71] was established to act as a local government until the All-Russian Constituent Assembly could decide upon the future of the empire. After the Bolsheviks dispersed the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 the last hope of preserving any connection with non-Bolshevik Russia disappeared. After some deliberation a local Caucasian parliament, the *Seim* (Diet), was created on February 23, 1918, by re-using the votes cast in elections for the Constituent Assembly.[72] The three main parties of the *Seim* – Mensheviks, Dashnaks and Musavatists – each represented a local ethnic group: Georgians, Armenians and *Tyurks*, known at the time as Caucasian Tatars. The *Seim* refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Bolshevik regime but, at the same time, acknowledging reality and declaring independence would be going one step too far. In the midst of this political chaos the Turkish army started its offensive on February 12.[73]

At the same time, on the Western Front the Germans started a virtually unopposed offensive on February 18. The very existence of the Bolshevik regime was now at stake. To avert catastrophe the Bolshevik leadership in Russia

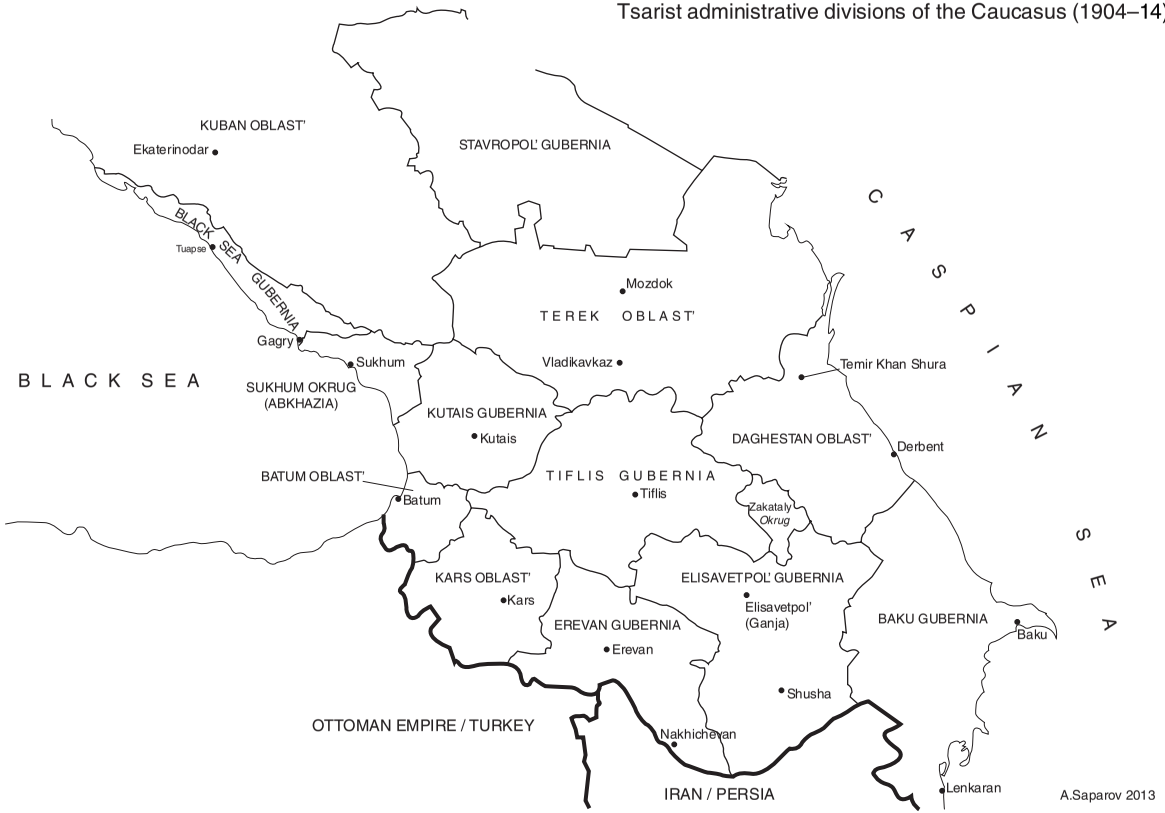

Figure 1.2 Tsarist administrative divisions of the Caucasus (1904–14).

desperately sought peace with the Germans. The Brest-Litovsk peace treaty signed on March 3 came at the price of huge territorial losses which affected Transcaucasia as well – the provinces of Kars and Batum were ceded to the Turks.

The newly created Transcaucasian *Seim* was shocked by conditions imposed by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and refused to recognize it.[74] Instead, the Transcaucasian leaders decided to conclude their own peace with Turkey, which was now rather urgent in view of the unfolding Turkish offensive. The delegation of the *Seim* departed to Trebizond on March 7. As soon as negotiations opened the Turks demanded either recognition of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty or a declaration of independence.[75]

All this was taking place while the Turkish armies were already crossing the Russian-Turkish frontier of 1914. Eventually, on April 10, the delegation in Trebizond, realizing how desperate the situation was, accepted the Brest-Litovsk Treaty.[76] However, in Tiflis the belligerent mood prevailed and the *Seim* rejected the treaty[77], recalled its delegation from Trebizond,[78] and declared war on Turkey on April 13.[79] The next day, however, the Turks captured without much difficulty the fortress of Batum. This military loss had a sobering effect on the political leaders of Transcaucasia.

Having no luck on the battlefield the *Seim* opted once again for peace. In order to resume negotiations the *Seim* complied with Turkish demands and proclaimed the independence of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic on April 22.[80] Three days later the fortress of Kars was surrendered and the Turks gained practically all the territories awarded to them by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (Ludshuveit 1966: 180). Once negotiations resumed in Batum on May 11 the Turks presented new territorial demands; claiming parts of Erevan and Tiflis *gubernii* on the grounds that as a war had taken place the conditions of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty were invalidated.[81] With negotiations under way in Batum the Turks continued their advance.

Eventually the Turks presented the Transcaucasian delegation with an ultimatum to accept their demands by May 26.[82] Under this final pressure the Transcaucasian Federation collapsed after barely of three month of existence – the Georgians, having already secured the protection of Germany, quit the Federation and declared their independence on May 26.[83] They were followed by Azerbaijan and finally, reluctantly, by the Armenians on May 28.

It is significant that while all three declarations of independence made rich promises to respect the rights of all people regardless of their political orientation, sex, religion or ethnicity, there was no mention of the territories within which these newly independent states were proclaimed. The Georgian declaration did not even attempt to define the territory within which the Georgian republic was declared[84]; Azerbaijan made elusive claims to "eastern and southern Transcaucasus" (Guliev 1998: 13–14); while Armenians vaguely stated that: "[The] Armenian National Council declares itself the supreme and sole administration of the Armenian provinces." It is symbolic that the borders between the three republics would finally be drawn only three years later by the new masters of the region – the Bolsheviks.

Meanwhile, and despite the collapse of the Transcaucasian Federation, the Turks imposed the new territorial losses on the now-independent states of Georgia and Armenia – annexing parts of Tiflis and Erevan *gubernii* under the provisions of the Treaty of Batum on June 4, 1918[85] – and were able to continue their advance towards Baku. Thus, the only defined frontier of the newly independent republics at the moment of independence was the one imposed by the Turks in Batum in 1918 and the Russo-Iranian border of 1828.

Notes

1 There are different dates for the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, ranging from 1722 to 1878. See Lapin (2008).
2 PSZ, series 1, vol. 7, pp. 110–12
3 Ibid., pp. 303–9.
4 SIRIO vol. 10, p. 441.
5 PSZ, series 1, vol. 21, pp. 1013–17, 1025.
6 Letter of Aga Mohamed to Erekle is in: SMOMPK (1901) vol. 29, pp. 146–8.
7 PSZ, series I, vol. 26, p. 502.
8 AKAK, vol. II, pp. 3, 8–9.
9 Ibid., pp. 685–6, text pp. 696–97.
10 Ibid., pp. 690–4.
11 Ibid., pp. 453–4.
12 Ibid., p. 456.
13 PSZ, series 1, vol. 28, annex pp. 6–8; text of *prositel'nye gramoty* in AKAK vol 2, pp. 459–62.
14 See diplomatic exchanges between Russian commanders and Javad Khan in AKAK, vol. I pp. 606–14; AKAK vol. 2, pp. 586–90.
15 AKAK, vol. II, pp. 588–90.
16 AKAK, vol. II, p. 592, no. 1184
17 AKAK, vol. II, pp. 593–4, no. 1186.
18 AKAK, vol. II, pp. 374–7, No. 748. Its vassal Guria also became part of that deal. But when Solomon II was expelled by the Russians and Imeretia was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1810, Guria was granted independence and concluded a treaty of suzerainity with the Russian Empire in June 1810. See: AKAK, vol. IV, pp. 436–8
19 AKAK, vol. II, pp. 572–4. "Report to the Emperor"; on 25 October 1805 Budag Sultan of Shuragel, who was in prison in Erevan, accepted the suzerainty of the Russian emperor. See: AKAK, vol. 2, pp. 577–8, text of the agreement.
20 Karabakh khanate. AKAK, vol. II, pp. 704–5. "Report of Tsitsianov to Alexander". pp. 702–5; Sheqi khanate AKAK, vol. 2, pp. 705–7; "Report of Tsitsianov", pp. 646–7, text p. 647.
21 AKAK, vol. II, pp. 674–6 (text of the treaty, pp. 676–7).
22 PSZ, series 1, vol. 32, pp. 641–5.
23 AKAK, vol. IV, p. 666.
24 AKAK, vol. VI, part I, pp. 738–9; PSZ Series I, vol. 36, p. 398.
25 AKAK, vol. VI, part I, p. 812.
26 Ibid., pp. 848, 850.
27 AKAK, vol. VII, pp. 418–19; vol. VIII, pp. 440–1.
28 PSZ, series 2, vol. 3, pp. 272–83.
29 AKAK, vol. 7, No. 47, "*Vsepoddaneishii raport grafa Paskevicha ot 24 aprelia 1830 goda, No 4*."
30 PSZ, series 2, vol. 15, part 1, pp. 237–61.
31 PSZ, series 2, vol. 20, part 1, pp. 151–2; AKAK, vol. X, p. i.

32 PSZ, series 2, vol. 21, part 1, pp. 647–56.
33 PSZ, series 2, vol. 24, part 1, pp. 311–2.
34 PSZ, series 2, vol. 43, part 1, p. 128.
35 PSZ, series 2, vol. 31, part 1, pp. 716–17.
36 PSZ, series 2, vol. 31, part 1, pp. 834–8; PSZ, series 2, vol. 42, part 1, pp. 3–4.
37 PSZ, series 2, vol. 15, part 1, pp. 237–61.
38 PSZ, series 2, vol. 21, part 2, pp. 647–69.
39 PSZ, series 2, vol. 42, part 1, pp. 382–3.
40 PSZ, series 2, vol. 41, part 1, pp. 1022–5.
41 AKAK, vol XII, p. 222.
42 AKAK, vol. X, p. 843.
43 AKAK, vol. III, pp. 198–200. On the murder of Kelesh-bey.
44 PSZ, series 1, vol. 40, appendix, pp. 74–5; AKAK, vol. III, p. 209.
45 AKAK, vol. IV, p. 419.
46 Ibid.
47 AKAK, vol. IV, p. 421.
48 Ibid., p. 424.
49 Ibid., p. 427.
50 AKAK, vol. VI part I, p. 654–5.
51 Ibid., pp. 658–9.
52 Ibid., pp. 655–6.
53 Ibid., pp. 660.
54 Ibid., p. 663.
55 Ibid., p. 664.
56 AKAK, vol. VIII, p. 449.
57 AKAK, vol. XI, p. 54.
58 Ibid., pp. 52–3.
59 PSZ, series 2, vol. 41, part 1, pp. 1022–5, no. 43551, August 11, 1866.
60 AKAK, vol. I, p. 396.
61 PSZ, series 2, vol. 41, part 1, pp. 1022–5.
62 See the text of Firman of Shah Abbas II (1642–66) from 1651 to Melik Bagi in AKAK, vol. VI, part I, p. 838.
63 AKAK, vol. I, pp. 631–2.
64 AKAK, vol. VI, part I, pp. 863–4.
65 AKAK, vol. V, p. 579.
66 AKAK, vol. VI, part I, p. 836.
67 Ibid., p. 840.
68 PSZ, series 2, vol. 21, part 2, pp. 647–69.
69 PSZ, series 2, vol. 43, part 1, p. 128.
70 SMOMPK, 1891, no. 11, pp. 1–89.
71 The Transcaucasian Commissariat existed in the period from November 28, 1917, until February 22, 1918, when it was replaced by *Zakavkazskii Seim* (Transcaucasian Diet).
72 ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 13, pp. 118 back, 119. Transcaucasia received 35 places in the Constituent Assembly. This number was proportionally increased and the Transcaucasian *Seim* had 122 delegates.
73 See "Telegramma Vekhiba-pashi o perekhode turetskikh voisk v nastuplenie, 30 yanvarya (12 fevralia) 1334 g. (1918 g.)" (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 47–9).
74 "Protest Zakavkazskogo Pravitel'stva protiv deistvii bol'shevikov v Brest-Litovske, Tiflis 17 fevralia (2 marta) 1918 g." (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 85–6).
75 "Otvet Ottomanskoi delegatsii, Trapezund, 7 (20) marta 1918 g." (Dokumenty 1919, p. 136).
76 "Otvet Zakavkazskoi delegatsii na turetskii ul'timatum" (Dokumenty 1919, p. 160).

77 "Zhurnal soedinennogo zasedaniia prezidiuma Zakavkazskogo Seima, Zakavkazskogo Pravitel'stva i predstavitelei fraktsii Seima 31 marta (13 aprelia) 1918 g." and "Iz stenograficheskogo otcheta o zasedanii Zakavkazskogo Seima, 31 marta (13 aprelia) 1918 g." (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 163–6, 166–84).
78 "Telegramma Zakavkazskogo Pravitel'stva ob otozvanii delegatsii, Tiflis 1 (14) aprelia 1918 g." (Dokumenty 1919, p. 184).
79 "Obrashchenie Zakavkazskogo Seima ko vsem narodan Zakavkaz'ia, Tiflis 31 marta (13 aprelia) 1918 g." (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 185–6).
80 "Provozglashenie Zakavkaz'ia nezavisimoi Respublikoi, 9 (22) aprelia 1918 g." (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 200–22); Kazemzadeh (1951, p. 105) incorrectly mentions April 28 as the date of this announcement.
81 "Iz protokola pervogo zasedaniia Batumskoi mirnoi konferentsii. 11 maia 1918 g." (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 314–15).
82 "Ul'timatum Turtsii, Batum 26 maia 1918 g." (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 309–10).
83 "Akt nezavisimosti Gruzii" (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 336–8).
84 Dokumenty 1919, pp. 336–337; Diasamidze T. (ed.) (2004) "Status avtonomnykh regionov Abkhazii i Iugo-Osetii v sostave Gruzii (1917–1988)," Sbornik politiko-pravovykh aktov (Tbilisi, GCI), pp. 220–1.
85 "Dogovor mira i druzhby mezhdu Imperatorskim Ottomanskim Pravitel'stvom i Pravitel'stvom Gruzinskoi Respubliki" (Dokumenty 1919, pp. 343–9).

2 Abkhazia (1917–31)

At the end of the tsarist epoch the population of Abkhazia represented a complex mix of different ethnic groups and social classes. Abkhazia was one of the last semi-independent regions in the Caucasus to come under direct Russian rule. The imposition of Russian rule resulted in a dramatic demographic change – following a number of rebellions a significant proportion of the Abkhaz population immigrated to the Ottoman Empire. The Russian government's attempts to colonize the depopulated province with Russian and European settlers met with limited success. The availability of empty lands in Abkhazia attracted unauthorized Armenian and Greek settlers from the Ottoman Empire, but large numbers of landless Mingrels from the neighboring Kutais Province made up the bulk of the arrivals. The combination of colonization policies and demographic change created deep social and ethnic cleavages within Abkhazia.

By the end of the nineteenth century the ethnographic and social structure of Abkhazia had fundamentally changed. The Abkhaz became a minority of the population but retained a large portion of their landed nobility and preserved ownership of lands which remained in their possession. The Russian and European colonists were offered generous land parcels by Russian authorities, but their numbers were limited.

Armenian and Greek settlers from the Ottoman Empire were not encouraged to colonize Abkhazia and could not acquire land ownership. Yet they found a profitable niche by specializing in tobacco- and tea-growing on rented land. The most numerous group – the Mingrel peasants – were also the most disadvantaged. Their sheer numbers alarmed the Russian authorities who perceived them as competitors for the colonization of Abkhazia. A legal framework was created to prevent Mingrels form owning or renting land and they were confined to the role of a hired agricultural workforce. At the time of the fall of the Romanov dynasty Abkhazia was ripe with social and ethnic tensions.

After the February revolution of 1917 numerous national councils and soviets mushroomed all over the former empire. They existed alongside the institutions of the provisional government. This was replicated in Abkhazia, where the provisional government was represented by members of the ancient regime organized into the City Committee of Public Security.

At the same time a number of soviets sprung up in Abkhazia. These were divided between Bolsheviks and Social Democrats (Mensheviks). The Bolsheviks dominated in two districts – in Gudauta, where Nestor Lakoba was elected District Commissar, and Samurzakano where Efrem Eshba secured the same position. Their support base was mainly among landless peasants. The Social Democrats (Mensheviks) and supporters of the local nobility were dominant in the central part of Abkhazia around Sukhum and Kodori districts.

The Abkhaz elites in this early period saw themselves as part of the larger family of mountain people of the North Caucasus, particularly due to their shared experience of tsarist colonialism. Throughout the summer of 1917 they toyed with the idea of joining the "Union of the Mountaineers of the Caucasus" that had emerged in the North Caucasus and strove to unite the Caucasian mountaineer people. The Abkhaz sent several delegations to participate in the congresses of the mountaineers. This, however, reaped few practical results primarily due to the remoteness of Abkhazia from the North Caucasus.

Two days after the Bolsheviks overthrew the provisional government in Petrograd, a peasant congress of Abkhazia convened in Sukhum on November 9, 1917. Despite the opposition of the Bolsheviks, as well as Mingrel delegates from the Samurzakano region, the congress adopted a "Constitution of the Abkhaz People" and elected the Abkhaz People Council (APC) – which acted as a temporary local government in view of the turmoil in Petrograd.

After the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly in Petrograd on January 5, 1918, it became clear that the Russian state was crumbling. The start of the civil war severed ties with Russia, and Abkhazia found itself in isolation. In this unclear political situation the Georgian National Council invited the representatives of the APC and Samurzakano to Tiflis to discuss the relationship between Transcaucasus and Abkhazia in January 1918. The outcome of these consultations was a three-point agreement, signed on February 9, that promised to re-establish the "united and indivisible" Abkhazia "from Ingur River to Mzymta River which will include Abkhazia itself and Samurzakano [i.e.] present day Sukhum District" (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 402); and the political organization of Abkhazia was to be determined according to the principle of national self-determination at the Constituent Assembly of Abkhazia.

The conditions of the agreement were quite favorable to the Abkhaz – not only did Georgians not make any claims on the Samurzakano region that had a Mingrel majority, they also promised to include within Abkazia parts of Chernomorskaia *gubernia* as far as the Mzymta River. The agreement, despite being vague, nevertheless left an impression of being concluded by two equal parties. But while the Abkhaz People's Council was signing agreements with its Georgian counterpart a series of violent events in Abkhazia demonstrated the limits of its authority. Abkhazia until then had been largely unaffected by the exodus of Russian soldiers from the Caucasian front, a process that had accelerated by early 1918. However, on February 16, after a violent incident, the deserting crew of a Russian battleship overthrew the authority of the APC in Sukhum. The local Bolsheviks used this opportunity and briefly proclaimed Soviet authority, though this evaporated with the departure of the ship a couple of days later.

Within two weeks the local authorities called a second Peasant Congress on March 4–9, 1918 (Dzidzaria 1983: 32). It condemned the Bolsheviks, recognized the Transcaucasian *Seim* and confirmed the authority of the APC within Abkhazia (Shamba and Neproshin 2004: 92; Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 409, 746). Despite these legitimacy-boosting measures the brief Bolshevik takeover of Sukhum was symptomatic in many ways. It not only revealed the weakness of the APC, it also revealed the size and extent of a strong social base that the Bolsheviks could count on among the landless Mingrel peasants in Abkhazia. It also coincided with a time when the relative stability of the South Caucasus was about to be shattered by the Ottoman advance of February 1918.

Meanwhile, Bolshevik forces centered upon Tuapse and Sochi expanded towards Gagra on the border of Sukhum *okrug* in early March. In early April they crossed into Abkhazia, capturing Sukhum on April 8 (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 411). By April 11 Bolshevik authority had spread to Samurzakano region (Dzidzariia 1957: 72, 81), bringing the whole of Abkhazia – with the exception of Kodor *uchastok* – under Bolshevik control. Members of the APC were either arrested, or dispersed (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 72).

The Bolshevik takeover of Abkhazia occurred at a time when the Transcaucasian *Seim* was in deep crisis – facing the advancing Ottoman troops it was forced to proclaim its independence and could hardly spare troops to deal with the situation in Abkhazia. It was only in May that the situation stabilized somewhat and the Georgian national guard moved against the Bolsheviks (Dzidzariia 1957: 75–80). Georgian troops recaptured Sukhum and pushed the Bolsheviks back to Gagra by May 17.

Within days of recapturing Sukhum the Georgian authorities re-established the APC. This decision seems to be related to the need to have a legitimate body representing Abkhazia in the wake of the negotiations with the Ottoman Empire in Batum that took place in June 1918. At the same time, the Transcaucasian Federation dissolved under Ottoman pressure into the three states of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The leadership of the APC that had previously associated itself with the Transcaucasian Federation now found itself in a predicament. On the one hand, it depended on Georgian troops for its security, but on the other hand it wanted to retain its independent standing. In this situation the APC sought to conclude a treaty with the Georgian government (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 413). On June 11 a treaty was signed between the APC and the Georgian government. One of the important points of the treaty stipulated that: "The concluded treaty will be revised by the National Assembly of Abkhazia which will finally determine the political organization of Abkhazia and the relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia" (Shamba and Neproshin 2003: 249–50). This point of the treaty preserved a theoretical option for the Abkhaz APC to reject a union with Georgia. As a result there is profound confusion between Georgian and Abkhaz scholars over the exact text of the treaty.[1]

Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks in Gagra, having received reinforcements, made another attempt to recapture Abkhazia in June. Facing this fresh Bolshevik invasion the Georgian war minister appointed General Mazniev as governor-general

of Sukhum on June 18. The regular Georgian troops landed in Sukhum and within a week the Bolsheviks were once again pushed out of Abkhazia (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 753). The regular Georgian army continued their pursuit along the coast.

Meanwhile, the APC found itself in the situation of being a king without a kingdom. Mazniev, who de facto had full authority in Abkhazia, did not even pay lip service to the APC – proclaiming Abkhazia a Sukhum governor-generalship (Gamakhariia 2009: 462). Mazniev's conduct demonstrated quite clearly that without real force on the ground the APC would exercise no real political power in Abkhazia. Having no resources of their own, some members of the APC sought support from an external power. In the summer of 1918 the only such power was the Ottoman Empire. It appears that some members of the APC established contact with the Ottoman delegation at the Batum conference – hoping to secure support of the ethnic Abkhaz serving with the Ottoman Army. This maneuver would spread Ottoman influence over Abkhazia, provide the APC with a military force, and technically exclude Turkey from breaching the terms of the Batum peace treaty. However, the landing of the Ottoman-Abkhaz force in late June and mid-August 1918 failed; and with this failure so too did the pro-Ottoman orientation among Abkhaz APC members.

The new power that emerged as a potential backer of Abkhaz interests was the Volunteer Army – an anti-Bolshevik force comprised of monarchist officers and Cossacks. It quickly developed antagonistic relations with Georgia. The Georgian pursuit of the Bolshevik troops retreating from Abkhazia continued into the territory of Chernomorskaia *gubernia*, eventually bringing them into contact with the Volunteer Army near Tuapse. The leadership of the Volunteer Army considered these territories an inseparable part of Russia and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of all Georgian forces beyond the River Ingur. In other words, Georgians had to evacuate not only Chernomorskaia *gubernia* but also Abkhazia itself. A Georgian-Volunteer Army conference held in Ekaterinodar in September failed to resolve these issues (Dokumenty 1919: 388–90).

It is in connection with these developments that one should see the attempt of some members of the APC to oust its pro-Georgian chairman in order to secure the backing of the Volunteer Army. On October 9 pro-independence members of the APC brought their armed supporters, forcing its chairman and presidium to resign (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 84–5). Once regular Georgian troops arrived the APC was dispersed and pro-independence members were arrested on charges of treason.[2] The very next day the Georgian government published a decree disbanding the APC:

> 1 The APC in its present form is disbanded; a new APC will be elected.
>
> [. . .]
>
> 3 Until the election of the new APC Sukhum region is placed under the administration of the commissar of Sukhum *okrug* and until his arrival

all military and civilian authority is placed in the hands of the chief of staff of the Sukhum detachment.

4 Due to the disbandment of the APC the responsibilities of Colonel Chkhotua are terminated. The minister of internal affairs will temporarily act in his place.[3]

Dispersal of the APC, arrest of its members, and introduction of direct rule from Tiflis, solved the problem of separatism within the governing body of Abkhazia but at the same time left the Georgian government exposed to political criticism. The commander of the Volunteer Army, General Denikin, argued that Abkhazia had to be declared a neutral zone since Georgia was occupying it against the wishes of the population (Khodzhaa 2007: 207). The Georgian government also came under pressure from British representatives in the South Caucasus who demanded the release of those members of the APC who had been arrested (Menteshashvili 1990a: 25–7). Finally, legitimization of Georgian control over Abkhazia was necessary in view of the opening of the Paris Peace Conference. In order to address these external pressures the Georgian government decided to legitimize its presence in Abkhazia by announcing new elections to the APC in December 1918.

Those elections were conducted in February 1919, and the new 40-member APC (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 87, 771) opened its first session on March 18 (ibid.: 771). The Social Democrats (Mensheviks) won the majority of seats in the new APC. Other factions were represented by social federalists, an independent socialist group (left wing ethnic Abkhaz), social revolutionaries, people's democrats, and colonists.[4] Almost immediately the APC split along ethnic lines over the question of Abkhaz autonomy. On March 18 the ethnic Abkhaz members of the Social Democrats joined the independent socialist group to form an ethnic Abkhaz opposition within the APC. Finally, a group of Abkhaz and Russian landowners, representing a right wing opposition, tied its hopes up with the success of the Volunteer Army.

By March 20, despite the opposition of ethnic Abkhaz members, the APC adopted a declaration of Abkhaz autonomy within Georgia:

1 Abkhazia joins the Georgian Democratic Republic as its autonomous unit [and] notifies the government of the Georgian Republic and its Constituent Assembly about this [decision].

2 [In order] to compose the Constitution of Autonomous Abkhazia and determine the relationship between central and autonomous authorities, a joint commission is to be elected from the equal number of the members of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia and the APC.

(Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 88, 435)

This new document, adopted by the elected APC, disavowed the earlier agreement of June 11, 1918, that allowed the APC to determine the relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia. It now framed the relationship between the two

in terms of autonomy, yet made provision for the Constitution of Abkhazia to determine the extent of its autonomous rights.

However, establishing the Constitution of the Autonomous Abkhazia proved to be a difficult and slow process. The constitutional commission was quickly set up – on March 30, 1919 – but its work proceeded slowly (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 435, 774–5). By late May there were two projects for an Abkhaz Constitution submitted by rival factions of the APC, and a third compromise one.

A delegation was sent to Tiflis in September but failed to secure any official recognition of the Abkhaz Constitution from the Georgian Constitutional Assembly. Uncertainty as to the exact legal position of Abkhazia continued to drag on and began to undermine the spirits of even the loyal majority of the APC. In July 1920 the APC appealed to the Constituent Assembly of Georgia, asking it to start discussions about the extent of Abkhaz autonomy in order to "calm the minds down."[5]

By 1920, some of the actions of the Georgian government in Abkhazia had effectively excluded and alienated its non-Georgian population. The introduction of Georgian in elementary schools within Abkhazia (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 455–6) was seen within Georgia as an act of decolonization. In the Abkhazian context this action marginalized a large section of the population; here, Russian was *lingua franca*. The imposition of Georgian as the official language had the effect of making a large number of civil servants unemployed.[6] There was also an attempt to resettle Georgian peasants within Abkhazia (Gamakhariia and Gogia 1997: 784). The deliberate destruction of Abkhaz peasant property by regular Georgian troops during the landing of Ottoman-Abkhaz soldiers in the summer 1918 was not an isolated incident. Such actions undermined whatever support the Georgian rule had in Abkhazia.

Meanwhile, the eclipse of Bolshevik influence in Abkhazia proved temporary. The successes of the Volunteer Army in the first half of 1919 caused waves of Bolsheviks, and their sympathizers, to flee prosecution by entering Abkhazia. Here they found a fertile ground among a population already dissatisfied with the policies of the Georgian republic. By the summer of 1920 the Bolsheviks had defeated the Volunteer Army, emerged victorious in the Russian civil war, and now approached the borders of Abkhazia. In these circumstances ethnic Abkhaz members of the APC were disillusioned by the reluctance of the Georgian government to ratify the autonomous status of Abkhazia, and began gravitating towards an alliance with the Bolsheviks. The Bolshevik influence in Abkhazia grew to such an extent that the Georgian authorities began arresting Bolshevik activists; and several members of the APC from the Abkhaz opposition were imprisoned for collaboration with them (Dzidzariia 1963: 305).

In October and November 1920 the APC sent two delegations to Tiflis in a final attempt to have the Abkhaz Constitution accepted – but the Georgian government was still reluctant to make any firm commitments. Seeing the futility of these efforts, the chairman of the APC eventually recalled the delegation in December 1920. It was only on February 21, 1921, that the Georgian government adopted a

constitution which in vague terms recognized the autonomy of Abkhazia. But this took place when the Red Army was already invading Georgia.

This brief overview of Abkhaz history during the Russian civil war leads us to the following conclusions. Despite its multi-ethnic composition the main tensions in Abkhazia in 1917 and early 1918 were mostly along social lines. The Bolsheviks were supported by the poor peasantry, while the Georgian Social Democrat base of support came from the well-off peasantry and nobility.

In this early period it seemed that Abkhazia, together with other parts of the Russian Empire, would become a member of a future democratic republic. In the turmoil that ensued after the Bolshevik takeover in October 1917 – dispersal of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 and the beginning of the Ottoman offensive in February 1918 – the Bolshevik-dominated soviets overran the APC and proclaimed the establishment of Soviet authority in Abkhazia.

It was only after the cessation of hostilities with Turkey that Georgian troops expelled the Bolsheviks from Abkhazia. In these new circumstances the Abkhazian status remained unclear. The Transcaucasian Federation, with which Abkhazia was associated, no longer existed after disintegrating into three independent republics. As a result the Georgian government found itself needing to legitimize its presence there. Hence, the APC was resurrected to act as a legitimate civil authority within Abkhazia. Unable to fully integrate Abkhazia, the Georgian government was now prepared to offer autonomy. Yet despite the earlier promise of autonomy, the Georgian government was reluctant to recognize Abkhaz status. The misconduct of Georgian military personnel who had carried out numerous arrests, frequent confiscations and been involved in the destruction of property, as well as attempts to impose the Georgian language in schools and in all official correspondence, alienated large sections of the non-Georgian population and laid a fertile ground for an easy Bolshevik takeover.

Meanwhile, the various promises and agreements that the Georgian government concluded with the APC during the course of the previous three years left a legacy that could not be easily disregarded and would play an essential role in Bolshevik decision-making with regard to Abkhazia and its status within Georgia.

The socialist Soviet republic of Abkhazia

On the eve of the Bolshevik invasion of Georgia an Abkhaz *Revkom* was hastily created in order to give an appearance of legitimacy to the impending takeover of Abkhazia. The ethnic Abkhaz Bolsheviks – Nestor Lakoba and Efrem Eshba – were urgently recalled from a mission in Turkey to join Nikolai Akirtava, who was also urgently summoned to form the three-member Abkhaz *Revkom*. On February 17, 1921, the 9th Red Army commander ordered the invasion of Abkhazia from the north (Dzidzariia 1957: 176). Bolshevik troops, accompanied by the newly created Abkhaz *Revkom*, moved along the coastal road. The Georgian troops offered little resistance and

Sukhum – the capital of Abkhazia – was captured on March 4. The Red Army-backed Abkhaz *Revkom* found itself, to its own surprise, to be the only viable political force in Abkhazia since the Georgian *Revkom* was still busy establishing its authority in Tiflis. As Efrem Eshba, one of the leaders of the Abkhaz *Revkom*, later admitted: "Even we who were moving from the north thought that Abkhazia would exist as an integral part of Georgia" (Sagariia 1970: 28). The political vacuum in Georgia prompted the Abkhaz *Revkom* to request the *Kavburo* to clarify the relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia in early March (ibid.: 25). From this political uncertainty arose the opportunity for the Abkhaz *Revkom* to claim more than originally expected, which it soon did with little hesitation.

After the capture of Sukhum in early March the Abkhaz *Revkom* conducted a joint session together with representatives of the *Revvoensovet* of the 9th Red Army and some members of the *Kavburo*. At this meeting it was decided to declare Abkhazia an independent Soviet Socialist Republic. Later the same month another session of the Abkhaz *Revkom* once again confirmed the previous decision, and based on these two decisions the Abkhaz *Revkom* appealed directly to Moscow on March 26, enquiring whether "the Soviet Abkhazia will be an independent republic or an administrative unit?" (ibid.: 25). In the same telegram they suggested a solution: "First, Abkhazia should be declared a Socialist Soviet Republic. Second, Soviet Abkhazia should join the Russian Federation directly" (ibid.: 26). A copy of this telegram was sent the next day to the head of the *Kavburo* – Sergo Ordzhonikidze (ibid).

The reaction of Ordzhonokidze, who in his capacity as chairman of the *Kavburo* was responsible for all major policy decisions in the Caucasus, was quite interesting. He suggested meeting in Batum in order to discuss this question, but for the time being recommended refraining from declaring that Abkhazia should join the Russian Federation pending clarification from Moscow (ibid.: 26). Apparently the prospect of Abkhazia proclaiming itself an independent Soviet Socialist Republic was less worrying for Ordzhonikidze than the Abkhaz desire to join Russia. The explanation for this somewhat incoherent attitude will become clear from the details of the meeting in Batum.

Following the suggestion of Ordzhonikidze, members of the Abkhaz *Revkom* (Eshba and Lakoba) proceeded to Batum where a joint meeting took place with members of the *Kavburo* (Ordzhonikidze and Eliava) and two Georgian representatives of the Batum *Revkom* (*Revkom* chairman, Kavtaradzhe, and another member, Toroshelidze) on March 28. There it was decided:

> until the [convocation of the] Congress of Soviets of Abkhazia, the question of federation [between] Soviet Abkhazia and RSFSR [or] SSR Georgia remains open and [meanwhile] Abkhazia is being declared a Soviet Socialist Republic.… Based on this decision the Abkhaz *Revkom* sends a welcoming telegram … to all Soviet Republics from Socialist Soviet Republic of Abkhazia.
>
> (Tulumdzhian 1957: 26–7)

A slightly different version appeared in another source:

> until the [convocation of the] Congress of Soviets of Abkhazia – the latter [Abkhazia] according to the declaration of the Georgian *Revkom* about the right of peoples of Abkhazia to complete self-determination, is being declared a Soviet Socialist Republic.
>
> (Akhalaia *et al*. 1961: 52)

Based on this decision the Abkhaz *Revkom* was quick to send a telegram announcing the creation of the SSR Abkhazia on March 31: "At the will of workers a new Socialist Soviet Republic of Abkhazia is born. The First Congress of peasant and worker deputies of Abkhazia will finally [*okonchatel'no*] determine the fate of the people" (Tulumdzhian 1957: 25).

Thus, very quickly and without much political struggle or any opposition from Georgia – Abkhazia separated from the Georgian SSR and received the same level of nominal independence as, for instance, the Ukrainian SSR or the Georgian SSR. In appearance Abkhazia was an independent Soviet Republic – free to decide its destiny. In reality this legal independence came with strings attached.

In my opinion the text of the decision taken in Batum and the text of the Abkhaz telegram explain the ease with which Abkhazia received its status of SSR. The Abkhaz were offered the status of a full-fledged republic on condition that they would "voluntarily" renounce this status and join into a federation with Georgia. A clear indication of this is the statement that the question of federation with Russia or Georgia would remain open until convocation of the congress. Additional evidence is provided by Sergo Ordzhonokidze himself:

> Our party, without a second of hesitation, offered Abkhazians independence and issued a directive to the Abkhaz communists to work in the direction of a union with Soviet Georgia. In some 3–4 months the Abkhaz people decided to join Georgia.
>
> (Ordzhonikidze 1923)

That created a paradoxical situation – on the one hand Abkhazia was legally independent and free to decide its own destiny (albeit within the limits allowed to the Socialist Republics), on the other hand this independence was constrained by some verbal agreement to denounce this independence and join Georgia on the basis of federation.

A few months later the Georgian *Revkom* officially welcomed the independence of the Abkhaz Socialist Soviet Republic. At first, on April 6, the Georgian newspaper *Pravda Gruzii* published a welcoming note to Soviet Abkhazia (Akhalaia *et al*. 1961: 27); later, on May 21, a more explicit announcement was made by Sergei Kavtaradze at the Congress of Workers of Abkhazia. In this last declaration we again see reference to the People's Congress that would finally determine the status of the independent Abkhaz SSR:

> The Menshevik authority … suppressed … national minorities which created terrible antagonism between different nationalities … living in Georgia.

> The Soviet authority … [finds] that national self-determination is [the] only way to overcome national prejudices.
>
> Based on that the *Revkom* of SSRG recognizes and welcomes the creation of an independent SSR Abkhazia and thinks that the question of the relationship between SSR Georgia and SSR Abkhazia will be finally determined at the first Congress of Worker and Peasant Deputies of Abkhazia, as well as of Georgia.
>
> (Kacharava *et al*. 1959, pp. 58–9; Akhalaia *et al*. 1961: 81–2)

Why did the Bolsheviks need to create such complicated schemes? Why did they not simply award Abkhazia an autonomous status within Georgia? It seems that the answer is in the fact that the Menshevik government was prepared to offer autonomy to Abkhazia as early as March 1919 (Lakoba 1993: 314–15; 319–20). What is more, a few days before the sovietization of Georgia the Mensheviks had adopted a Georgian Constitution that included a rather ambiguous clause on Abkhaz autonomy (Constitution 1922: 26). It is possible to assume that by granting the Abkhaz independence, the Bolsheviks wanted to demonstrate their more progressive position on the national question than their political opponents.

Towards union with Georgia

Once independence was granted the Abkhaz leadership was expected to make good on its part of the bargain – preparing the ground for joining Abkhazia with Georgia. In May a Congress of Workers[7] of Abkhazia took place. There the representative of the Georgian *Revkom* – Kavtaradze – announced the recognition of the independent Abkhazia, while the head of the Abkhaz *Revkom* – Efrem Eshba – speaking on May 28, hinted at the possible union with Georgia in the near future:

> In a couple months the congress of Soviets will convene and there the workers themselves will discuss and decide this question from the workers' point of view. Their eyes will open and they will understand what the Soviet authority is. And they will decide [whether] to be with Russia or Georgia. This question is being postponed until convocation of the congress of Soviets [principally] in order not to force any decision.
>
> (Tulumdzhian 1957: 45; Akhalaia *et al*. 1961: 88–9)

On May 28 the congress adopted a resolution which also alluded to forthcoming union with Georgia:

> The congress is confident that the First Congress of plenipotentiary Soviets of peasant and worker deputies of Georgia and Abkhazia will on its own determine the final forms of the fraternal cooperation between Abkhazia and Georgia, as is correctly mentioned in the May 21 declaration of the Georgian *Revkom*.
>
> (Tulumdzhian 1957: 48; Akhalaia *et al*. 1961: 91)

Thus the Abkhaz leadership made it clear at the May congress that the union with Georgia would be announced at the forthcoming Congress of the Soviet Deputies a few months later. However, despite these promises, the Abkhaz *Revkom* was in no hurry to convoke this decisive congress and resorted to procrastinating tactics. The Abkhaz position started to create problems for the *Kavburo* in its attempts to establish firm control over Georgia – where local Bolsheviks with nationalist leanings were particularly strong (Smith 1998). So it is little surprising that the *Kavburo* was quick to intervene – by early July 1921 the plenum of the *Kavburo* had already instructed the Abkhaz *Revkom* to speed up convocation of the Congress of Soviets of Abkhazia and suggested that the Abkhaz leadership should work "in the direction of [the] uniting of Abkhazia with Georgia as an autonomous republic within Georgia" (Gogokhiia and Kuprava 1969: 39). Later the same month, on July 22, the secretary of the *Kavburo* – Amaiak Nazaretian – intervened once again. The following day, as a result of Nazaretian's involvement, the Abkhaz leadership produced a resolution entitled "On the relationship between SSR Abkhazia and SSR Georgia," which concluded:

> The conference [of the Abkhaz *Revkom* and Abkhaz Communist Party] now considers that the Declaration of Georgian *Revkom* sufficiently guarantees the autonomous rights for the Abkhaz people, whose economic destiny is intricately connected with that of Georgia.

It then suggested that:

> the full independence of the Abkhaz people, declared by the Georgian *Revkom*, is practically impossible to fulfil as no small Soviet republic can exist independently.
>
> (Gogokhiia and Kuprava 1969: 39–40; Sagariia 1970: 33)

With this forced declaration from the Abkhaz the move towards closer ties with Georgia stalled once again. The Congress of the Soviets of Abkhazia – where the union with Georgia would finally be decided – was not scheduled in the coming months. The patience of the *Kavburo* was wearing thin and on October 16, 1921, a joint meeting of the *Orgburo RKP(b)* and the Abkhaz *Revkom* took place. There it was decided to immediately conclude, without waiting for the convocation of the Congress of Soviets, a treaty between Abkhazia and Georgia – "two equal union republics." It is significant that this decision overruled earlier plans to give a flavor of legitimacy to this union by declaring it at the First Congress of Soviet Deputies of Abkhazia. It is worth quoting from the document (adopted on October 16) since it is illustrative of the justifications employed.

> Based, on the one hand, on the program of RKP(b) on the national question; on the new economic policy approved by the 10th congress of RKP(b); and, on the other hand, [based] on the fact of the national relationship [existing]

between the Abkhaz and Georgian people [which was] formed during the period of the Menshevik domination – the council fully approves the decision of the Batum meeting of March 29 of this year [1921] and the declaration of the Georgian *Revkom* from May 21 on the independence of SSR Abkhazia.

Meanwhile, on the one hand, taking into consideration that disproportionate economic strength of Abkhazia [is marred by] the paucity of its population [which] by [its] customs and historically is connected with the Georgian people [and] on the other hand, unity of economy and the corresponding economic policy of Georgia and Abkhazia, the conference finds it necessary [that] close unity be established between SSR Georgia and Abkhazia.

And having in mind the forthcoming sovietization[8] of both republics – the council finds it necessary right away to register officially the aforementioned ties of Georgia and Abkhazia by means of official treaty of two equal union republics.

In order to register and sign this treaty between SSR Georgia and SSR Abkhazia the member of *Orgrburo* and the head of the Abkhaz *Revkom* comrade E. A. Eshba should be dispatched to Tiflis.

The treaty should be ratified by the *Revkom* of Georgia and *Revkom* of Abkhazia.

(Secretary of *Orgburo RKP(b)* of Abkhazia, N. Svanidze (cited in Akhalaia *et al*. 1961: 142–3))

Two weeks later, on November 1, 1921, the *Kavburo* ordered the creation of a joint Georgian-Abkhaz commission to prepare such a treaty by November 10. The preparation of the treaty was delayed as some of the Abkhaz communists attempted to maneuver Abkhazia directly into the Transcaucasian Federation, thus avoiding a union with Georgia (Sagariia 1970: 35). On November 16 the *Kavburo* leadership apparently lost patience and intervened once again, deciding:

1 [We] consider that the existence of an independent Abkhazia is inexpedient from the economic and political [point of view].
2 [We urge] comrade Eshba to present his final decision on the joining of Abkhazia with Georgia on the basis of a treaty or on the basis of an autonomous region into RSFSR.

(Sagariia 1970: 35)

A month later, on December 16, 1921, the Abkhaz SSR finally concluded a "special union-treaty" with Georgia.[9] What is surprising in these political maneuvers is the rush of the entire process. The Bolshevik leadership sacrificed the legitimacy of their actions by forcing the union between Abkhazia and Georgia without having formally approved it first in the Abkhaz Congress of Soviets (parliament), though the decision was eventually approved by it, post factum, in February 1922.

The only explanation of this strange disregard for the formal legal process, especially in view of their previous insistence on parliamentary approval, is political pressure elsewhere. At that time the Bolshevik leadership in the Caucasus was in the process of creating ZSFSR and was struggling with the opposition in Georgia to this union. It seems that achieving the union of Abkhazia with Georgia was necessary in order to undermine Georgian opposition (Smith 1998).

Let us now consider in detail what the "special union treaty" concluded between the SSR Abkhazia and the SSR Georgia really meant. The short text of the treaty left the impression that it had been concluded between two equal parties:

1 SSR Georgia and SSR Abkhazia enter into political, military and financial-economic union.
2 In order to fulfil the aforementioned goal both governments declare the merging of the following Commissariats: a) military, b) finance, c) peoples' agriculture, d) post and telegraph, e) *ChKa*, f) *RKI*, g) People's Commissariat of Justice, and h) [Commissariat of] Sea Transport.

(Kacharava *et al*. 1959: 80)

However, the true implications were articulated in the notes to the two-article treaty. In particular, point 1 stated that "[f]oreign affairs remain the sole prerogative of SSR Georgia" while point 4 mentioned that "Abkhazia participates in regional organizations in particular the Transcaucasian Federation through Georgia, which will offer her one third of its seats" (Kacharava *et al*. 1959: 80). These two points of the annex are a clear indication of the subordinate status of Abkhazia.

It is also interesting to note how the union with Georgia was received at the Congress of the Soviets of Abkhazia when it opened in February 1922 – two months after the treaty was signed. There the creation of ZSFSR and the treaty between Abkhazia and Georgia were widely discussed.

The leaders of the Abkhaz *Revkom* – Efrem Eshba and Nestor Lakoba – came under fire from the Abkhaz deputies about the signing of the treaty with Georgia. Some extracts from the discussions are worth mentioning as they show the heated nature of the debates. A number of delegates asked if Abkhazia could "enter as an equal [partner] into federation with the Transcaucasian republics [ZSFSR] and if it couldn't then why? Please answer simply, concisely and definitely" (Tulumdzhian 1959: 101). This question alluded to the newly created ZSFSR – in theory Abkhazia as a full-fledged republic had an equal right to enter directly into this federation. Several anonymous notes were submitted to the presidium: "Does the [Abkhaz] *Revkom* have the right to sign a [treaty of] federation [with SSR Georgia] without representatives of people?" (ibid.: 104) – a clear reference to the initially planned approval of the treaty by the Abkhaz parliament. Also submitted was a note without signature demanding that all points of the treaty with Georgia be announced (ibid.: 103). Finally, two deputies announced with emotion: "[T]he freedom of Abkhazia is in danger … if our

sons, Eshba and Lakoba, have betrayed [us] then they should be replaced by those who would be loyal to us" (ibid.: 104). One of the deputies declared: "[W]e shall defend our independence with daggers!" (ibid.: 98).

The support for the union with Georgia naturally came from Mingrel deputies from the Samurzakano region, and other loyal members of the Communist Party. Eventually, despite these reservations and criticisms, the treaty with Georgia was post factum approved by the congress: "[We] recognize the treaty between the fraternal Abkhaz and Georgian people as politically and economically vital for the interests of both people" (Georgadze 1960: 460–1).

Another indication of the subordinate Abkhaz status can be found in the comment to Article 1 of the Georgian Constitution of 1922, which contains the following definition: "Based on voluntary self-determination, the ASSR Ajaria, the Autonomous Region of South Ossetia and the SSR Abkhazia, which is joined to the SSR Georgia by the special union treaty between them, all compose the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia" (*Istoriia* 1957: 339). Even though Abkhazia was called an SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic) in the treaty and constitution, the Abkhaz status was clearly subordinate to Georgia in more or less the same manner as Adjaria and South Ossetia were.

Hence, Abkhazia remained a full-fledged SSR for eight-and-a-half months before becoming a "Treaty SSR" (*Dogovonaia SSR*). It should be noted that the "special union treaty" was one of the unprecedented and unclear arrangements that were numerous in the early years of the Soviet state, though in fact there was no other instance of a "special union treaty" in Soviet federalism (Lepeshkin 1977: 139). The ambiguity of these early Soviet legal documents allowed for wide interpretation. One could argue that Abkhazia remained a full-fledged union republic, but it could equally be argued that it was subordinated to Georgia. The ambiguity of Abkhaz status led to tensions between the Abkhaz and Georgian leadership, as shown below.

The controversies arising from the political status of Abkhazia

The signing of the treaty between Abkhazia and Georgia created a unique political entity in the Soviet Union – a treaty republic. In theory it was a union of two equal units but in practice Abkhazia was meant to become a subordinate part of Georgia. It seems clear that the Abkhaz leadership signed this treaty under pressure from the "elder comrades" in the *Kavburo* and this union was not warmly received by the Abkhaz public, as the First Congress of Soviets of Abkhazia demonstrated. Nevertheless, the ambiguous and unique political position of Abkhazia permitted the Abkhaz leadership to subtly challenge this intended reality.

A number of indicators continued to point to the fact that the SSR Abkhazia was not subordinated to the Georgian SSR. First of all, Abkhazia had its own state symbols. Thus, a special commission in early 1924 prepared the Abkhaz coat-of-arms and flag, and by November 1924 they had been adopted (Potseluev 1987: 131). What is more, the Abkhaz also had their own army made up of two regiments and an artillery unit (Sagariia 1970: 56–8). In the early years the

Bolsheviks permitted the republics to have their own national army units – hence, an Abkhaz military was symbolic of the fact that Abkhazia did not have subordinate status.

Among symbolically important emblems representing the Abkhaz statehood I will focus on two visible issues that generated controversy between Georgia and Abkhazia – the Abkhaz coat-of-arms and the text of the Abkhaz Constitution.

The 1925 Abkhaz Constitution described the coat-of-arms of Abkhazia as "composed of a golden hammer and sickle on the background of the Abkhazian landscape with inscription in the Abkhaz language 'SSR Abkhazia'" (Kalinychev *et al.* 1964: 700).

The Abkhaz coat-of-arms was symbolically charged. Note that all inscriptions are written in Cyrillic script in the Abkhaz language even though the state language of Abkhazia at that time was Russian and not Abkhaz. The inscription "SSR APSNY" – SSR Abkhazia – occupies a prominent place and there is no reference to Georgia, with which Abkhazia was in a "treaty union." Also note the central part of the coat-of-arms that depicts the "landscape of Abkhazia" – a mountain range, the shore, and the sea under the red star. It appears that the Black Sea is in the foreground; the shore is Abkhazia and the Caucasian mountain range is in the background. This west to east perspective completely omits Georgia from the picture. This coat-of-arms was modified in 1926 to reflect changes in the new constitution. In essence the coat-of-arms remained the same; the only thing that was added were inscriptions in three languages – Russian, Georgian and Abkhaz – placed around the coat-of-arms due to lack of space (see Figure 2.1) (Kalinychev *et al.* 1964: 728). This modified coat-of-arms survived until after 1931 when Abkhazia was demoted to the status of autonomous republic and new changes were introduced in the Abkhaz Constitution. After 1936 the new coat-of-arms of Abkhazia was the same as the Georgian one. There were only two differences between the Abkhaz and Georgian coat-of-arms – one being the

Abkhaz coat-of-arms (1925)

Abkhaz coat-of-arms (1926)

Figure 2.1 Abkhaz coat-of-arms (1925 and 1926).

inscription: "Proletarians of all countries unite!" in three languages – Abkhaz, Georgian and Russian. The Georgian one had the same slogan, but in Russian and Georgian. Under the sickle and hammer the Abkhaz coat-of-arms has "Ab. ASSR" written in Cyrillic and Georgian, while the Georgian coat-of-arms had "GSSR" written in Georgian script (see Figure 2.2). On the 1936 Abkhaz coat-of-arms the perspective is different – from south to north with the Caucasian mountain range in the background. This is the Georgian view of the Caucasian mountain range.

The Abkhaz Constitution was another source of confusion. Its mere existence set Abkhazia apart from other Soviet autonomous republics, none of which had a constitution at that time. What is more, the content of the Abkhaz Constitution was the source of yet another controversy.

The first attempt to create an Abkhaz Constitution was undertaken as early as 1922; however, the proposed constitutional draft was not accepted (Sagariia 1970: 84). Eventually the new draft was proposed in November 1924 and it was unilaterally adopted at the Third Congress of Soviets of Abkhazia on 1 April 1925 (Kalinychev *et al.* 1964: 686–700; Sagariia 1964: 19). Thus, Abkhazia received its own constitution.[10] The writers of this constitution interpreted the unclear political status of Abkhazia and its union with Georgia in a rather interesting manner. The word "Georgia" was mentioned in the text of this Abkhaz Constitution only three times. Article 1 of the Abkhaz Constitution proudly declared: "Having overthrown the state authority of the former Georgian Democratic Republic on the territory of Abkhazia … the Abkhazian Socialist Soviet Republic was created" (Kalinychev *et al*. 1964: 686). And Article 4 stated that "the Abkhazian SSR, united on the base of a special treaty with Georgia, participates in the Transcaucasian Federation and the USSR through Georgia." Despite this admission, Article 5 of the constitution read:

Figure 2.2 Georgian and Abkhaz coat-of-arms (1936).

> [T]he Abkhaz SSR is a sovereign state that exercises state authority on its territory … independently of any other authority. Due to its voluntary entrance into the Transcaucasian Federation and the USSR, Abkhazian sovereignty is limited only in matters mentioned in the constitutions of those unions. The citizens of the SSR Abkhazia preserve their republican citizenship and are [also] citizens of ZSFSR and USSR. The Abkhaz SSR preserves the right to freely leave both the ZSFSR as well as the USSR.
>
> (Sagariia 1970: 91–3)

The whole emphasis of this passage is on the direct links with ZSFSR and the USSR. The union with Georgia is ignored, perhaps intentionally, in order to emphasize the independence of Abkhazia from the latter – a clear challenge to the Georgian government and the *Kavburo's* intentions. This was clearly the boldest part of the Abkhaz Constitution. Interestingly enough, the state language of Abkhazia was Russian (Article 6). Thus, apart from Article 4 – which briefly mentioned the union with Georgia – the impression was given that Abkhazia was still a full-fledged union republic and had no connection with Georgia. The contradictions of the Abkhaz Constitution were so obvious that it is little surprise that amendments soon had to be made.

The text of the new Abkhaz Constitution was apparently not well received by the Georgian and Transcaucasian leadership. Already in September 1925 the question of the Abkhaz Constitution became subject to review at the meeting of the *Zakraikom*, where it was decided "[It is] necessary to legalize in a constitutional manner the relationship between SSR Abkhazia and SSR Georgia and revise the Constitution of SSR Abkhazia [which was] adopted at the Third Congress of Soviets of Abkhazia" (Sagariia 1964: 20, 1970: 98).

Around the same time as the Abkhaz Constitution was adopted the Georgian government was preparing a draft of its own constitution. This created a convenient opportunity to bring the Abkhaz leaders into line – in the summer of 1926 the Georgian government held a symbolic session of the Georgian *TsIK* (government) in the Abkhaz capital, Sukhumi (Kalinychev *et al*. 1964: 675) – and there on July 5 it adopted the text of the new Constitution of Georgia (ibid.: 497) which contained an entire chapter devoted to regulation of the relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia (ibid.: 513–15).[11] It was made quite clear in the chapter that Abkhazia was not an equal partner in this union. Soon after this dramatic intervention by the Georgian government the Abkhaz *TsIK* had to make important symbolic changes to the Abkhaz Constitution (ibid.: 711). A completely new draft of the constitution was prepared. It no longer mentioned the "overthrown Menshevik government" and Article 2 now stated: "The republic of Abkhazia is a socialist state of workers and peasants which by means of a special treaty enters into the SSR Georgia and through it into ZSFSR." However, Article 4 preserved some contradiction and uncertainty about the Abkhaz status: "SSR Abkhazia implements state authority on its territory independently as its authority is not limited by the treaty relations with SSR Georgia and by the constitution of ZSFSR." Another visible change occurred with the state language – instead of

Russian the new constitution now had three state languages – Abkhaz, Georgian and Russian (Article 8) (ibid.: 711–2).

The most important indication of the subordinate status of Abkhazia was the new chapter of the Abkhaz Constitution which dealt entirely with relations with Georgia. Even more interestingly, this entire chapter was copied, word for word, from the Georgian Constitution (ibid.: 513–15).[12] Finally Article 101 describing the coat-of-arms of Abkhazia added the inscription "SSR Abkhazia" and "Proletarians of all countries unite!" in three languages – Abkhaz, Georgian and Russian (see Figure 2.1) (ibid.: 728).

The nature of these amendments was to emphasize explicitly Abkhazia's subordinated status within Georgia. The new Abkhaz Constitution adopted by its *TsIK* was published as a brochure in October 1926. However, formally the text of the constitution was to be approved by the People's Congress. The Fourth Congress of Soviets of Abkhazia convened in early March 1927. There the text of the constitution published earlier was formally approved – on March 7, 1927 – without any changes or amendments (ibid.: 711). This gave an Orwellian touch to the entire affair as it allowed the use of the print run of the constitution published before it was formally approved, and thus eliminated the need to publish a new text of the constitution. Thus the Abkhaz Constitution finally received approval of the People's Congress.

Given the authoritarian nature of the Soviet Union, the republican constitutions were mere window-dressing – all-important issues were decided elsewhere. Contradictions within the legal facade of the constitutions did not, therefore, prevent the system from functioning. However, these controversies left an important symbolic legacy that could be invoked for the purpose of national mobilization. The constitutions and other state symbols provided valuable identity markers for the Abkhaz.

Towards an autonomous republic

The constitutional contradictions described above were not the only source of confusion. The relationship between the government institutions (*narkomats*) of Abkhazia and Georgia was also unclear – especially during the early years. Changes to the state institutions of Abkhazia were instrumental in bringing about the downgrade of the Abkhaz political status.

The union treaty between Abkhazia and Georgia (December 1921) stipulated that the detailed arrangements for governing these two entities should be determined by a special agreement between the two governments (Kacharava *et al*. 1959: 80).[13] The annex to this treaty stipulated that several *narkomats* of Abkhazia (army, finance, people's agriculture, post and telegraph, *ChKa*, workers and peasants inspection, justice, sea transport) should be united with the Georgian ones (ibid.). The remaining Abkhaz *narkomats* continued to function independently of the Georgian ones since neither the Georgian Constitution (March 1922) nor the Abkhazian one (April 1925) clarified the treaty relationships between the two.

The situation with the Abkhaz state institutions began to be clarified in 1925 in connection with amendments introduced into the Abkhaz Constitution. The Georgian government decided that those Abkhazian Commissariats which were already united with their equivalent Georgian *narkomats* – according to the treaty signed in December 1921 – should deal with the Transcaucasian Federation via the corresponding *narkomats* of Georgia; whereas the remaining independent *narkomats* of Abkhazia needed only to conduct periodic consultations with their Georgian colleagues (Sagariia 1970: 96). The Abkhaz SSR retained several independent Commissariats that "acted independently of the corresponding Commissariats of the Georgian SSR but they had to keep each other informed" (ibid.: 100–1).

The situation began to change for the Abkhaz in the late 1920s. Around that time SSR Abkhazia was required to adopt a new constitution that reflected its political status as subordinate to Georgia. Along with changes to the constitution, the process of dismantling the network of state institutions of Abkhazia accelerated. The official rationale for these changes was economic efficiency, and this argument was clearly valid since Abkhazia was a very small republic that possessed political institutions that replicated those of a much larger union republic – disproportionate for its small budget. That said, it is difficult to imagine that any state would voluntarily start to undermine its own institutional framework by eliminating key institutions. But the first important move in this direction occurred almost immediately after the newly amended Abkhaz Constitution was approved in March 1927.

The Abkhaz *TsIK* held a session where the measures for cutting down on state institutions were discussed (Sagariia 1970: 134). Along with the elimination of the two Commissariats and the *Gosplan* a much more radical proposal was made – it was suggested that two of the key state institutions (*TsIK* and *SNK*) of Abkhazia be merged. This dramatic measure was avoided, however, by instead cutting back on the number of staff working for these two highest of state institutions (ibid.: 135). Judging by the campaign run by the local newspaper *Sovetskaia Abkhazia*, at that time the formal reasoning for these measures was the fiscal efficacy of the state.

But the proposal to merge the two highest state institutions of Abkhazia – the *TsIK* and *SNK* – did not disappear, and re-emerged on November 29, 1929. This time the presidium of the Abkhaz *Obkom* found that it was "expedient to conduct the reorganization of *TsIK* and *SNK* by means of merging them into one institution" (ibid.: 137). Since this decision could be seen as infringing upon Abkhaz political rights, in the spirit of the time the presidium of the Abkhaz *Obkom* of the Communist Party ordered that measures should be taken to ensure "that the working masses understand the necessity … of this step as the reorganization of the highest organs of Abkhazia does not mean the limitation of the constitutional rights and achievements in the national question in Abkhazia" (ibid.).

The project of reform of the state institutions of Abkhazia was approved by the Abkhaz *Obkom* on January 6, 1930. Accordingly, the *TsIK* and *SNK* were merged into one body, along with several other *narkomats* (ibid.: 138). This

project was later approved by the *Zakraikom*, and subsequently by the Georgian *Obkom* which suggested that it should be discussed at the session of the Abkhaz *TsIK* (ibid.: 139).

The project of dismantling the state institutions of Abkhazia was reviewed and approved at the third session of the Abkhaz *TsIK* in April 1930 (ibid.: 139–41). The session of the Abkhaz *TsIK* adopted a resolution on renaming the "treaty republic" an "autonomous republic," and necessary amendments were to be introduced into the Abkhaz Constitution (ibid.: 142).

Once the state institutions of Abkhazia were dismantled it became possible for the Abkhaz government to declare that the union treaty between Abkhazia and Georgia

> in its essence does not reflect the real relationships between Abkhazia and Georgia as all the *narkomats* and institutions mentioned in it except *narkomat* of Justice are unified.… Bearing in mind that the treaty of 16 December 1921 has lost its real meaning due to the impossibility of fulfilling all of its points apart from the main one, [namely] on the unification of the SSR of Abkhazia with the SSR of Georgia, and therefore that it can only be seen as an agreement on the unification of the SSR of Abkhazia with the SSR of Georgia … it is necessary to admit that the so-called 'treaty SSR of Abkhazia' [*dogovornaiia SSR*] has no real meaning.
>
> (Sagariia 1970: 140, 142)

The Sixth Congress of Soviets of Abkhazia that assembled in February 1930 unanimously approved "the political line and practical actions of both [the Abkhaz and Georgian] governments" (ibid.: 143), and the congress subsequently voted in favor of renaming the "Treaty SSR Abkhazia" to reflect the new status as an autonomous republic within Georgia. The All-Georgian Congress of Soviets decided to satisfy "the wishes of the Abkhaz workers … to join SSR Abkhazia to SSR Georgia as an autonomous republic" on February 19, 1931 (Tulumdzhian *et al*. 1976: 248–9). The necessary amendments were subsequently introduced into the constitutions of both Georgia and Abkhazia (Sagariia 1970: 143). According to one Abkhaz historian, the decision to downgrade Abkhazian status to that of an autonomy generated spontaneous protest in a number of Abkhaz villages between February 18–26, 1931 (Lakoba 1998: 95).

Thus, in the course of a decade, Abkhazia experienced a dramatic metamorphosis of its political status. The Abkhaz saw their full union republic status downgraded – first to the ambiguous level of a treaty republic, and then to that of an autonomy. In any case, it seems unlikely that Abkhazia could have survived as a full union republic due to its relatively small size and population. Furthermore, bearing in mind the process of standardization of the federal structures of the USSR, it also seems unlikely that Abkhazia could have retained its unique status as a treaty republic with regard to Georgia. As the pages above have demonstrated, the exact meaning of the "treaty republic of Abkhazia" was extremely ambiguous (probably unclear even to its creators) and there were

many contradictions, although its status was undoubtedly superior to that of a mere autonomy. One thing, however, is clear – the unprecedented and ambiguous arrangements for Abkhazia, combined with the surviving elements of a full union republic, provided grounds for a relatively free interpretation of the Abkhazian status in the period 1921–31.

These contradictions allow the Abkhaz to claim that "Abkhazia did not … enter into the make-up of Georgia but was in union with it.…[I]n essence [the union treaty with Georgia established] equality of status of the two republics" (Lakoba 1998: 93). To prove the equal status of Abkhazia, Abkhaz authors point out that Abkhazia had its own constitution, just like any other full union republic and in contrast to other "autonomous" republics that did not have such constitutions. The Abkhaz constitution confirmed Abkhazia's "sovereign" status and stipulated that the republic had its own coat-of-arms and flag. Hence, from the Abkhazian perspective, their republic suffered a series of injustices. First, Abkhazia received independent status as a Socialist Soviet Republic, which lasted only a few months from March until December 1921. Later, the Abkhaz status was clearly downgraded to a vague special union treaty with Georgia that lasted ten years from December 1921 until February 1931, at which point Abkhazia's status was further downgraded to that of a standard autonomous republic within Georgia. Nevertheless, the institutional arrangements that the Abkhaz enjoyed during the early years have played an important role in fostering a sense of statehood and identity. The subsequent demotion of Abkhazia's political status and the removal of its symbolic statehood markers provided a source of grievance.

Conclusion

This chapter started with two sets of questions – one concerning the logic of the Bolshevik decision-making, and the other dealing with the symbolic impact of the political metamorphoses of the Abkhaz status on national identity and the emergence of modern conflicts at the time of the demise of the USSR.

In my opinion, the decision to grant Abkhazia a status of SSR was not part of any preconceived plan to generate leverage against either Georgia or Abkhazia. It appears that this decision was one of the many ad hoc solutions readily employed by the Bolsheviks to cater for their immediate political needs. The sequence of events testifies to this – the Abkhaz *Revkom* was hastily created just before the Red Army invasion of Abkhazia. Upon arrival it found there a vacuum of authority – the Menshevik administration of Abkhazia had collapsed while the Georgian *Revkom* in Tiflis had not yet extended its powers there. In this situation the Abkhaz *Revkom* decided to seize the opportunity and proclaim Abkhazia a Soviet Socialist Republic. Sergo Ordzhonokidze, confronted with this unexpected development, opted for a short-term solution to satisfy the Abkhaz and avoid alienating the Georgians. Abkhazia was allowed to proclaim itself an SSR on condition that it renounce its political status and join Georgia a few months later. The clumsy way in which the union of Abkhazia with Georgia was inaugurated in December 1921 was also a result of the immediate political needs of the Bolsheviks rather than any

long-term strategy. The *Kavburo* in late 1921 badly needed to undermine the position of the Georgian national deviationists by bringing Abkhazia into union with Georgia. It was rushed to such an extent that even legal formalities were not observed – the Abkhaz parliament approved the union post factum.

While the creation of SSR Abkhazia, and its union with SSR Georgia, were outcomes of the short-term goals of the Bolsheviks – who in order to strengthen their position needed to make concessions first to Abkhaz nationalism and then to Georgian nationalism – the downgrading of Abkhazia from republic to autonomy was the result of a different process. The ten-year process of transforming the "*Dogovornaia*" SSR Abkhazia into an autonomous republic is often seen by the Abkhaz as a manifestation of Georgian nationalism. From the Abkhaz point of view the forced union with Georgia, the subsequent changes to their coat-of-arms, and the constitution – as well as the erosion of its state institutions which eventually resulted in the downgrading of their status from republic to autonomy – were clear manifestations of a Georgian nationalism supported by ethnic Georgians: Stalin and Ordzhonikidze (Lakoba 1998: 92).

In fact it would be wrong to attribute these changes solely to Georgian nationalism and to the personalities of Stalin and Ordzhonikidze. It is more likely that two trends are at work here. In the second half of the 1920s the Soviet Union was undergoing a process of unification and standardization of its political institutions that culminated in the so-called Stalin Constitution of 1936. The multitude of political units that existed in the early 1920s was disappearing and being replaced by a simpler hierarchical system of union republics, autonomous republics and autonomous regions that would survive practically unchanged until the downfall of the USSR. All unusual and unique forms of political and administrative units were disappearing. There can be little doubt that Abkhazia, with its unique status of "treaty republic," was unlikely to preserve its status due to the global changes taking place within the USSR's administrative system. At the same time, it was not unusual for the republican governments to engage in nationalist policies if these fitted nicely within the main ideological course of the Soviet state. Thus, there can be little doubt that the government of the Georgian SSR, while not being the initiator of these policies, was simply using favorable circumstances to integrate Abkhazia within Georgia.

Another important observation has to be made about the Soviet legal system. It seems clear that it would be futile to approach Georgian-Abkhaz relations from a purely legal point of view, i.e. trying to understand whether legally Abkhazia was subordinated to Georgia or not. Attempts to make sense of Sovet legal acts are doomed to fail. The constitutional acts were never designed to be adhered to by the letter – they were just a beautiful decoration, a symbolic attribute of statehood, not a real tool. The numerous contradictions present in the texts of constitutions in no way prevented a system from functioning – since it did not function by the letter of the law anyway. Yet the possibility for a different interpretation of the Soviet legal acts was widely used in the run-up to the conflicts of the early 1990s. This can be seen from the outset of conflict – at one of the first mass rallies in Lykhny village in March 1989 the Abkhaz demanded

they be granted the status of union republic – i.e. restoration of the 1925 status. This declaration was subsequently published by the Sovetskaia Abkhazia newspaper.[14] In numerous interviews given in the early 1990s by the Abkhaz leadership, frequent reference was made to the early status of SSR Abkhazia (Shamba 1990; Ardzinba 1991).[15] On July 23, 1992, the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia replaced the constitution of 1978 with that of 1925.[16] The latter stated that Abkhazia was an independent republic.

Summing up – it seems clear that the decision to create SSR Abkhazia, and its subsequent demotion to the status of autonomous republic, was not the result of some preconceived plan to divide and rule. It was primarily the product of compromise and the immediate need of the Bolshevik leadership to resolve urgent problems. Yet the decisions taken and implemented left a very important and long-lasting symbolic trace that resurfaced in the early 1990s and which fed into the conflict.

Notes

1 Abkhaz historians maintain that the treaty was signed on June 11, 1918, while their Georgian colleagues insist that it was signed on June 8, 1918. Minor differences exist between the two versions, with the version from June 11 allowing the APC to sanction the treaty, while the version from June 8 remains vague about it. The Georgian text of the treaty from June 8, 1918, can be found in GNACH, fund 1861, register 2, file 37, p. 57.
2 GNACH, fund 1861, register 2, file 37, pp. 53, 70, 71
3 GNACH, fund 1861, register 2, file 37, p. 71 "Pravitel'stvennoe soobshchenie."
4 GNACH, fund 1833, register 1, file 853, pp. 108–9 "Tiflis. Uchreditel'nomu Sobraniiu."
5 GNACH, fund 1853, register 1, file 853, p. 5 "Dokladnaia zapiska. Delegatov Narodnogo Soveta Abkhazii."
6 GNACH, fund 1861, register 2, file 28, pp. 14–15. "Telegram of the APC to Georgian government about introduction of the Georgian language in the government institutions" (July 27, 1918).
7 Do not confuse the Congress of Workers (May 1921) with the Congress of Worker and Peasant Deputies of Abkhazia (January 1922) – the body that was to decide upon the question of joining with Georgia.
8 Sovietization in this context implies that the republics were ruled by unelected *Revkomy* which would surrender power to the elected soviets – hence sovietization.
9 The full text of the treaty is in Kacharava *et al*. (1959), p. 80.
10 Even though the Abkhaz Constitution was officially adopted in April 1925, the text of that constitution was only published during the Khruchshev thaw in 1964 (Kalinychev *et al.* 1964, pp. 686–700). As a result, some Georgian scholars, in pointing out this and other contradictions (the mention in the Abkhaz *TsIK* publication that the draft of the constitution should be reworked), claim that the 1925 Abkhaz Constitution remained a project (Gamakharia 2009, p. 498). This, however, ignores the fact that apparently the Abkhaz congress adopted the constitution at the last day of its session, and the subsequent efforts of the Georgian and Transcaucasian authorities to amend it.
11 Kalinychev *et al.*, pp. 513–15. See Chapter V of the Georgian Constitution.
12 Chapter II "On the treaty relations of the SSR Abkhazia and SSR Georgia (Articles 17–25)" corresponded entirely with Chapter V (Articles 83–91) of the Georgian Constitution of 1927.

13 Point 3 of the "Notes" to the union treaty between Georgia and Abkhazia makes such provision. See Kacharava *et al*., 1959: 80.
14 *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, April 12, 1989
15 Sergei Shamba (chairman of the Abkhaz People's Front), in *Molodezh Gruzii*, March 30, 1990, in OSA 300–5-180, box 2, Abkhazia, 1984–92; V. Ardzinba, interview "Reshat' narodam" in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, April 10, 1991, mentions restoration of the 1921 status of Abkhazia.
16 See OSA 300–5-180, box 1, Abkhazia, "Transcript of 21.00 news broadcast of Central TV from 23 07 1992."

3 South Ossetian Autonomous Region (1918–22)

A number of social changes accumulated throughout the nineteenth century and resulted in a transformation of the Ossetian populated areas of the South Caucasus by the early twentieth century. Two trends were instrumental – the social conflict between the restive Ossetian peasants and their Georgian landlords was especially visible in the first half of the nineteenth century. These tensions subsided towards the end of the century with the termination of serfdom, but were never fully eliminated. The other trend that became visible at this time was the industrialization of the South Caucasus and the accompanying factors that came with it. The Ossetian populated territories were barely affected by industrialization but the Ossetian peasants were nevertheless exposed to its effects through the migratory work that was created in Tiflis and Vladikavkaz. Literacy was also penetrating Ossetian society, particularly via the efforts of the Russian impirial administration but also through the exposure of Ossetian workers to the ideas of socialism. In the early twentieth century Ossetian society was experiencing social tensions concerning the land question, as well as increased literacy levels.

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 released existing social tensions. The period of the civil war is instrumental for understanding how the relationship between Georgians and Ossetians were shaped. State-building projects in the South Caucasus presented a new set of challenges – the new states had to deal with resurfacing social problems as well as cultural discrepancies that resulted from the spread of literacy, education and a new political culture. In the Ossetian populated territories this led to social conflict, which eventually evolved into ethnic confrontation.

Ossetian-Georgian relations (1918–19)

The October Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd initiated the breakdown of the Russian Empire. This prompted a range of different reactions in the Caucasus, including calls for the redistribution of land and the formation of movements for national autonomy or independence. The war-weary tsarist army started to disintegrate after the unilateral Bolshevik proclamation of the end of the imperialist war. The populist slogan of the Bolsheviks – "land to the peasants" – prompted a mass desertion among soldiers returning from the front who were eager to claim

the promised land. It was in this atmosphere of euphoria, and with the expectation of forthcoming dramatic social change, that bands of armed Ossetian and Georgian soldiers began to appear in the Georgian provinces in late 1917 and early 1918 (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 39; Butyrina 1934: 32). At first these soldiers prevented landlords from collecting traditional taxes; subsequently they began to appropriate the land. The reaction of the authorities in Tiflis was to attempt to disarm the peasant-soldiers, but this only escalated the situation.

The incident that triggered the first Ossetian rebellion occurred on February 2, 1918, in the Ossetian village of Kornis in Gori *uezd*. There, the local villagers, led by deserting soldiers, murdered three Georgian princes of Kherkheulidze (Pliev and Tskhovrebov 1957: 40; Butyrina 1934: 32; Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 58; Nikonov 1956: 26) and then appropriated their land (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 18–19). These murders provoked outrage in Tiflis. The Menshevik government was bent on disarming and punishing the Ossetian villagers and to this end it dispatched a unit of the Georgian National Guard to Kornis. However, after a standoff with armed Ossetian bands, the Georgian National Guards had to retreat (Tskhovrebov, N. Z. 1961: 60). The same unit then attempted to disarm the population of the Georgian village of Eredvi on March 12, which triggered a larger rebellion (Butyrina 1934: 32). Ossetian rebels from the surrounding districts advanced and captured Tskhinval after heavy fighting on March 18 (Kulumbegov 1957: 14–15). Tskhinval remained in Ossetian hands for four days until regular Georgian troops arrived and dispersed the rebels (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 34–7).

The beginning of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict during the civil war can be dated from this first Ossetian rebellion of 1918. For a proper understanding of the rebellion three important aspects need to be noted. First, it was not a unique event – during the course of 1918 the Georgian countryside was engulfed by peasant rebellions. In February 1918 a rebellion also took place in Lechkhum *uezd*; in March a rebellion occurred in Senaki *uezd*; in June large rebellions occurred in Dushet *uezd*, and in Sachkheri District of Shoropan *uezd* (Sturua 1971: 349, 361, 776; Esiashvili 1957: 323, 335).

Second, the Ossetian rebellion that started in Kornis village and led to the brief capture of Tskhinval did not encompass the entire territory of what would later became the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. It affected areas around Tskhinval and the Dhzava region. During 1918 other parts of the Ossetian populated region were involved in revolts but they occurred in the context of rebellions in Georgian districts. For example, the Ossetians of Tedeleti village joined rebels in Sachkheri in June 1918 (Makharadze 1928: 188). Ossetians also participated in the Dushet rebellion (Sturua 1971: 362).

Third, at that time the conflict was devoid of any revolutionary or nationalist connotations and appeared to be a social conflict. These peasant revolts were largely spontaneous and poorly organized events. Even Soviet sources, always keen to exaggerate any evidence of revolutionary activity, were unable to conceal the absence of any revolutionary inspiration or guidance (Makharadze 1928: 161; Sanakoev, V. A. 1935: 11–12). Little evidence exists of the rebels'

political demands or of any ideological convictions. It is obvious that at that time the main goal was simply the appropriation of the land. However, the suppression of the peasant revolt of 1918 did not solve the problem in the long run.

Meanwhile, alongside the outbreak of conflict over land, a political movement among Ossetians was emerging. The main proponent of Ossetian political demands during the period of 1918–19 was the Ossetian National Council – created in December 1917.[1] Diring the course of 1918 the council held six congresses, the first five of which were dominated by the Ossetian Mensheviks with some insignificant Bolshevik presence. High-ranking members of the Georgian Menshevik Party (I. Ramishvili and I. Tsereteli) attended the third and fourth congresses and tried to persuade the council to recognize the authority of the Georgian Republic (Tskhovrebov, N. Z. 1961: 75–8). However, the council initially adopted a somewhat evasive stand; at its fourth congress it called for the postponement of a final decision on the self-determination of the South Ossetian people until the next (fifth) congress. Referring to the need for an agreement with North Ossetia on the question of self-determination, it asked the Georgian government to leave the question of South Ossetia open when preparing the Georgian Constitution (Nikonov 1956: 42).

Similarly, around this time the South Ossetian National Council tried to push for autonomous arrangements in the territory inhabited by Ossetians. There were frequent requests to the Georgian government to use Russian as the language of communication – which were granted.[2] In January 1919 the South Ossetian National Council asked the Georgian government to establish an Extraordinary Temporary Court in South Ossetia – which would be composed of members of the South Ossetian National Council and representatives from the Ossetian population – to deal with crimes committed on territory inhabited by ethnic Ossetians.[3] This request was rejected.[4]

The sixth Ossetian congress of December 1918 elected a Bolshevik-dominated council that quickly made its attitude towards the Georgian state quite clear. It first decided "to create in South Ossetia an independent (*samostoyatel'nyi*) administrative-political unit (*okrug*)." It then refused to participate in either the Georgian local elections or the all-Georgian Constituent Assembly elections. Instead the council scheduled its own elections for May 1919, and in March 1919 it began on construction of a road across the Roki Pass to North Ossetia (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 81–2). The Georgian government responded to these challenges in May 1919 by sending troops to disband the Bolshevik-dominated Ossetian National Council, and holding new elections (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 59). However, the newly elected council continued to display signs of separatism by reinstating demands for national autonomy, now in the form of a South Ossetian Canton (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 83–4).

During 1919 the political future of the Caucasus and Russia was discussed at the Paris Peace Conference. At that time the Russian Bolsheviks were on the defensive and it was the Ossetian leadership of the Social Revolutionary Party that took the initiative by appealing to the *Entente* mission in the Caucasus in a letter:

> In case it is decided at the [Paris] Peace Conference that Russia is restored on the principles of federalism Ossetia … desires to join the newly created Russian state as an independent member of the federation.
>
> In case the Caucasus becomes a mandate territory of one of the Allied states Ossetia should join it directly as a federative unit within the sphere of influence of the Allied nation.
>
> In case the Allied states decide to alter the political division of the Caucasus the united Ossetia should be included in the North Caucasian entity based on historical and economic conditions.
>
> (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 93–4)

A notable aspect of this letter is that all the political options proposed for Ossetia entail the idea that Ossetia should *not* become part of Georgia, whatever solution was adopted.

While the Ossetian Social Revolutionary Party was appealing to the *Entente*, the Ossetian Bolsheviks looked in a different direction. In October 1919 a second Ossetian rebellion broke out in the countryside but, unlike the rebellion of 1918, this one was not spontaneous. It was planned and initiated with evident support from the Bolsheviks. The rebellion began in the Roki District, immediately adjacent to the Russian North Caucasus (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 68–9; Esiashvili 1957: 349). The Bolshevik-backed rebels established control over, and declared Soviet authority in, several Ossetian districts. The rebellion lasted for about a month but was eventually suppressed in early December when regular Georgian troops arrived (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 70–5). The defeated rebels and their Bolshevik leaders escaped to the Terek *Oblast'* of Russia where they established the *Iugo Osetinskii Okruzhkom* (South Ossetian District Committee) in exile. After Georgian troops left Ossetia in January 1920 some of the escaped Ossetian Bolsheviks returned to South Ossetia to continue their subversive activities (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 99).

The Ossetian rebellion of 1920

The next major outbreak of conflict occurred at the end of April 1920 when Ossetians in the remote Roki District started a spontaneous rebellion. The revolt was a reaction to a Georgian attempt to sever communications with the North Caucasus. The Ossetian Bolsheviks in Vladikavkaz were caught off guard with this revolt but initially dispatched two members of the Ossetian *Revkom* to Roki District to oversee the rebellion (Butyrina 1934: 33; Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960: 75). Then the rebels, under the newly arrived Bolshevik leadership, arrested the Georgian Menshevik representative and declared Soviet authority in the district on May 8 (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 79). According to the rebel declaration it had been necessary to declare Soviet authority both in response to a spontaneous popular revolt and as part of the Bolsheviks' preconceived strategy of a planned rebellion. In their declaration the rebel leaders referred, on the one hand, to "an emerging situation [in which] … the population (partially) rebelled" and to the

need to respond to the "advance of the Georgian government troops to the mountainous passes that strongly strengthens their position," and on the other hand, "following the order of the KKK, … to join the RSFSR, and of which to notify Moscow and democratic Georgia."[5]

With the help of an Ossetian brigade that arrived from the North Caucasus, the rebels in Roki District were initially successful in defeating the Georgian units and capturing Tskhinval on June 7. The next day the Ossetian *Revkom* declared the establishment of Soviet authority throughout South Ossetia:

> The Menshevik troops of Georgia are expelled from South Ossetia by the rebellious peasants [who] declare Soviet authority on the territory from Oni to Dushet. All authority within the mentioned territory is subordinated to the *Revkom* of South Ossetia [which] is located in Tskhinval. The *Narkomindel* RSFSR is to be informed about the will of South Ossetia to join Soviet Russia.[6]

In emphasizing the extent of the claimed territory ("from Oni to Dushet") and "the will … to join Soviet Russia," it appears that the Ossetians were aware of their precarious political position and wanted to emphasize their territorial claims and desire to separate from Georgia and join Russia.

However, the initial Ossetian military success was short-lived. Following the signing of a peace treaty on May 7, the immediate threat of a Bolshevik takeover of Georgia was lifted and the Georgians were able to redeploy more regular troops against the Ossetians. (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960: 79–80) A major Georgian counter-offensive began on June 12, and by the next day they had captured Tskhinval. The circumstances of the Ossetian rebellion within the wider context of the failed attempt to sovietize Georgia made the Georgian government perceive the Ossetians as traitors and consequently the operation against the rebels turned into a punitive expedition. During the course of the counter-offensive the Ossetian population fled en masse and some 40 villages were burned down.[7] The death-toll varies between around 5,000 (Pliev and Tskhovrebov 1957: 78) and 20,000,[8] and some 35,000 refugees were forced to flee to North Ossetia (Vaneti 1933: 127).

The international context of the 1920 rebellion

A number of international factors played a decisive role in the course of the Ossetian rebellion of 1920. By the end of January 1920 the defeat of the Volunteer Army of General Denikin had become clear. The Bolsheviks re-established their control over parts of the North Caucasus – capturing Grozny and Vladikavkaz at the end of March – which brought them into direct contact with the South Caucasian states (Sturua 1971: 381). This new geopolitical reality opened the possibility of recapturing the South Caucasus with its valuable economic assets – the oilfields of Baku and the Black Sea ports of Georgia. In the spring of 1920 plans for the sovietization of the Caucasus were already under

way. In March 1920 Lenin wrote to Sergo Ordzhonikidze: "We badly, badly need to take Baku. Direct all efforts towards this goal" (Lenin 1965: 163–4). The government of Azerbaijan was easily overthrown on April 28, 1920 and the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan was proclaimed. Ordzhonikidze, who was in charge of the sovietization of the South Caucasus, was more than eager to proceed with further conquests of Armenia and Georgia (Kvašonkin 1997). The Bolsheviks in Tiflis planned to use the same scenario as they had successfully implemented in Azerbaijan – a revolt of local communists who would then declare Soviet authority and request military aid (Makharadze 1928: 217).

The plans to continue with the sovietization of Armenia and Georgia were, however, frustrated by new developments in the Russian civil war. The Polish armies of Józef Piłsudski started an offensive in Ukraine on April 25, 1920, and less then two weeks later, on May 6–7, Polish troops captured Kiev. The beginning of this offensive meant that the sovietization of the Caucasus had to be postponed and troops were now diverted from the Caucasus to the Polish front. At the same time, facing the advance of Soviet Russia towards the Caucasus, the Georgian government dispatched a diplomatic mission to Moscow at the end of April 1920 with the aim of concluding a peace treaty (Makharadze 1928: 213). The Georgian-Russian negotiations resulted in the signing of a peace treaty on May 7. Russia recognized the independence of Georgia and its borders, which included Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Beichman 1991: 165). In addition to sending a diplomatic mission to Moscow, the Georgian government, wary of the Bolshevik plans to sovietize the South Caucasus, sent troops to block the mountain passes to Terek *Oblast'* from South Ossetia and to disarm the Ossetians (Pliev and Tskhovrebov 1957: 66). It was this movement of Georgian troops that triggered the Ossetian rebellion.

Moscow's decision to refrain from the sovietization of Armenia and Georgia was a cause of some frustration for Ordzhonikidze. He telegraphed Moscow that "we could have had everything ready, [we would have] started [our offensive] on 8th [May] and by 11th–12th would have been in Tiflis" (Kvašonkin 1997: 168). His feelings were understandable given that plans for the sovietization of Georgia had long been in place. In Tiflis, the Bolsheviks had been preparing a coup against the Georgian government, and by March 1920 an Ossetian *Revkom* had been organized by order of the *Kavkazskii Kraevoi Komitet RKP(b)* (KKK) in the North Caucasus with the following aims: to disband the Ossetian National Council;[9] to declare that temporarily the *Revkom* held all authority; to form a military unit immediately; and to establish contact with North Ossetia and villages in Gori *uezd* in Georgia.[10] This document clearly demonstrated that an Ossetian rebellion was planned in Georgia with the apparent goal of declaring Soviet authority. It may have been part of a larger plan to sovietize the whole of Georgia.

The Ossetian Bolsheviks in the North Caucasus faced a dilemma: on the one hand, Moscow had quite explicitly ordered them not to interfere with Georgia; but on the other hand, the Roki rebellion that started spontaneously was doomed without assistance. The rebels' declaration clearly reflected this dilemma since,

on the one hand, it referred to the need to act in response to the situation that had arisen in Roki and to support the idea of a spontaneous revolt. However, on the other hand, the reference to the order from the KKK clearly revealed the planned nature of the Bolshevik interference. Also, the desire of the rebels to join Russia was evident. It is significant that Soviet authority in Roki District was proclaimed on May 8 – the same day that an attempted Bolshevik coup in Tiflis failed and some of the participants were captured and executed (Kvašonkin 1997: 170).

The Ossetian revolt in Roki District at the end of April had coincided with a change of mood in Moscow. The Bolshevik Ossetian leaders were well aware of the treaty signed in Moscow and their dilemma is clear in the following passages of a letter of May 20, 1920, from the chairman of the South Ossetian District Committee (V.A. Sanakoev) – based in Vladikavkaz – to the Ossetian Bolshevik Alexander Dzhatiev, who had been sent earlier to oversee the Roki rebellion. On the one hand he advised:

> The situation is like this: Georgia signed a peace [treaty] with Soviet Russia. Both sides agreed not to interfere into the internal affairs of each other.… In these circumstances we are categorically forbidden to offer aid; neither troops nor weapons can be moved to the south. Disobeying this order threatens us with execution.
>
> (cited in Tskhovrebov, N. Z. 1961: 95–6)

On the other hand:

> The Roki front [rebellion] should not be eliminated but in its development, Alexander, one has to be careful; it would be good to embrace [sovietize] other gorges leading to the [mountain] passes calmly and without bloodshed.… You can see on the ground better whether it is possible to further develop the movement [rebellion] calmly and quietly. Officially it cannot be sanctioned from here.

The author then went on to describe the formation of an Ossetian military brigade: "[W]e all have a strong desire to set out soon, but circumstances are such that the death of the Mensheviks is postponed for some time" (cited in Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960: 82–3).

It was in the midst of this complicated political situation that the Ossetian Bolsheviks, at their conference in Vladikavkaz, had to decide whether to violate Moscow's instructions and support the Ossetian rebels in Roki District. Initially, on May 28, the conference decided "to refrain for a moment from active aid to the rebels of Roki District and to wait for more precise information from Dzhatiev" (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960: 87; Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 105). However, on the evening of the same day the decision was taken that a newly formed Ossetian brigade should set out immediately for South Ossetia (Sanakoev, M. K. 1957: 75).[11] This decision was quite clearly taken in violation

of Moscow's previous instructions not to interfere with Georgia, and was a purely local initiative.

Despite violating Moscow's orders the Ossetian Bolsheviks in Vladikavkaz tried to secure Moscow's support for the rebels in Roki District. During the rebellion of May–June 1920 the Ossetian communists in Terek *Oblast'* of Russia adopted a "Memorandum" at their conference addressed to the Bolshevik leadership in Moscow. The document summarized the events of 1918–20 as a continuous struggle of the Ossetian communists against the Menshevik government, and then roughly defined the territory of South Ossetia (thus laying a territorial claim) and stated that South Ossetia should be regarded as inseparable from Soviet Russia and that it should be allowed to "join Soviet Russia on the same basis as everyone else [*na obshchikh osnovaniiakh*]" (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960: 96). The main point of this document was to secure support and the involvement of Moscow in the ongoing Ossetian rebellion. It also tried to present South Ossetia as part of Russia. The Ossetian communists sent two representatives to the Comintern Congress in Moscow; they were charged with delivering a "Memorandum" to the Central Committee and personally to Lenin, and "to insist firmly that South Ossetia is inseparable from Russia." The Ossetian emissary reported that he had met Lenin: "I told him about the rebellion and the decision of the South Ossetian working masses to join Soviet Russia" (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 112).[12]

However, in practical terms, having taken the initiative and disobeyed Moscow the Ossetian rebels were subsequently left on their own without any help in facing the regular Georgian army. This was made clear by Filipp Makharadze[13] in his 1928 book on the sovietization of Georgia. He wrote:

> The tragedy of this rebellion is that it once again became totally isolated, because a helping hand could not be offered either by the KKK or by the North Caucasus that was part of Soviet Russia as they had absolutely no right to do so bound by the treaty of 7th May [sic.]. Thus this new rebellion from the very start was doomed to perish.
>
> (Makharadze 1928: 225)

This brief survey of relations between Georgians and Ossetians during the civil war allows for the following conclusions. The conflict started as an unorganized social movement for land redistribution, primarily among Ossetian peasants. However, soon the ethnic dimension of that social conflict acquired a more important role since the landowners were traditionally Georgian nobles. The conflict thus turned into antagonism between Georgians and Ossetians. In this new situation the Ossetians found support from the Bolsheviks in the North Caucasus. The Ossetians in Georgia acquired a Bolshevik orientation as their political situation (peasants struggling against aristocratic landowners) could be easily integrated into the Bolshevik ideological discourse. We thus have a situation where an initial social conflict evolved into ethnic antagonism, which in turn acquired a political dimension.

The aftermath of the 1920 rebellion

Immediately after the suppression of the rebellion the Georgian government decided to expel large sections of the Ossetian population. A special resettlement commission was established to this end under the chairmanship of V. Rtskhiladze, with the goal of regulating the deportation of Ossetians and the resettlement of Georgians in their place (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 108). The commission adopted a document on July 17, 1920, that called for the following measures: the immediate full removal of Ossetians from the area; the temporary cancelation of the residence permits of all Ossetians except those who had given service or displayed loyalty to the Republic of Georgia; the delimitation of areas in which to resettle the Ossetians; and the granting of the right of Georgian settlers to take possession of the vacant houses, yards, gardens and cattle left in the villages following the expulsion of the Ossetians (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960: 145–7).

It appears that the deportation orders concerned mainly the Gori *uezd* and did not involve Ossetians living in neighboring regions. In this context a curious situation occurred in the Ossetian village of Tson located on the border of Gori and Shoropan *uezdy*. When a Georgian unit arrived at Tson the Georgian commander had orders "not to leave a single Ossetian in the Gori *uezd*." The village of Tson was located in Gori *uezd* but it had not participated in the rebellion and the villagers appealed to be spared the expulsion order. The Georgian commander suggested that it could only be done if the village became part of Shoropan District. The villagers then petitioned the Shoropan *uezd* administration and were, as a result, spared deportation (Dzhioev 1957: 152). Ossetians were also expelled from the Kornis District of the Gori *uezd* which was resettled by Imeretian Georgians (Dzudtsov 1957: 101). Some authors indicate that the Menshevik government planned to resettle the remaining Ossetians along the border with Azerbaijan in the Karayaz steppe on the left bank of Kura River (Khachapuridze 1956: 201).

These disastrous consequences of the rebellion of 1920 have left bitter memories among Ossetians, and there are frequent references to the events of 1920 both in Ossetian historiography and in the current political discourse. After the dissolution of the USSR Ossetian politicians tried to present the events of 1920 as genocide. In 1990 the South Ossetian Soviet adopted a "declaration on genocide" and in October 2006 the North Ossetian parliament made an appeal to the Russian *Duma* regarding "the Ossetian genocide."

The sovietization of Georgia and the creation of Ossetian autonomy

Despite their decisive victory over the Ossetians, by the end of 1920 the clouds were gathering again over the independent Georgian state. The sovietization of Armenia in December 1920 suggested that a similar fate was awaiting Georgia in the near future. In February 1921 the Red Army, under the pretext of helping rebels in Lori District, invaded Georgia and declared the establishment of Soviet authority.

The political bargaining for Ossetian autonomy

The origins of South Ossetian autonomy can be traced to the period immediately preceding the sovietization of Georgia in February 1921. Following the unsuccessful uprising of the summer of 1920, South Ossetian Bolsheviks had fled to North Ossetia, where they retained separate organizational structures. A South Ossetian *Okruzhkom* (District Committee) of the Communist Party in North Ossetia acted as the South Ossetian government-in-exile, mainly dealing with South Ossetian refugees and administrative matters. This "government-in-exile" had military units – a Special South Ossetian Partisan Unit and a Second South Ossetian Brigade made up of Ossetian refugees who had participated in the disastrous rebellion in Georgia in May–June 1920 (Pliev, B. Z. and Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 81). These separate political and military institutions allowed South Ossetians to exercise some political influence and permitted a certain flexibility in minor decision-making. These factors played a decisive role in the Ossetian attempt to secure autonomy.

Thus, on the eve of the Bolshevik invasion of Georgia, the South Ossetian *Okruzhkom* in Vladikavkaz (North Ossetia) on February 25, 1921, decided once again take matters into their own hands. They discussed the situation in South Ossetia and adopted a resolution "On the self-determination of South Ossetia," which declared that, in view of the "unbending will of the South Ossetian poor," and

> the persistent, nearly three-year long struggle of the South Ossetian people against Georgian national-chauvinists for their liberation, the South Ossetian Party Committee decided to establish South Ossetia as an autonomous unit (region) with Tskhinval as its center. This decision should be implemented by revolutionary means and will be subject to final approval by the Congress of the Soviets of South Ossetia.
>
> (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 194–5; 1960: 213–14)

While this resolution might look like many similar pronouncements typical of these times, when it is placed within the context of the unfolding events it becomes clear that it expresses the concern and urgency that Ossetians felt regarding the future political status of South Ossetia. First of all, we should note the self-declared nature of the document. The Ossetians were not acting on anyone's directions; they were deciding unilaterally that Ossetia warranted autonomous status, and they planned to claim it. Second, the expulsion of nearly the entire Ossetian population, and their subsequent lack of control over the territories claimed, compelled them to moderate their demands. Ossetians no longer explicitly demanded unification with Soviet Russia but asked for autonomous status without specifying whether it would be within Georgia or Russia. Third, the prospect of Georgia becoming a "socialist" republic meant that Ossetians would no longer be able to claim bourgeois oppression by Georgians. Hence, the only feasible solution in these circumstances was to acquire autonomy.

The mention of Tskhinval as the proposed location of the capital is hardly accidental since it was a source of bitter contest between Ossetians and Georgians. The Ossetians lived in mountainous villages and thus had no towns of their own. Another reason for the need of a town was perhaps ideological – without a town there could be no proletariat, and the absence of a proletariat was certainly a disadvantage from the Bolshevik point of view. Tskhinval was the only town close enough to the Ossetian territories that was suitable as a capital for the proposed autonomous unit – even though Ossetians were in the minority there.[14]

Finally, we should note the expression "to be implemented by revolutionary means." To execute the resolution a South Ossetian *Revkom* was established. A few days later the Ossetian units moved into South Ossetia, and in less than a week, and without encountering much resistance, captured the territory of South Ossetia including the town of Tskhinval on March 5, 1921 (Gagloev 1935: 129–39). As a result of the sovietization of Georgia the Ossetians were thus able to establish control over South Ossetian territory, which in turn enabled them to defend their bid for autonomy.

The Ossetian *Revkom* started its activities by issuing a directive:

> From today – March 26, 1921 the South Ossetian *Revkom* begins to fulfil its duties. The authority of the *Revkom* extends to the entire territory of South Ossetia. . . .All [other] *Revkomy* functioning in the territory of South Ossetia should register with the South Ossetian *Revkom* within three days of receiving this order.
>
> (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960: 217–18)

The curiosity of this situation was that this self-declared autonomous formation in South Ossetia was not formally recognized by the Georgian *Revkom* in Tiflis, and was acting on its own. The simultaneous existence of two *Revkomy* in Tskhinval – one dealing with issues concerning Georgians, the other addressing Ossetian issues (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 127) – during the early period of Soviet rule is another good example of the extremely unclear political status of South Ossetia at that time. The sovietization of Georgia also enabled the return of the expelled Ossetian population. They received subsidies upon their return and they were able to reclaim their confiscated property (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 117–18, 127).

Having proclaimed the political entity of South Ossetia, secured the return of the expelled population, and established de facto control over the territory, the next urgent step was to have its borders recognized. This, however, was not an easy task. A whole array of historical, geographic, ethnographic and political issues delayed and complicated the task of determining the Ossetian frontiers and the recognition of South Ossetia as a political and administrative entity.

The Ossetians living in Georgia were predominantly peasants who lived on the lands of Georgian nobility. Without princes and landed nobility there was no tradition of an Ossetian political entity in Georgia. In the course of the nineteenth

century, for a short period of 17 years between 1842 and 1859, there existed an administrative unit called the *osetinskii okrug* (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960a: 67–8), which was eventually incorporated into the Gori *uezd* of Tiflis *gubernia* (province).[15] That administrative unit, however, did not encompass the entire Ossetian population. During the late tsarist period the territory inhabited by Ossetians was not delimited by any administrative boundary, but was mainly incorporated into the two *uezdy* of the Tiflis *gubernia*. A small number of Ossetians resided in Kutais *gubernia* as well. Apart from those 17 years in the mid-nineteenth century there had been no administrative entity bearing the name of Ossetia in the South Caucasus.

The absence of any previous political or administrative entity in the territory of South Ossetia gave little legitimacy to Ossetian claims for autonomy. Moreover, the absence of clearly defined frontiers that could be claimed – in contrast to the two other Georgian autonomous entities of Abkhazia and Ajaria – further complicated the task of determining the borders of the future Ossetian Autonomous Region. In the end, the territory that later became South Ossetian Autonomous Region was divided between two *gubernii* and four *uezdy*.[16]

The ethnic composition of the population was very complex. While Ossetians were the majority in the territory they claimed, they did not constitute a compact and homogeneous mass. There were large Georgian populated enclaves between the areas where Ossetians predominated. Even the proposed capital of the autonomous unit, Tskhinval, was surrounded by Georgian villages. Geographically, the territory of South Ossetia was very poorly integrated due to the rugged terrain. Access between different parts of South Ossetia was often more difficult than communication with nearby Georgian regions. This was the main reason why Ossetian territory during the tsarist period was administratively split between two *gubernii* and four *uezdy*. Finally, there was an understandable reluctance on the part of Georgian communists to create boundaries and grant political status to an ethnic group, especially where there had previously been none. It was against this complicated background that the Ossetians tried to secure recognition of their autonomy.

The process of recognition of the South Ossetian entity and its borders was the subject of a number of bureaucratic commissions created by the Georgian and Ossetian sides. The Georgian *Revkom* issued an order on May 13, 1921, to the local Gori *Revkom* to create a special commission to determine the geographic and ethnographic features of the Gori *uezd* (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 128). It is not accidental that the task of determining the frontiers of South Ossetia was delegated to the Gori *Revkom* since the majority of the Ossetian population of Georgia lived in Gori *uezd* while Ossetians living in nearby *uezdy* were separated from the Gori *uezd* by mountainous ridges. From the Georgian point of view, if the Ossetians were to be given an autonomous status it had to be within Gori *uezd*. In determining the boundaries the commission apparently relied on tsarist ethnographic data and the administrative boundaries from 1903. The commission eventually came up with two main

areas – Mountainous Ossetia, with an overwhelming Ossetian majority; and the Tskhinval region with a mixed population. The reliance on tsarist administrative boundaries resulted in the inclusion of several Georgian villages in the Mountainous Ossetia region – the villages of Vanet, Atseriskhevi, Satskheneti, Dvani, Zemo, and Kvemo Avnevi. The commission therefore made a provision that these villages should be subordinated to Gori *uezd* directly. The documents indicate that the Georgian side was against the inclusion of the Tskhinval region within the Ossetian autonomy given its substantial Georgian population. The Gori *Revkom* mostly approved the plan of the commission on May 31. The only exception was the proposition to subordinate the Georgian villages to the Gori *uezd* – they were temporarily left in their districts (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 129).

The Georgian plan could not possibly satisfy Ossetians as it excluded sections of the Ossetian population living in adjacent areas of Gori *uezd*, while the large Ossetian population outside Gori *uezd* was not even considered for inclusion in the autonomous region. Around that time, in June 1921, the Ossetian population of Chasovala District in Rachnskii *uezd* of Kutais *gubernia* petitioned that their district be attached to the South Ossetian "district" that was being created.

It is interesting to note some of the arguments used to justify this request. According to a resolution signed by the Ossetian inhabitants of the 394 homesteads (*dymov*) of Chasoval community, even though their community was placed within the Georgian Rachinskii *uezd* by the tsarist administration under Nicholas II,

> The Chasoval community forms – from the historical, economical and geographical point of view – an integral part of [South Ossetia]…. From the onset of the [October] Revolution we expressed our desire to separate from the Rachinskii *uezd*, after which we subordinated to the South Ossetian National Soviet, … [and] we participated in all Peoples' Congresses of South Ossetia. In terms of party organization we were part of the district organization RKP….[T]herefore we categorically demand … to separate from the Rachinskii *uezd* and join the South Ossetian self-governing unit-district and thus enter the solid South Ossetian family [sic.].
>
> (Tsomaya 1960: 29–30)

Three types of argument are used in this appeal: ethnographic, economic and political. If the ethnographic and political arguments hold true, then the economic argument was totally unjustified. The reason why the area was placed within Rachinskii *uezd* was not because of a tsarist conspiracy, but because of its geographical position. The Chasoval area had more economic ties with Rachinskii *uezd* than with the rest of what became the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. There was a direct road to the nearby *uezd* center, Oni, while there was no road connecting the Chasoval area with the rest of South Ossetia at the time (one was built in the 1930s – the Chasoval-Kemul'ta-Gufta road) (Abaev 1956: 120).

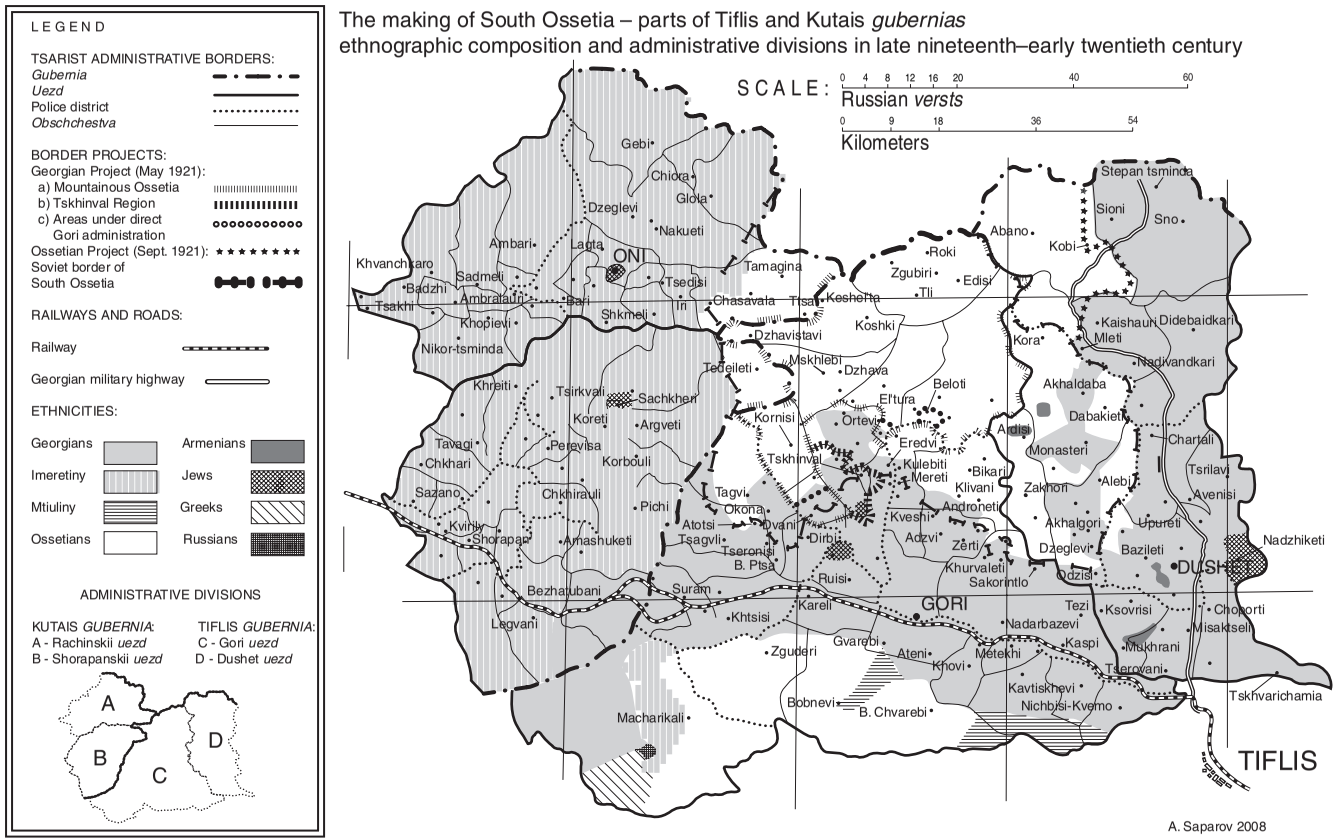

Figure 3.1 The making of South Ossetia. Parts of Tiflis and Kutais *gubernii*. Ethnographic composition and administrative divisions in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

In early July 1921 the South Ossetian *Revkom* appealed to its Georgian counterpart to decide on the question of the areas with mixed populations. The Georgian *Revkom* in turn forwarded this demand to the Georgian Commissariat of internal affairs. The latter responded that "South Ossetia does not represent a unitary geographic unit and [therefore] does not have the requisites of autonomous status" (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 129). Another source provides a similar quote which summarizes the arguments against autonomy rather well:

> The districts inhabited by Ossetians lack geographic unity and from the geographical and economic point of view [they] make parts of different provinces and therefore it should be considered an impossible task to create an artificial administrative entity from these strips [of land].
>
> (Toidze 1994: 307)

Thus the question of the South Ossetian autonomy reached a stalemate.

Further deliberations regarding the political status and boundaries of South Ossetia lasted for several months without much progress. Facing strong reluctance on the Georgian side, in September 1921 the Ossetians embarked on political maneuvering in an attempt to secure recognition of their claims. Instead of dealing directly with the Georgians they decided to appeal to a higher political body: the *Kavburo*.

A joint meeting of the South Ossetian *Revkom* and *Partkom* took place between September 6–8, 1921. A number of proposals to justify their bid for autonomy were prepared, along with a detailed outline of the boundaries the Ossetians desired, as well as a draft of the constitution. It should be noted that for the first time since the establishment of Soviet authority, the Ossetians referred to union with Georgia in their proposal: "Socialist Soviet Republic of South Ossetia voluntarily enters into federative relations with SSR Georgia."[17] This clause indicates how the Ossetian position had changed over the course of several months. Initially they had demanded unification with North Ossetia, but by September they were ready to accept union with Georgia. It seems that the main reason for moderating their position was their difficulty in legitimizing their claim for separation on the basis of a previous administrative status. Facing the impossibility of separating from Georgia they moderated their demands to show that they were prepared to compromise, thus hoping to secure at least the same kind of political autonomy within Georgia that Abkhazia enjoyed.

The proposed Ossetian Constitution was clearly influenced by the Abkhaz arrangements. Article 2 stated: "SSR South Ossetia enters into a federative relation with SSR Georgia," while Article 13 claimed: "On cultural and economic matters SSR South Ossetia can directly communicate with other Soviet republics" – an obvious reference to the Ossetians within Russia. Another interesting point stated: "Soviet government of South Ossetia is in charge of cultural-educational matters among the Ossetian population of Georgia, [which] is left outside of SSR South Ossetia" (Article 14). Finally, the draft mentioned that "[t]he language of communication between SSR South Ossetia and SSR Georgia is Russian."[18]

On September 14, 1921, the joint conference of *Partkom* and *Revkom* of Ossetia approved all the proposals prepared at the earlier meeting and appointed a special delegation to deliver them directly to the highest political body in the South Caucasus – the *Kavburo* – hoping thus to force the Georgians to recognize the Ossetian frontiers. It should be noted that the same proposals were also sent to the Georgian Central Committee and *Revkom* but clearly the true addressee was the *Kavburo* (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 130).[19]

Having considered the Ossetian proposals, the *Kavburo* decided on October 31, 1921, to grant autonomy to South Ossetia, and it instructed the Georgian *Revkom* to cooperate with the Ossetian *Revkom* to determine the boundaries of South Ossetia (Tsomaya 1960: 40–1). As a result yet another joint Georgian-Ossetian commission was appointed to resolve the question of boundaries, made up of four members of the Georgian and Ossetian *Revkomy*. There were a number of disputed issues to be solved. Some difficult negotiations were going on concerning Ossetian populated areas around the Georgian military highway (Kobi District) – which Ossetians were trying to include within the borders of their autonomy.[20] Another complicated case was the extent of the southern limits of autonomy. For example, the final decision to include Tskhinval in the Ossetian Autonomous Region was granted by the Georgian Central Committee only on November 17, 1921 (Tsomaya 1960: 40–1). When the decision became known to the Georgian population it prompted protests from the local Georgian population of Tskhinval and several surrounding villages on December 5, 1921.[21] The Ossetian boundaries were finally approved on December 20, 1921 (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 131).[22]

The protests of the Georgian population against their inclusion in the Ossetian Autonomous Region did not go unnoticed by the communist leadership. Initially it was decided to leave the Georgian population under Gori District administration until "the mood of the population is changed in favor of inclusion within Autonomous Ossetia."[23] Within ten days of the decision regarding the boundaries of South Ossetia, something resembling a referendum was conducted in several Georgian populated areas that had been included within the boundaries of the proposed South Ossetia Autonomous Region. In the Georgian village of Achabeti, on December 30, 1921, a meeting of several Georgian villages[24] approved their inclusion in the newly created autonomy:

> [We] welcome unanimously the decision of the central worker and peasant authority of Georgia on the establishment of autonomous regions of South Ossetia with its center in Tskhinval which [we] entirely support. We denounce the shameful Menshevik authority which artificially created bloody hostility between the fraternal peasants of South Ossetia and Georgia. [We] declare that this decision of the worker and peasant authority of Georgia lays down solid foundations for tranquil and mutual cohabitation of the working peasants of Georgia and South Ossetia. Long live the fraternal union of the long-suffering Ossetian people with the Georgian peasantry. Long live the Soviet authority of Georgia and its creator Communist Party.[25]

In a similar manner a general meeting took place in the villages of Eredvi and Prisi on December 31, 1921, and in the town of Tskhinval on January 1, 1922. There the local communist leadership informed the population about the "decision of the central Soviet authority to create an autonomous region of South Ossetia with its center in Tskhinval and the inclusion of the Eredvi village within its borders" (Tsomaya 1960: 42–3). The population this time also "unilaterally" adopted a resolution approving the decision. These resolutions were meant to demonstrate the support of the Georgian population for inclusion of their villages within the Ossetian Autonomous Region in order to disavow the previous protests. It seems that the Bolsheviks worried about appearances and needed a background of legitimacy for their decision regarding Ossetian boundaries.

In his speech at the First Congress of the Georgian Communist Party in Tbilisi in January 1922 Sergo Ordzonikidze briefly discussed the Ossetian issue:

> [T]here were little frictions, but do little frictions matter when solving such a complex question?.... [Y]ou have offered South Ossetia a wide autonomy, and the freedom-loving Ossetian people [who] time and again rose the banner of rebellion against the Mensheviks, are now in the closest and [most] fraternal union with peasant-worker Georgia.
>
> (Ordzhonikidze 1939: 136, 138)

But it took another four months before the Ossetian Autonomous *Oblast'* was eventually declared by the April 20, 1922, decree of the Georgian Central Committee (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 133). A few days later the Georgian government added a clarification, stipulating that "administration and militia [police] in the Georgian villages remains Georgian." In the same document it was additionally stressed that the disputed Kobi District remained part of Dushet *uezd*.[26]

The principles used in drawing the boundaries of South Ossetia

As noted above, there was no administrative entity that included all Ossetians in one unit during the tsarist period. Therefore the Bolsheviks had to draw up the boundaries of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region from scratch. The basis on which these boundaries were decided upon can be best understood by juxtaposing the Soviet-created boundary of South Ossetia with the administrative and ethnographic map from the tsarist period.

The detailed description of the South Ossetian boundaries appeared in the decree on the creation of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region signed by the head of the Georgian *Revkom*, Filipp Makharadze, on April 20, 1922.[27] The description of the boundary was prepared in the tradition of the period and combined several techniques – description by zone (i.e. that the border lies east of village A and west of village B), and description by natural features (i.e. mountain peaks, mountain passes and the course of rivers).

The following analysis of the South Ossetian border is based on three different sources. I will compare the border description with the Soviet military

maps and tsarist administrative maps. Finally, I will compare the location of the boundary with the ethnographic data from 1886. The combination of these cartographic and ethnographic sources will reveal which were the predominant principles of the South Ossetian boundary drawing.

The map (Figure 3.1) is a digital remastering of the late nineteenth century tsarist administrative map of the region. The administrative divisions are those of the year 1903 and the scale is given in tsarist *versts* to the inch and kilometres to the centimetre. The place-names are those used at the time and are, in many cases, different from modern ones. A number of villages that appear on the map were destroyed during the civil war of 1918–21 and no longer exist.[28]

The map shows the location of a number of ethnic groups that were categorized as such by the tsarist ethnographers. In fact, the tsarist ethnographers recorded a multitude of ethnicities and ethnographic groups. For instance, the groups called "Imeretiny" and "Mtiuliny" are ethnographic groups of Georgians who spoke a distinct dialect of Georgian (Wixman 1984: 82, 140). Some of the groups were not considered as ethnic groups by a later Soviet government and were therefore not included in population censuses.

Finally, a word of caution is needed regarding the ethnographic distribution of the population. One should bear in mind that when creating the ethnographic map the nineteenth century geographer used population data for a whole district and simply colored the entire area of a given district. This was obviously erroneous, especially in the sparsely populated mountainous districts that made up South Ossetia. Areas directly adjacent to the Caucasian mountain range were clearly unpopulated.

The map nevertheless gives an excellent understanding of the ethnographic distribution of the population and administrative boundaries before the sovietization of Georgia. Imposing the Soviet boundary of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region on this tsarist map allows one to clearly perceive which factors played a role in determining the frontier: geographic, ethnographic or administrative. What were the principles that were used to create the boundaries of South Ossetia? Each of the following three factors are discussed to determine which predominated in different locations: ethnographic principles, geographic considerations, and the ancient boundaries or political influences of the time.

Kutais *gubernia*: Rachinskii and Shorapanskii *uezdy*

We may trace the boundary of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region by beginning in the north-west, in the former Rachinskii *uezd* of Kutais *gubernia*. It includes a small and uninhabited strip of mountain range of the Glolskii District and then incorporates almost all of Chasavalskii District. In the case of the latter, the boundary of the autonomous region follows the ethnographic principle by excluding the Georgian populated part of the district.

The boundary then enters Shoropanskii *uezd* of Kutais *gubernia*, where it incorporates the Ossetian populated Tedeleti village[29] of the Argveti District into the Ossetian autonomy. The boundary then follows the ancient border between

the Kutais and Tiflis *gubernii* for a short distance. The boundary here also coincides with a geographical feature (a mountain range) and an ethnographic one, and thus separates the Ossetian populated part of Tiflis *gubernia* from the Imeretian (Georgian) populated Kutais *gubernia*.

Tiflis gubernia: Gori uezd

The border of autonomy then crosses into the Gori *uezd* of Tiflis *gubernia*. At first, it follows closely the ethnographic principle in the Okoni District where it separates the Ossetian and Georgian populations until carefully excluding the Georgian populated Atotsi village from the Ossetian Autonomous Region; but then it disregards the ethnographic principle and one can see large tracts of the Georgian populated areas included within the borders of the autonomous region. However, the boundary here again carefully excludes the important Georgian villages of Tseronisi, Dirbi, Dvani and Khviti which are very close to the border on the Georgian side.

The boundary then approaches the capital, Tskhinval, and passes by the southern reaches of the town. This was probably the most contested part of the boundary as Tskhinval had at that time a minority Ossetian population, but it was the only suitable town to serve as a capital and, as noted above, the Ossetians did not lose an opportunity to mention it as their desired capital. The decision to include Tskhinval meant that a large Georgian enclave north of Tskhinval would be included as well. Thus the important Georgian villages of Kemerti, Tamarasheni, Kekhvi, Kheiti, Vanati, Erdevi and Kulebiti [Kulbiti] became part of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. The Ossetian side claimed that the inclusion of Tskhinval, with its predominantly Georgian population, was vital for the successful cultural and economic development of South Ossetia (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1960: 226). After Tskhinval the boundary very closely follows the ethnographic principle by separating Georgian and Ossetian populations until it meets the border of Dushet *uezd* not far from the Georgian village of Odzisi.

Tiflis gubernia: Dushet uezd

In Dushet *uezd* the border of the Ossetian autonomy precisely followed the ancient tsarist boundary of the sub-*uezd* administrative unit of Ksanskii *uchastok*, which comprised three districts. The entire Ksanskii *uchastok*, with the exception of the southernmost village of Odzisi, was included within the borders of the autonomy. This created a curious ethnographic situation. On the one hand, the border followed the ethnographic distribution of the population (excluding a small tract of Ossetian populated land in the south-east), as can be seen from Figure 3.1. On the other hand, this created another Georgian enclave within the Ossetian Autonomous Region. Perhaps this Georgian enclave was intended as compensation for the large but sparsely populated Ossetian Kobi district to the north of Ksanski *uchastok* that was left outside the borders of the autonomous region. That territory was another source of bitter discontent between the

Ossetians and Georgians. The Georgians opposed the inclusion of that region in the Ossetian autonomy, justifying this by citing its remoteness from South Ossetia – it was separated from the rest of Ossetia by mountain ranges (Sanakoev, I. B. 2004: 23). The Georgians did not fail to return the compliment to Ossetians, claiming that they could better serve the needs (social and cultural) of the Ossetian population of this isolated region (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 131). However, it seems that the real reason was that the route of the strategic Georgian military highway crossed that area, as can be seen from Figure 3.1. The Georgian side was particularly sensitive to the fact that the Ossetians controlled mountain passes leading to the North Caucasus, and was opposed therefore to the inclusion of this area within the Ossetian Autonomous Region.

Analysis of the cartographic data reveals that apparently two main principles were employed. In the mountainous part of the newly created unit, where the populated settlements were scarce, the boundary was principally drawn along physical features of the terrain – mountainous peaks, ranges, crossings and the courses of rivers. On many occasions the boundary drawn along the geophysical characteristics of the terrain coincided with the antecedent frontiers – the borders of the tsarist administrative districts. The use of the antecedent boundary in mountainous terrain was perhaps unintentional and unavoidable. The tsarist authorities chose the location of district boundary for the convenience of administration – and as a result the administrative boundaries followed the geophysical features of the terrain. In the case of the Soviet-made boundaries, when the convenience of administration did not contradict the ethnographic principle it is of little surprise that an ancient boundary was adopted as a convenient option once again.

Another clearly visible principle when drawing the South Ossetian boundary, was ethnographic. The use of geophysical markers and antecedent frontiers to draw borders was abandoned entirely in areas of dense settlement where different ethnic groups were mixed. The entire southern portion of the South Ossetian boundary is a testimony to this. The description of this portion of the boundary is abundant with details of settlements left within or outside the South Ossetian autonomy. In other words, the goal of the border was to include or exclude certain villages in the South Ossetian autonomy. Checking the placenames against ethnographic data from 1886 clearly shows that the boundary separated quite precisely the Ossetian and Georgian populations. There were several exceptions from this principle when political considerations prevailed. In some places political considerations such as the desire to include Georgian dominated Tskhinval within the borders of the autonomous region, or the need to preserve Georgian control over the strategic Caucasian military highway, prevailed over ethnographic considerations. We can also see what appears to be a practice of territorial compensation that again violated the ethnographic principle. Finally, one can see that a large Ossetian enclave in the southern part of Gori *uezd* was not included as it was separated from the autonomous region by a large tract of Georgian populated territory. Nevertheless, the dominant principle for drawing the boundaries of the South Ossetian autonomy was ethnographic – considerations of economics, or convenience of access, played a secondary role.

Conclusion

The main goal of this chapter has been to try to understand the reasons for the Bolshevik decision to grant autonomy to the Ossetians in Georgia. I believe that the answer to this question can be found in the analysis of the events of the civil war. First, the period 1918–20 was characterized by an intense conflict between Ossetians and Georgians. This conflict started as a social confrontation around the issue of land redistribution soon after October 1917. The Ossetian peasants refused to pay taxes and seized land from their Georgian landowners. This situation, where class coincided with ethnicity, very quickly evolved into an ethnic confrontation in which Ossetians turned to the only possible ally who could support them in their struggle – the Bolsheviks. Their situation as landless peasants struggling with "bourgeois oppression" blended particularly well with the Bolshevik ideology.

Second, the Ossetians had clearly lost in their conflict with the Georgians. The largest Ossetian rebellion of 1920 was suppressed and large parts of the Ossetian population were expelled into the North Caucasus. By the time of sovietization Georgia effectively controlled all the territory that later became the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. It was only the Bolshevik takeover of Georgia in February 1921 that enabled the Ossetians to recapture the territory of South Ossetia and demand autonomy.

The sovietization of Georgia in February 1921 presented the Bolsheviks with a dilemma: it was clear that it would be impossible to solve the problem to the satisfaction of both sides but it would not be possible to ignore it. The Bolsheviks had the following hypothetical options. One solution was to fully reward the Ossetians by granting them separation from Georgia. After all, the Ossetians had been ardent Bolshevik supporters throughout the entire civil war. They had been repressed for this support and naturally expected to benefit from Bolshevik victory in the civil war. As we have seen, it was separation from Georgia that the Ossetians desired and mentioned in practically every proclamation. However, this was an impossible course of action, for a number of reasons. On the one hand, it should not be forgotten that during the entire conflict, and despite their numerous rebellions, Ossetians rarely controlled the entire territory of South Ossetia; moreover, on the eve of the sovietization of Georgia they controlled none of it. In these circumstances separating Ossetia from Georgia would undoubtedly alienate the latter, and in spite of everything the Bolsheviks were realists and South Ossetia was much less important than Georgia.

On the other hand, Georgians would have preferred that no special status be given to Ossetians because a separate Ossetian political entity had never existed in the South Caucasus. The Ossetians could not claim an ancient kingdom in these lands, and under tsarist rule there had been no clearly defined administrative entity that the Ossetians could claim.[30] This made it particularly difficult to define Ossetian boundaries. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks could not have ignored the issue altogether and leave South Ossetia as an

integral part of Georgia. The ferocity of the conflict and the fact that in the turmoil that followed the sovietization of Georgia the Ossetians had recaptured the territory of South Ossetia and established a de facto autonomous unit with a separate *Revkom* dictated that a certain political status should be granted to the Ossetians. In these circumstances, allowing the Ossetians an autonomous status within Georgia was perhaps the only feasible solution to the conflict. Thus, the granting of autonomy to the Ossetians was the Bolshevik way of solving the conflict.

Needless to say, this solution did not satisfy either side. The Ossetians remained unhappy with their subordinate status and did not stop their attempts to separate from Georgia as can be seen from an attempt they made in 1925 to join North Ossetia (Gatagova *et al*. 2005).[31] The Georgians, meanwhile, felt that the autonomy was unjustly forced upon them by the central authorities. This naturally generated dissatisfaction, especially in light of the fact that the overthrown Georgian Menshevik government had been prepared to grant autonomy to Abkhazia and Ajaria, but not to Ossetia.[32]

Although academic works often maintain that the drawing of boundaries and the creation of ethnic autonomous entities was part of the *divide et impera* policy pursued by the Bolsheviks as a way of controlling the union republics (Conquest 1962; Pipes 1964; d'Encausse 1993; Sabol 1995), I believe that this chapter demonstrates that this was not necessarily the case. I would argue that even if the motivation of political control through administrative manipulations might have been present elsewhere when drawing boundaries, such assertions should not be universally applied to the entire Soviet Union. The example of South Ossetia clearly demonstrates that the Bolshevik leadership was primarily reacting to challenges on the ground rather than being an initiator of such policies. We did not see any evidence of preliminary plans or any prior encouragement of the Ossetians for the creation of a political unit in South Ossetia by the leadership of the *Kavburo* or from the Moscow leadership. Ossetian autonomy was a compromise solution the Bolsheviks adopted to solve a fierce civil war conflict. It was not a product of any deliberate policy to divide and rule.

To sum up, the autonomy of South Ossetia was, in the long run, an unsuccessful attempt at conflict resolution by the Bolsheviks, and not the product of deliberate manipulations by Stalin – as is frequently believed. The boundaries of the autonomy were not drawn arbitrarily,[33] but were the result of an attempt to implement certain principles (ethnographic, political and ideological) on the ground. It is also clear that the origins of Ossetian autonomy and its perception by the conflicting parties was instrumental in triggering violent conflict in the final years of the Soviet Union.

Notes

1 The first Ossetian political organization, called the *Tiflisskii osetinskii revolyutsionnyi komitet* (Tiflis Ossetian Revolutionary Committee), was created in Tiflis in March 1917. It included Menshevik, Social Revolutionary and Bolshevik Ossetians (Pliev 1985: 262). Ethnic Ossetians of different political backgrounds – members of Menshevik, Social Revolutionary and Bolshevik parties – participated in the Ossetian National Council of 1918–19. A separate Ossetian Menshevik organization was created in early May 1919 in Gori as an attempt by Georgian Mensheviks to retain influence in Ossetian regions. This was followed by the establishment of a separate Ossetian Bolshevik organization at a party conference in Dzhava in July 1919 (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 82–3, 89).
2 GNHA, fund 1861, register 1, file 335, p. 3
3 GNHA, fund 1861, register 1, file 335, pp. 8, 10.
4 GNHA, fund 1861, register 1, file 335, p. 1.
5 "Vypiska iz protokola zasedaniia chlenov Iugo-Osetinskogo revkoma ot 06. 05. 1920" in *Izvestiia Iugo-Osetinskogo* (1935), p. 124; See also Tskhovrebov, I. N. (1960), p. 77.
6 "Prikaz Revkoma Iugo-Osetii ot 08. 07. 1920" in *Izvestiya Iugo-Osetinskogo* (1935), p. 125.
7 "Telegramma tsentral'nomu komitetu RKP(b) 24 June 1920" in *Izvestiya Iugo-Osetinskogo* (1935), p. 127.
8 "Telegramma tsentral'nomu komitetu RKP(b) 24 June 1920" in *Izvestiya Iugo-Osetinskogo* (1935), p. 127.
9 Ossetians in Georgia had their own *Natsional'nyi Soviet* (National Council) where Bolsheviks were not in the majority by 1920 – hence the Bolshevik decision to disband it.
10 "Vypiska iz protokola KKK RKP(b) ot 23. 03. 1920" in *Izvestiia Iugo-Osetinskogo* (1935), p. 124.
11 The Bolsheviks had formed a military brigade consisting of South Ossetian refugees in Terek *Oblast'* in April 1920, with the apparent purpose of using it in South Ossetia (Tskhovrebov, V. D. 1981: 101). It is interesting to note that the brigade was initially inconspicuously called the "Special Communist Brigade," but the name was changed to South Ossetian Brigade as soon as they crossed the mountains and entered the territory of South Ossetia (Tskhovrebov, I. N. 1957: 79). It is unclear whether this change of name was part of typically clandestine activities or whether it was designed in the Bolshevik frame of mind to give more legitimacy to their cause.
12 Thus, both the Ossetian social revolutionaries and the Ossetian Bolsheviks desired separation from Georgia.
13 Filipp Makharadze (1868–1941) was a prominent Georgian Bolshevik and Soviet statesman. In 1921 he became chairman of the Georgian *Revkom*. Thereafter he served as the head of the Soviet Georgian government.
14 For example, according to data from the 1886 population survey, the population of Tskhinval was 3,832, including 744 Armenians, 1,135 Georgians and 1,953 Jews. According to the Soviet population census of 1926 the national composition of Tskhinvali was as follows: 1,152 Ossetians; 1,920 Georgians; 1,739 Jews; 827 Armenians; and 114 Russians. The total population of the town was 5,818 (TsSU 1929: 105).
15 AKAK, vol. XII, 1904, p. 222.
16 South Ossetian Autonomous *Oblast'* incorporated parts of Gori and Dushet *uezdy* of Tiflis *gubernia* and minor parts of Rachinskii and Shorapanskii *uezdy* of Kutais *gubernia*.
17 GNA fund 281; register 2; folder 3, p. 161.
18 GNA fund 281; register 2; folder 3, pp. 165–6

19 GNA fund 281; register 2; folder 3, p. 160.
20 GNA fund 281; register 2; folder 3, pp. 172–3.
21 GNA, fund 600, register 2, folder 5, p. 2 and 2b.
22 Text with the description of the boundary can be found in GNA fund 281, register 2, folder 3, pp. 172–3. Signed on December 8, 1921.
23 GNA, fund 281, register 2, folder 3, p. 159.
24 The villages listed are: Kekhvi, Kurta, Kveme and Zeme Achabeti, Tamarash[eni], Drgvisi, Sveri, Zartsevi, Kimerti, Kheiti and Saba-Tsminda, Bogianti, Gochianti, [G?] erazadati, Zubanti and Pekhshvelanti.
25 GNA, fund 600, register 2, folder 5, p. 1.
26 GNA, fund 284, register 1, folder 2, p. 5.
27 Text of the decree was published in a newspaper, *Pravda Gruzii*, on April 22, 1922, no. 340. The text of the decree was also published in Abaev, V. D. (1956), pp. 6–10.
28 It should also be noted that the map is not without certain geographic errors. A number of villages (especially in remote mountainous areas) are mislocated sometimes by several kilometres. The course of rivers, again in mountainous districts, may also be incorrect.
29 It should be noted that the position of the village on the map is not correct. It is located almost precisely on the boundary of the autonomy, not within the Ossetian autonomy.
30 For a short time in the mid-nineteenth century there existed an *Osetinskii okrug* (Ossetian District) under military rule. It was subsequently incorporated into new administrative divisions and the name Ossetia disappeared from the administrative map.
31 The attempt of South and North Ossetia to join together was a challenge for Moscow as such act would undoubtedly alienate Georgia. Stalin came up with a cunning solution – he did not object to the Ossetian proposal, but suggested that both South and North Ossetia join Georgia rather than the Russian Federation. After initial deliberations the Ossetins decided against joining Georgia and eventually dropped the plan.
32 Two days before Tbilisi fell to the Red Army in February 1921 the Georgian Menshevik government adopted a new constitution for the Georgian Republic, which mentioned in very ambiguous terms an autonomous status for Ajaria and Abkhazia, but none for South Ossetia (Constitution de la Republique Georgie (1922), p. 26.
33 That seems to be the predominant cliché that resurfaced during the events of August 2008. See, for example, Walker (2008).

4 From territorial dispute to autonomy

The creation of Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region (1918–21)

The key to understanding the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan lies in the administrative division of the South Caucasus. The geography of this rugged terrain had largely dictated the location of frontiers. From the Middle Ages the frontiers of local principalities followed the mountain ranges and watershed lines. Impassable roads made access across the mountains difficult and, as a result, economic and political activities were centered on the river basins. With the Russian conquest in the early nineteenth century the local principalities were absorbed into the tsarist administrative system and the region was divided into large provinces – *gubernii*. Nevertheless, at the lower administrative level the ancient frontiers dictated by geography remained intact.

This administrative system offered convenience of governance and preserved the economic unity of the provinces, but it also created an extreme ethnic mix of people, especially in the *gubernii* of Erevan and Elisavetpol which were populated by Armenians and Muslims. With the progress of ideas of nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century ethnic tensions became apparent and manifested themselves in a violent Armenian-Tatar war in 1905. When detailed population data became available at the end of nineteenth century,[1] a number of proposals to change the administrative division were made so that it would reflect the ethnographic composition of the population; however, they were never implemented (Evangulov 1914; Shakhatunian 1918).

This was the state of affairs on the eve of the First World War. In May 1918, when the region disintegrated into three independent states, only the external borders were clear – those imposed by Turkey in the Treaty of Batum,[2] and the Russo-Persian border of 1828. The frontiers between the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were to become a matter of violent dispute that would dominate the politics of the region in the coming years.

The fact that internal borders between these new states were unclear did not mean that their leaders did not know where they wanted their frontiers to be. To justify their territorial claims two principles were advanced. On the one hand, the *gubernii* presented convenient building blocks with functioning administrations and binding economic ties. Thus, the dominant group in a given province laid claim on the entire province regardless of its often heterogeneous ethnic composition. On the other hand, the ethnographic principle was by no means

forgotten either – the compactly settled ethnic groups residing in the "other" province were also claimed on each side, despite the absence of economic ties and difficulties in accessing and administering them.

Thus, Armenians who predominated in Erevan *gubernia* claimed parts of Elisavetpol and Tiflis *gubernii* with compact Armenian majorities, despite the fact that these areas were difficult to access and economically separate from Erevan. Similarly, Azerbaijan with its Turkic majorities in Baku and Elisavetpol *gubernii* claimed hardly accessible parts of Erevan *gubernia* which had a compact Turkic population. Karabakh, with its Armenian majority in the highlands and Turkic population predominating in the plains, was one such region where the conflicting claims clashed. Its geography made access to the Karabakh highlands much easier from the plains that lay to the east than from the west across the impassable mountains of Zangezur. The road from Baku to Karabakh passed by railway to Evlakh station and then along the Evlakh-Agdam-Shusha main road. There was no such convenient road from Erevan.[3] These geographic conditions favored the inclusion of the region within the Elisavetpol *gubernia* despite the overwhelming Armenian majority in the Karabakh highlands (Figure 4.1).

The struggle for Karabakh (1917–April 1920)

After the fall of the Romanov dynasty the provisional authority for the South Caucasus, OZAKOM, ordered the creation of local executive councils made up of the local parties. In Karabakh a 40-man committee was formed on March 26, 1917 (Abrahamian 1986: 18). Relative peace was preserved in the region between the Armenians and Turkic and Kurdish population until the summer of 1918 when the three independent republics were proclaimed. At the end of June the Azerbaijani government announced its intention to delimit its borders (Barsegov 2008: 34), and in early August, at the request of the Azerbaijani government seated in Ganja, the Turkish commander, Nuri Pasha, demanded that the Armenians of Karabakh recognize the suzerainty of Azerbaijan (Hovannisian 1971: 83). The Karabakh Armenians rejected the request as at that time the Turks were engaged in operations against Baku and could not spare troops to enforce their demand. However, after the capture of Baku at the end of September the Turkish troops marched towards Karabakh and entered Shusha on October 7, 1918 (Hovannisian 1971: 85; Ludshuveit 1966: 259). The local Armenians, hoping to avoid violence, offered no resistance. The Turks, having a small number of troops, effectively controlled the town of Shusha and the strategic road to Agdam. The Karabakh countryside where local Armenians had organized an armed militia remained outside their control.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani struggle over disputed territories resumed after the arrival of the British. British policy in the Caucasus was determined by two factors: their desire to maintain effective control over the region, and the limited number of troops available to enforce it. In these circumstances the British could not afford to alienate local leaders and their decisions were often informed by political needs and the actual situation on the ground (Arslanian 1980). In

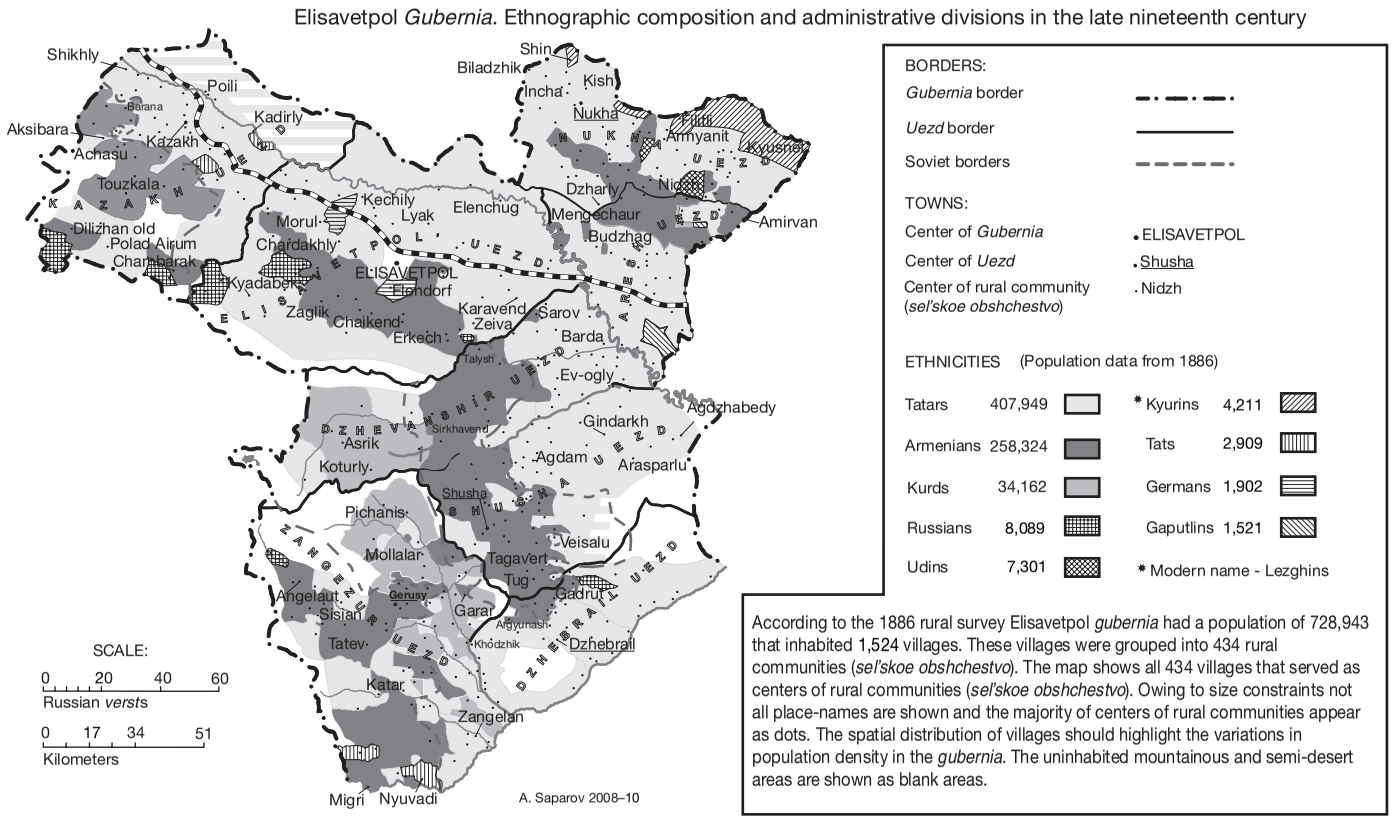

Figure 4.1 Elisavetpol *gubernia*. Ethnographic composition and administrative divisions in the late nineteenth century.

general the British preferred to leave things as they were without redrawing frontiers. The memorandum prepared by the Intelligence Department of the Naval Staff in April 1919 is a good illustration of the British approach to the immensely complicated problems of the South Caucasus:

> [T]he Tatars and Armenians are hopelessly intermingled and it is impossible to draw a frontier that is even roughly ethnographic. The boundary between the former Russian provinces of Erivan and Elisavetpol is therefore suggested as being the best physical frontier and as leaving roughly equal Armenian and Tatar minorities on the wrong side, respectively, of the line.
>
> (Burdett 1996: 577–8)

On January 15, 1919, with British approval, the Azerbaijani government appointed Dr Khosrov Bek Sultanov, a large landowner of Kurdish origin,[4] as provisional governor-general of Karabakh and Zangezur (Barsegov 2008: 245).[5] This was a serious blow to the Armenian claim on Karabakh, and both the Armenian government and Karabakh Armenians protested. In early February, Sultanov arrived in Shusha accompanied by a small British mission. However, the 4th Assembly of Armenians of Karabakh refused to recognize his authority. The attempt to extend the rule of the governor-generalship to Zangezur failed when the local armed Armenians in Goris/Geriusy surrounded the British mission that arrived to extend Sultanov's rule.[6] The British in this situation decided to preserve the existing status quo, leaving the Armenian National Council to administer the Armenian parts of the Zangezur *uezd* (Mikaelian 1992: 208–9).

Meanwhile, in Karabakh, the situation remained tense and the Armenian council continued to defy Sultanov's administration. In April the British attempted in vain to persuade the 5th Assembly of Karabakh Armenians to accept the provisional rule of Azerbaijan. When persuasion failed an economic blockade was imposed in another fruitless effort to force the Armenians to accept the rule of Azerbaijan. On June 4 tensions heightened when Sultanov tried to install an Azerbaijani garrison in the fortress of Shusha held by an Armenian militia. Only British intervention prevented large-scale clashes. Sultanov, however, was not going to tolerate the presence of an Armenian militia in the fortress of Shusha. The next day the nearby Armenian village of Kaibali-kend was attacked by nearly 2,000 mounted Kurdish and Turkic irregulars led by the brother of the governor-general, Sultan bek Sultanov. According to the report of a British officer present, after a day of fighting the village was pillaged and most of its 700 inhabitants were killed (Hovannisian 1971: 177). The destruction of Kaibali-kend, which could be clearly seen from Shusha, had an intimidating psychological effect – it demonstrated to Armenians that their militia was insufficient to protect the population. This was followed by news of the imminent British departure.

The massacre at Kaibali-kend soon yielded political results. The 6th Assembly of the Armenians of Karabakh that gathered at the end of June no

longer defied the Azerbaijani government but discussed possible settlement with Baku. Once the British mission left on August 10 (Mikaelian 1992: 323) the Armenians had little choice but to accept the provisional rule of Baku. At the 7th Assembly of the Karabakh Armenians a 26-point agreement was signed with the Baku government that outlined the division of power between the parties.[7]

The success in Karabakh permitted Azerbaijan to start operations against the Armenian-controlled part of Zangezur where the Armenian population was engaged in violent struggle with the Turkic minority and continued to reject the rule of Baku. At the end of September, the Azerbaijani army started an offensive against Zangezur. The battles continued until the end of October, but, despite heavy fighting, the Azerbaijani army had no success. During the winter of 1919–20 military activities ceased, but both Armenia and Azerbaijan were preparing for a renewed clash in the spring. Azerbaijan planned to prevail in Zangezur while Armenia intended to reclaim the Karabakh highlands.

In December 1919 the Armenian government secretly dispatched two emissaries to Karabakh to coordinate the activities of the local Armenians and prepare a rebellion. As the direct road from Armenia to Karabakh was impassable the emissaries traveled incognito via Tiflis and Ganja, arriving in Karabakh at the end of December 1919 (Hovannisian 1996a: 135). At the same time the governor-general of Karabakh was working towards the full integration of Karabakh within Azerbaijan. In February 1920 Sultanov decided to terminate the semi-autonomous status of Karabakh which had been established in August 1919. He requested the Armenian council summon the 8th Assembly in Shusha to discuss the full integration of Karabakh into Azerbaijan (ibid.: 143). Just before the Assembly gathered, an anti-Armenian riot in the village of Khankend [Stepanakert] claimed several hundred lives on February 22, after the body, thought to be of an Azerbaijani soldier, was discovered (ibid.: 142). In these circumstances, some Armenian delegates traveling to the 8th Assembly gathered in the nearby village of Shosh instead of proceeding to Shusha. Those delegates who reached Shusha became trapped there. As a result, two completely different resolutions were produced – the delegates in Shusha, under Sultanov's pressure, agreed on integration into Azerbaijan; while the delegates in Shosh under the leadership of Armenian emissaries rejected it (ibid.: 145).

At the same time, Azerbaijan was preparing for the spring campaign in Zangezur. On March 11–12, 90 railway trucks loaded with troops departed from Baku towards Zangezur (ibid.: 147–8). This became known to the leaders of the Karabakh Armenians, who eventually decided to start a long-planned rebellion. On the night of March 23 the rebels attacked Azerbaijani garrisons in Karabakh (ibid.: 152). However, because of poor coordination, the rebellion largely failed – only in one place did the rebels prevail and capture positions on the Askeran Pass, cutting the road between Agdam and Shusha (ibid.: 156–7).

Most importantly, the rebels failed to capture the town of Shusha. Reprisals were swift – on the morning of March 23 the Azerbaijani garrison and Turkic population of Shusha attacked and burned down the Armenian part of the town in a three-day *pogrom*.[8] The remaining pockets of resistance were crushed after

ten days of fighting when the Azerbaijani army broke through the Askeran Pass and marched into Shusha on April 4 (ibid.: 157).

The Armenian rebellion against Azerbaijani rule failed, but despite the disastrous outcome of the rebellion the Armenian units stationed in Zangezur, under the command of Dro,[9] marched to the Karabakh village of Tumi on April 13. In order to legitimize his activities Dro called a 9th Assembly of Karabakh Armenians on April 22, which authorized his actions against the Azerbaijani army. Dro started to mobilize local Armenians in preparation for a counter-offensive. Yet the decisive clash between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces was never to happen.

The sovietization of the South Caucasus

In April 1920 the history of the South Caucasus was to take another dramatic turn. By this time the Red Army had already defeated the forces of General Denikin and had approached the frontiers of Georgia and Azerbaijan. The Bolsheviks intended to capture oil-producing Baku and wanted to establish a direct link with the emerging Turkish nationalist movement of Mustafa Kemal in the heart of Anatolia. With the forthcoming sovietization of Azerbaijan the shortest route linking Soviet Russia with Kemalist forces in Turkey would be via the strategic Shusha-Angelaut-Nakhichevan road that traversed the disputed territories of Karabakh-Zangezur and Nakhichevan.

The sovietization of Azerbaijan (April 28, 1920)

While the Azerbaijani and Armenian forces were preparing for battle in Karabakh the situation was about to change dramatically. In the early hours of April 27 a Red Army armored train crossed the Samur River and steamed virtually unopposed towards Baku. The next morning the Azerbaijani *Revkom* proclaimed the establishment of Soviet authority in Azerbaijan, and in the following days further armored trains of the 11th Red Army swept through Azerbaijan declaring Soviet authority.

The mastermind of this impressive victory – Sergo Ordzhonikidze – was eager to proceed with further conquests. However, the takeover of Azerbaijan coincided with the start of the Polish offensive in Ukraine, forcing Moscow to put on hold the further sovietization of the South Caucasus and divert all resources to this new threat. Ordzhonikidze was categorically instructed to refrain, temporarily, from interfering in Georgian and Armenian affairs (Kvašonkin 1997: 168). Reluctantly he submitted to Moscow's orders.

However, the disputed nature of the Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan regions, and the absence of clear and recognized frontiers between Armenia and Azerbaijan, presented an opportunity for involvement without violating orders from Moscow. In this instance, the national interests of Azerbaijan coincided with the aims of Moscow. The Azerbaijani Bolsheviks had an opportunity to secure these disputed regions for Azerbaijan while attaining one of Moscow's important goals – the creation of a land corridor between Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey.

Sovietization of Karabakh (May 1920)

The proclamation of Soviet authority in Karabakh came from an unusual source – the governor-general of Karabakh: Khosrov bek Sultanov. On April 29 he proclaimed himself chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee of Red Karabakh and sent a telegram to the chairman of the Azerbaijani *Revkom* – Nariman Narimanov (Hovhannisian 1971: 160–1; Guliev 1989: 42–3). Sultanov was a large landowner closely associated with the local Musavatist government, the British, and before that with the Turks – an unlikely Bolshevik. In spite of this, his services were temporarily accepted in Baku.[10] Meanwhile, the commander of the Caucasian front, General Ivan Smilga, issued an order to occupy the strategic Shusha-Ordubad-Nakhichevan region on the pretext of ending the mutual Armenian Tatar massacres. On May 12 the Red Army units arrived in Shusha (Hovannisian 1996a: 195).

Once the Soviet units arrived in Shusha and the local Azerbaijani army garrison morphed into a Red Army unit, the head of the Azerbaijani *Revkom*, Nariman Narimanov, issued a decree liquidating the self-proclaimed *Revkom* of Sultanov – whose services were no longer needed.[11] Instead, Dadash Buniatzade was appointed as extraordinary commissar for Karabakh on May 14 (Hovhannisian 1971: 162). However, on May 18, while the 25 members of the newly created Karabakh *Revkom* made up of Armenian and Azerbaijani Bolsheviks were preparing to depart for Karabakh, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, accompanied by the 11th Army commander Levandovski and the Armenian Bolshevik Sahak Ter-Gabrielian, appeared in Shusha (Hovannisian 1996a: 196; Hovhannisian 1971: 164–5; Abrahamian 1991b: 43). This visit shows the importance that the Bolsheviks attributed to establishing contact with the Kemalists between Karabakh and Nakhichevan via Zangezur. Almost immediately after their arrival Sahak Ter-Gabrielian was sent to Dro's headquarters in Karabulag village, just 10 km away, to negotiate the withdrawal of Armenian units from Karabakh to Zangezur (Hovhannisian 1971: 164).

The arrival of the Red Army dramatically changed the mood of the local Armenian population, who had been expecting the restoration of Russian rule and the end of violence. The failed rebellion and destruction of the Armenian quarter of Shusha were now blamed on the emissaries from Erevan. In these circumstances, and clearly lacking popular support, Dro decided to comply with Bolshevik demands to withdraw (Ibid.: 166) and on May 25 his units retreated to Zangezur (Ibid.; Abrahamian 1991b: 44). With the Armenian nationalist forces withdrawing from Karabakh the local Armenian Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Sako Hambartsumian, appealed to the Armenian population to summon the 10th Congress of Karabakh Armenians (Hovhannisian 1971: 166). On May 26, in the village of Tahavard, the 10th Congress of Karabakh Armenians took place under Bolshevik leadership. At the Congress the establishment of Soviet authority in Karabakh was proclaimed for the third time. Congratulations were sent to Lenin and Narimanov (Ibid.: 167). With the sovietization of Karabakh and the departure of the national Armenian forces, Bolshevik involvement in Zangezur was just a matter of time.

The Bolshevik attempt to sovietize Zangezur (July–November 1920)

The unopposed takeover of Karabakh seemed to indicate that Zangezur could also be easily captured. However, several anti-Soviet rebellions in Azerbaijan forced the Bolsheviks to postpone the offensive against Zangezur.[12] Once the last rebellion was suppressed at the end of June, the Red Army chief of staff, Sergei Kamenev, ordered the Red Army to occupy the disputed regions of Karabakh, Zangezur, Nakhichevan, Julfa and Ordubad (Hovannisian 1996b: 67). Following his orders the Red Army crossed the River Akera/Hakaru and advanced towards Goris/Gerusy. The Armenian units offered little resistance and retreated; Dro and his men moved towards Daralagiaz, while Nzhdeh[13] moved towards his stronghold in southern Zangezur. The strategic road between Goris, Angelaut and Nakhichevan now lay open to the Bolsheviks (Ibid.: 67).

Despite this set-back, however, the Armenian forces tried to retake Zangezur. On July 31 Dro counter-attacked from Daralagiaz. During his swift advance he intercepted a Red Army unit transporting some of the gold the Bolsheviks gave in support of the Kemalist struggle. On August 3 Armenian forces entered Goris/Gerusy. The Bolsheviks retreated towards Karabakh having executed a number of imprisoned hostages.[14] On August 7 the Red Army started a counter-offensive from Karabakh, and by August 10 they had regained control of the road, pushing units under Dro's command into Daralagiaz and forcing Nzhdeh to retreat towards Katar Mines/Kapan once again (Ibid.: 88–9). Thus ended the first round of the standoff between the Armenian forces and the Red Army in Zangezur. On August 10 the Armenian government signed an agreement in Tiflis with the Bolshevik mission headed by Boris Legran, which acknowledged the existing status quo. According to the agreement the Armenian troops were to retreat from Zangezur, and the disputed districts of Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan were to be occupied by the Red Army – their future was to be decided later (see page 99) (Balikian and Evoian 1989: 122–3; Mikaelian 1992: 574–5).

Meanwhile, Nzhdeh was cut off in the southern part of Zangezur and neither wanted nor was able to retreat towards Armenia. With the Red Army now in control of most of Zangezur, General Nikifor Nesterovskii prepared to liquidate Nzhdeh's remaining Armenian forces. On August 31 the Red Army advanced from Goris/Gerusy and by September 6–7 it had captured Katar Mines. The loss of Katar Mines/Kapan pushed Nzhdeh into a remote mountainous district in the south of Zangezur. The Red Army together with their Turkish allies in Nakhichevan were now preparing for the final assault against Nzhdeh. The offensive started on September 21 from three directions – Ordubad, Nuvadi and Katar Mines/Kapan. Five days of fierce battle yielded no result and in the early days of October the Red Army renewed its offensive (Hovannisian 1996b: 113).

However, the situation was beginning to change for the Red Army. If in August the local Armenian population was favorably disposed towards it – expecting the return of the Russians to help re-establish law and order – after two months of Soviet rule the mood had changed. The Red Army commanders largely alienated the Armenian population, not only by the usual practices of

food and livestock requisitions, but also by employing a large number of Azerbaijani and Turkish troops in their operations against Nzhdeh.[15]

On October 10 Nzhdeh started a surprise rebellion behind enemy lines in Katar Mines/Kapan, capturing two infantry and one cavalry regiments of the Red Army. The rebellion quickly spread, finding support among the Armenian population. The desperate attempt of General Nesterovskii to save the situation by sending the 28th Rifle Division – reinforced by Azerbaijani infantry regiments, Muslim irregulars and Armenian Bolsheviks – also failed, and he was pushed towards Goris/Gerusy. By that time Dro, stationed in Daralagiaz, had joined the rebellion and advanced towards Angelaut.

The commander of the 11th Army urgently created a new strike force under General Petr Kuryshko to deal with the rebels. The new Red Army offensive began with the capture of several villages, but on November 6 Kuryshko's force was ambushed and suffered heavy losses (Hovannisian 1996b: 115–22). Towards the end of November the Red Army ceased its attempts to capture Zangezur and withdrew to Karabakh.

The sovietization of Armenia (April–December 1920)

The Bolshevik takeover of Azerbaijan presented a serious dilemma for the Armenian government. On the one hand, the Armenians were allied with anti-Bolshevik forces – the Entente powers and the Volunteer Army of General Denikin (Arslanian and Nichols 1979). On the other hand, the spread of Soviet power into the South Caucasus prompted the Armenian government to seek the establishment of a relationship with Moscow – the sworn enemy of its allies.

Reaching an agreement with Moscow was becoming paramount in view of the fact that the new Bolshevik government of Azerbaijan, now backed by the 11th Red Army, demanded the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the contested regions of Karabakh and Zangezur. Hardly two days had passed after the declaration of the sovietization of Azerbaijan when, on April 30, the Azerbaijani commissar of foreign affairs, Mirza Guseinov, sent an ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Karabakh and Zangezur (Guliev 1989a: 41). The following day this was backed by a telegram signed by Ordzhonikidzhe, Kirov, Konstantin Mekhonoshin and the 11th Army commander, Mikhail Levandovski, demanding that the Armenian government withdraw its troops from Azerbaijan (Ibid.). It was in this situation that an Armenian diplomatic mission was sent to Moscow at the end of April charged with the difficult task of securing Moscow's recognition of the Armenian borders – both in the Caucasus and in the Ottoman Empire (Armenian National Academy 2000: 198). Before the Armenian delegation reached Moscow the local Bolsheviks in Armenia, encouraged by the earlier sovietization of Azerbaijan, attempted an ill-prepared coup d'état, counting on the intervention of the 11th Red Army. The latter offered no meaningful support, constrained as it was by orders from Moscow forbidding intervention in Armenia and Georgia. The Armenian government, meanwhile, suppressed the rebellion of the local Bolsheviks, with its leader – Avis Nuridjanian – escaping to Azerbaijan.

The Armenian delegation had barely started negotiations in Moscow on May 28 when the delegation of the Turkish nationalist movement also appeared in Moscow hoping to find an ally in its struggle against the Entente (Hovannisian 1996b: 45–62). In these circumstances Moscow decided to delay signing a peace deal with Armenia, though without breaking off the negotiations. To gain time Moscow dispatched a diplomatic mission headed by Boris Legran to Armenia to establish diplomatic relations. A few weeks later Legran's mission arrived in Tiflis where it finally met with an Armenian delegation in early August. Eventually, on August 10, an agreement was reached that specified a line of delimitation between the Red Army and Armenia (Mikaelian 1992: 574–5).

Meanwhile, the Treaty of Sevres was signed in France on the same day as agreement was reached with the Bolsheviks. According to the Sevres treaty Armenia would receive large territories of the former Ottoman Empire, although they were devoid of the Armenian population which had perished in the genocide of 1915. But the emerging Turkish nationalist movement had no intention of submitting to the terms of the treaty and planned to defy the Allies. The best place to start their attack was to strike at the weakest link – the Republic of Armenia (Gökay 1996). Such an operation promised to boost the morale of the movement and establish vital communication with Soviet Russia as a potential ally.

At the end of September Turkish troops under the leadership of Kazim Karabekir Pasha started an offensive against Armenia. The Armenian army, demoralized by the Bolshevik propaganda and poor government, offered little resistance. By October 30 the fortress of Kars had fallen without a fight and the Turks advanced towards Alexandropol, which they also captured without much resistance in early November. Unable to oppose the Turkish advance the Armenian government sued for peace and started negotiations. In such circumstances the Red Army, which had previously been merely observing the Turkish advance, intervened to prevent what was left of Armenia from falling completely into the Turkish sphere of influence. On November 29 the Bolsheviks crossed from Kazakh into Dilijan and proclaimed Soviet authority. On December 2 the Armenian government handed authority to the newly arrived *Revkom*. Ironically the fall of the Armenian Republic coincided with the victory of Armenian forces in Zangezur.

Consolidating Bolshevik control: May 1920–July 1921

After the proclamation of Soviet order in Azerbaijan and Armenia the Bolsheviks continued to face numerous challenges on the ground. The overthrown local Musavatists and Dashnaks continued to enjoy wide grassroots support, that was only magnified by the ruthless policies of war communism implemented by the Red Army. Another constant source of annoyance for the Bolsheviks was the existence of the anti-Soviet Armenian forces in the mountains of Zangezur. In this section, below, I will examine developments in Karabakh, Armenia and Zangezur after the proclamation of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan (April 1920) and Armenia (December 1920).

Karabakh (May 1920–May 1921)

The year-long period between the proclamation of Soviet authority in Karabakh and the time when the Bolsheviks consolidated their grip on the region is very little researched. Nevertheless, it is apparent that there were political struggles between local Armenian communists and the leadership of the Azerbaijani Bolsheviks. Both sides continued to pursue their national goals, this time within the communist ideological framework.

Meanwhile, in Karabakh, where Soviet authority had been proclaimed several times by competing parties, two separate *Revkomy* were established. One, the Karabakh *Revkom*, headed by Bahatur Kasum ogly Velibekov, was appointed from Baku and was based in the town of Shusha. The other, called the *Revkom* of the Mountainous Karabakh, under the leadership of Sako Hambartsumian, was seated in the Armenian village of Tahavard (Hovhannisian 1971: 179–80). The difference in the names of these *Revkomy* is significant. The Karabakh *Revkom* aimed to represent the entire territory of Karabakh with its Armenian and Turkic populations; while the Mountainous Karabakh *Revkom* represented the Armenian population that were predominant in the mountains.

The existence of two *Revkomy* in Karabakh indicates that even though sovietization may have ended the large-scale violence, the old animosities and conflicts were far from being resolved. The Armenians and *Tyurks* had now to act within a new ideological framework in pursuit of their goals. If the Karabakh Armenian Bolsheviks tried to emphasize the Armenian-dominated part – the Mountainous Karabakh – then the leadership of Azerbaijan preferred to deal with the entire Karabakh region to de-emphasize the compactly settled Armenian population.

After the suppression of the anti-Bolshevik rebellion in Shusha in June 1920 the Azerbaijani leadership decided to address the awkward situation in which two *Revkomy* were claiming authority over overlapping territory. On June 16 the Mountainous Karabakh *Revkom* was ordered to move to Shusha and merge with the Karabakh *Revkom*. As compensation for the merger, the head of the Mountainous Karabakh *Revkom*, Sako Hambartsumian, was appointed head of the party committee in Shusha District (Hovhannisian 1971: 180). Thus, and without much opposition, the problem of a separate Armenian *Revkom* in the mountainous part of Karabakh was resolved.

Another pressing issue was the legitimization of Soviet authority. The Armenians were the first to secure popular approval for their *Revkom* when they held the 10th Congress of the Armenians of Karabakh immediately after the withdrawal of Dro's forces at the end of May. Lacking such a token of popular approval, and in order to secure formal support for the all-Karabakh *Revkom* and bring into political focus the entire Karabakh region rather than its Armenian dominated mountainous part, the Baku-appointed *Revkom* in Shusha organized a First All-Karabakh Villagers Congress. More than 500 representatives from the Mountainous (Armenian-dominated) and Lowland (Turkic-dominated) Karabakh gathered in Shusha on July 26. The Congress was opened by the extraordinary commissar for Karabakh, Dadash Buniatzade (Guliev 1989a: 60–1).

While the villagers' Congress was assembled to demonstrate the unity of Lowland with Mountainous Karabakh, the local Armenian Bolsheviks, at the party conference in Shusha on August 3, 1920, worked in a different direction and raised the question of regrouping together the Armenian populated parts of Karabakh into one administrative unit. The pretext was that the old administrative division that divided the mountainous part of Karabakh into separate districts was hindering political and social work among the Armenian population. After detailed discussion a resolution was passed asking the Azerbaijani Central Committee to join the Armenian districts of Karabakh into one administrative unit (Hovhannisian 1971: 218). This appeal apparently yielded the opposite result: not only was the all-Karabakh *Revkom* dissolved, the old administrative units – *uezdy* – were re-established (Shadunts 1922). Thus the Azerbaijani government fully incorporated Karabakh within its administrative structures.

Another blow to the local Armenian Bolsheviks came in October 1920 at a regional conference of the Azerbaijani Communist Party in Shusha.[16] The conference discussed measures against the *Kulaks* but also saw the removal of the former leader of the Mountainous Karabakh *Revkom*, Sako Hambartsumian, from the position of party secretary "due to moving to a new work-place." He was replaced by the Baku-appointed Surkhai Adigezalov (Hovhannisian 1971: 192–3).

In these ways the Azerbaijani and Armenian communists were engaged in political struggles in Karabakh during the summer of 1920. At the same time, the Armenian population, having become alienated from the Red Army, rose in rebellion and, by November 1920, had expelled Soviet troops from Zangezur. The Red Army's misfortunes in Zangezur had echoes in Karabakh as well. The population in Karabakh had initially welcomed the Bolsheviks and the Red Army, anticipating the end of ethnic violence. However, the policies of war communism, arrests and requisitions prepared the ground for rebellion there as well.

The rebellion in Karabakh, with evident support from Zangezur (Abrahamian 1991b: 57–60), was started by the former tsarist army officer Tevan Stepanian.[17] The rebels captured several villages in the southwestern part of Karabakh in mid-December. The center of the rebellion was Tevan's native village of Tum. By the end of December the rebellion had already spread to neighboring districts. The local Bolshevik units, without the support of the Red Army which was engaged in operations in Armenia and then in Georgia, were unable to offer any prolonged resistance and retreated. By February 1921 the entire southern part of Mountainous Karabakh was already in rebel hands. The Bolsheviks retreated towards the Turkic populated villages of Kariagino and Agdam and also held the strategic road between Agdam and Shusha. The situation changed only in the second half of March when two regiments of the 11th Red Army arrived to aid the local Bolsheviks. After more than a month of heavy fighting the Red Army was finally able to suppress the rebellion on April 19, 1921 (Hovhannisian 1971: 201–13). The rebels then retreated towards Zangezur – the last remaining center of anti-Soviet resistance.

The sovietization of Azerbaijan put the local Armenian Bolsheviks in Karabakh in a complicated situation. First, the Bolshevik movement had never been strong among local Armenians and as a result they lacked popular support. Unlike Armenian Bolsheviks from other parts of the empire, the Armenian Bolsheviks from Karabakh were not prominent party members and had few connections and little influence within the Bolshevik Party. In their political struggles with the Azerbaijani leadership they received no external support – the Republic of Armenia was in the hands of the anti-Bolshevik forces of the Dashnaks – while Armenian Bolsheviks in Baku were represented by those who fled Dashnak Armenia after the failed rebellion of May 1920. Most of them held a deep-seated grudge against the Dashnaks and consequently worked against the national interests of Armenia. In this situation it is not surprising that in Karabakh the Armenian Bolsheviks largely failed to make any political gains in their political struggle with Azerbaijan.

Soviet Armenia (December 1920–May 1921)

Despite the bloodless sovietization of Armenia in December 1920 the Bolshevik *Revkom* lacked popular support. The only reason the Bolsheviks came to power was the military defeat of the Republic of Armenia at the hands of Kemalist forces that made the Bolsheviks appear to be the lesser evil in the circumstances. At the same time their deposed political adversaries – the Dashnaks – still enjoyed grassroots support. It seems that the Bolshevik leaders in the *Kavburo*, and in particular Sergo Ordzhonikidze, were aware of the precarious position of the Armenian *Revkom* and sought measures to secure some political legitimacy for Soviet power there. It is in this context that one should evaluate the following curious exchange of declarations between Armenia and Azerbaijan that took place on the eve of the sovietization of Armenia.

On November 30, 1920, at the session of the Azerbaijani *Politburo* in the presence of Ordzhonikidze, Narimanov was commissioned to prepare a declaration of the *AzRevkom* to Soviet Armenia stating that Zangezur and Nakhichevan were being ceded to Armenia and the mountainous part of Karabakh given the right of self-determination (Kharmandarian 1969: 99). The next day, at the session of the Baku Soviet, the declaration was read and subsequently published.[18] This abandonment of Azerbaijani claims on the disputed territories was most likely forced out of Narimanov by Ordzhonikidze to ensure a smooth transfer of power in Armenia. Towards the end of the month, on December 28, the Armenian *Revkom* issued a similar proclamation declaring that the population of Nakhichevan was also to be given the right of self-determination.[19] The sincerity of these declarations is doubtful; they were intended primarily as propaganda moves. There can be little doubt that Narimanov had no intention of giving up claims over these disputed territories, just as the Armenians would not voluntarily renounce their claim on Nakhichevan. These declarations primarily reflected the political needs of the *Kavburo* to secure Bolshevik control rather than any genuine intention on the part of the Azerbaijani or Armenian leaders.

Meanwhile, in Erevan, the Armenian *Revkom* pursued policies that were sure to undermine whatever feeble support they might have had among the populations concerned. Among the first measures of the *Revkom* were decrees against speculation and counter-revolution, followed by the creation of the *ChKa* – which almost immediately set about executing its political opponents. With total disregard for the dire economic situation in a country ravaged by war, the Bolshevik administration started to confiscate livestock and food from the peasants (Hovannisian 1996b: 404–5). Such overzealous policies, implemented with unwarranted confidence, undermined popular support and alienated the population. On February 18, 1921 the population rose in rebellion under the leadership of the deposed but still omnipresent Dashnak Party. The rebels profited from the fact that most of the Russian Red Army troops had departed to impose Soviet rule on Georgia, while the local Armenian Red Army units sided with the rebels. The Soviet *Revkom* escaped to the Turkic populated part of Sharur-Daralagiaz *uezd* near Nakhichevan, while the rebels captured the capital of Erevan where they created a salvation committee and tried to secure international support. Without external support, however, the rebellion had no chance of withstanding the Red Army. Once the sovietization of Georgia was accomplished the Russian troops returned and suppressed the rebellion in early April 1921. The rebels, together with numerous refugees, retreated towards Zangezur.

The difficulties and set-backs encountered by the Bolsheviks in the Caucasus, and especially the latest anti-Soviet rebellion in Armenia, demonstrated to Moscow that a policy change was required. On March 23, by decision of Moscow, a more moderate and experienced Bolshevik of Armenian origin – Alexander Myasnikov (Myasnikian) – was appointed to head the Armenian *Revkom*, while several of the members of the old *Revkom* were recalled from Armenia (Kharmandarian 1969: 80). On April 14, 1921 Lenin wrote a letter "To the Comrade Communists of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Daghestan, and the Mountaineer Republic" which signaled a radical change of policy. There, he called for the use of different tactics:

> You will need to practice more moderation and caution, and show more readiness to make concessions to the petty bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, and particularly the peasantry.
>
> What the Republics of the Caucasus can and must do, as distinct from the R.S.F.S.R., is to effect a slower, more cautious and more systematic transition to socialism. That is what you must understand, and what you must be able to carry out, as distinct from our own tactics.
>
> (Lenin 1965: 316–18)

The letter was delivered to Tiflis by Myasnikov, who arrived there on his way to Armenia on May 4, 1921. On arrival he was immediately confronted by two pressing issues: the rebels in Zangezur and the question of Mountainous Karabakh.

Zangezur (December 1920–July 1921)

The fall of the Armenian Republic in early December 1920 created some confusion with regard to the political status of Zangezur. While the Armenians of Zangezur still aspired to be part of the Armenian Republic they had no intention of joining a Soviet Armenia. The brief experience of Bolshevik rule in the summer of 1920, and the subsequent expulsion of the Red Army, had made them wary of Soviet Armenia.

Nevertheless, the new Bolshevik rulers of Armenia tried to persuade the leaders of Zangezur to join Soviet Armenia. On December 16, 1920, a member of the Armenian *Revkom*, Avis Nuridjanian, sent an appeal to Zangezur offering to submit to Soviet authority since Azerbaijan had given the disputed territories of Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan to Armenia (Abrahamian 1991a: 11). The Bolshevik appeals were, however, rejected and on December 25, 1920, at the monastery of Tatev, the local council proclaimed the creation of an Autonomous Syunik (*Inknavar Syunik*).[20]

On January 21 the Bolsheviks once again attempted to convince Nzhdeh in Zangezur to accept Soviet rule. A five-member delegation from Armenia arrived in Goris/Gerusy bringing a letter from Dro and commanders of the 11th Red Army[21] in which it was argued that "Zangezur's non-recognition of Soviet Armenia was preventing the solution of the question of Nakhichevan, Sharur, and Daralagiaz," and expressed a hope that

> Zangezur and its leaders would put an end to their politics and will join their motherland – Armenia – in order to prove in the negotiations with the Turks in Moscow that Soviet Russia would defend the gains of the Armenian workers.
>
> (Abrahamian 1991a: 12)

This offer of submission was likewise rejected.

Meanwhile, contact with the Bolsheviks was interrupted when the anti-Soviet rebellion started in Armenia in mid-February. The rebellion was suppressed in early April and its leaders, together with refugees and the defecting Armenian Red Army troops, retreated towards Zangezur. In these new circumstances the leadership of Autonomous Syunik called another popular assembly at Tatev and proclaimed The Republic of Mountainous Armenia (*Lernahaiastan*) on April 26, 1921. The change of name is significant as the political affiliation of Autonomous Syunik was not clear, while the new name now clearly challenged the authority of the Soviet Armenian Republic.

After suppressing the rebellion in Armenia, the new and more moderate government of Soviet Armenia, under the leadership of Alexander Myasnikov, once again attempted to negotiate with the rebels in Zangezur and dispatched a two-member delegation headed by the commissar of internal affairs – Artashes Karinian.[22] The two delegations met on May 12 in the village of Halajukh/Kaladzhik [Spandarian] in Zangezur. After a day of exchanges the

positions of each side became clear – in exchange for accepting Soviet rule the Bolsheviks offered a number of important concessions, among them amnesty to the rebels and promises of non-resumption of the summer Turkic nomad migrations. The Bolshevik offer was transmitted to the government of Mountainous Armenia,[23] and on May 15 their response arrived. To the main question of submitting to Soviet authority it responded that this was outside its jurisdiction and such questions "ought to be decided by the people for which [purpose] an assembly of Mountainous Armenia will be called where this question will be considered."[24] A two-week delay was also requested to call the popular assembly.

It was clear that the government of Mountainous Armenia was trying to win time and was not likely to surrender power to the Bolsheviks. At the same time, the continued existence of the defiant Republic of Mountainous Armenia after the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia and Georgia was beginning to look embarrassing for the Bolshevik leadership. To address this annoying situation with Zangezur a session of the *Kavburo* was called on June 3, 1921, at which a resolution was adopted calling for the suppression of the Zangezur rebellion:

1 To liquidate Zangezur [rebellion] at the end of June.
2 To start preparing for military operations immediately.
3 Concurrently with the [military] preparations the government of [Soviet] Armenia is to dispatch its declaration in response to the announcement of the representatives of the Zangezur government.
4 Together with the dispatch of the declaration to take measures for immediate occupation of Megri.
5 In the declaration of the [Soviet] Armenian government to indicate that Nagorno Karabakh belongs to Armenia.
6 [In the period] between the presentation of the declaration and the start of military activities the Georgian and Azerbaijani governments are to send their representatives for mediation.
7 To liquidate the Zangezur [rebellion] along with the Kurdistan [rebellion].

(Barsegov 2003: 504)

While the negotiations between Bolshevik Armenia and the rebel forces in Zangezur were not officially broken off, the Red Army command, in accordance with the *Kavburo* decision, started preparing for the offensive against Zangezur. Learning from their experience of summer 1920, the Bolsheviks decided that the offensive was to be conducted mostly by Armenian units of the Red Army. The start of operations was scheduled for June 25 (Arutyunyan 1978: 152, 154). As part of the operation against Zangezur, on June 13 the Soviet Armenian government prepared an appeal to the "Authorities of Zangezur" in which it repeated and extended promises made by the delegation of Karinian in May. The appeal, signed by Myasnikian and members of the

Soviet Armenian government, was printed as a leaflet to be used as propaganda for the population of Zangezur.[25]

However, the rebels, apparently learning of the Bolshevik preparations, launched a pre-emptive attack on June 15 and quickly pushed out the Armenian Red Army troops, capturing the entire Daralagiaz District (Arutyunyan 1978: 155). The commander of the 11th Red Army, Mikhail Velikanov, ordered the transfer of Russian Red Army troops to suppress the rebellion (Ibid.: 156). The Red Army started its counter-attack at the end of June. After a week of fighting the rebels were pushed from Daralagiaz and the Red Army approached Zangezur. On June 30 Bolshevik forces entered Sisian and started to advance towards Goris, which was captured on July 2 (Kadishev 1960: 430–1). A few days later the Red Army entered the strongholds of Tatev and finally Katar/Kapan on July 7.[26] As in the summer of 1921, the rebels retreated to the southernmost corner of Zangezur around Megri. Seeing the futility of further struggle the government of Mountainous Armenia decided to leave Zangezur and crossed into Iran on July 15, 1921.

The Bolsheviks solve the conflicts (May–July 1921)

With the fall of Georgia – the last remaining independent republic of the South Caucasus – and the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish Treaty on March 16, 1921, the Bolsheviks established the external frontier of the South Caucasian states. There remained, however, the immensely difficult task of resolving the question of frontiers between the "fraternal" Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. To solve the internal boundary question the *Kavburo* decided to create a border commission made up of representatives of all three Soviet republics under the chairmanship of Kirov on May 2, 1921 (Kharmandarian 1969: 101). The commission was to start its sessions later in June. It is significant that three years after the proclamation of independence the boundaries between the three Caucasian states were still to be defined.

Even before the boundary commission had assembled the question of Karabakh had received earlier consideration owing to difficulties the Bolshevik authorities had encountered in Zangezur. At that time Zangezur was still controlled by the Nzhdeh and Dashnak units that had escaped after the suppression of the February rebellion in Armenia. This was a source of extreme annoyance to the Bolsheviks, given the heavy casualties they had sustained there in the fall of 1920. This made them keen to bring the region within Soviet power, though without actually having to conquer it.

On May 23, 1921, the Plenum of the Armenian *TsKa KPA* discussed a number of questions relating to the situation in Zangezur and Karabakh, among which the interesting decision was taken "to appoint comrade Akop Ioannisyan as representative of SSRA in Nagorno Karabakh and to summon him from Baku to Tiflis by telegram to receive directions and instructions from comrade Bekzadyan."[27] This decision to appoint the Armenian representative to Karabakh is quite surprising. It does not seem likely that the Armenian *TsKa* was acting on

Narimanov's renunciation of his claim from December 1920. It is also unlikely that this was a purely local initiative taken at their own risk given that another point of the same resolution called for the urgent postponement of the publication of the notes "until clarification of the Nagorno Karabakh question at the forthcoming plenum of *Kavburo*." This shows that the Armenian *TsKa* was unlikely to act without *Kavburo* approval. It therefore seems that the Armenian leadership was receiving hints from the *Kavburo* about the intended resolution of the Karabakh question.

Meanwhile, ten days later, the Plenum of *Kavburo* took place on June 3, 1921, in the presence of Ordzhonikidze, Narimanov, Myasnikyan and others. The main subject of discussion was the situation in Zangezur. A resolution was adopted calling for a quick suppression of the Zangezur group. In point five of that resolution it was stated that the Armenian government should declare that Nagorno Karabakh was part of Armenia (see page 105) (Barsegov 2003: 504).[28] As soon as the *Kavburo* decision became known in Armenia some members of the Armenian *TsKa* tried to dispatch a representative to Karabakh as early as June 6, but it was decided to postpone this until Myasnikov's return.[29]

Nine days later – on June 12 – and in accordance with the aforementioned *Kavburo* resolution on the Zangezur question, the Soviet Armenian government adopted a short decree signed by Alexander Myasnikian stating that, according to the agreement between the *Revkomy* of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh was now an inalienable part of Armenia.[30] It was later published as a leaflet in three languages – Armenian, Russian and Turkic.

On June 15 the Armenian *TsKa* finally decided to act on the *Kavburo* decision of June 3. It decided "to publish the declaration on the joining of Nagorno Karabakh to Soviet Armenia" and ordered the sending to Karabakh of "comrade Mravian together with a group of comrades – Pirumov, Akop Ioannisian, Ter-Simonian and others."[31] Four days later the decree was published in an Armenian newspaper, *Khorhrdayin Hayastan*,[32] and a few days later the same decree was published in the Azerbaijani party organ, *Bakinskii Rabochii* (Khurshudyan 1989: 32).

In preparation for sending a representative to Mountainous Karabakh, the official stamp of the Armenian extraordinary commissar for Karabakh was ordered in Tiflis on June 18 (Kazandzhian 1997: 42) and a few days later Askanaz Mravian was finally appointed as extraordinary commissar (Kharmandarian 1969: 102). Mravian's departure to Karabakh via Tiflis coincided with the beginning of the *Kavburo*-sponsored conference between the three republics to solve the question of boundaries between them. The Red Army's operation against Zangezur also began during those days. During his stay in Tiflis, Mravian had a meeting with Ordzhonikidze and some members of the Azerbaijani *Revkom* – Gadzhiev (chairman of *TsIK*), Guseinov (commissar of foreign affairs) and Aligeidar Karaev (military commissar) – after which he departed for Karabakh accompanied by Karaev on the morning of June 25 (Ibid.: 102).

Meanwhile the border commission, under Kirov's chairmanship, eventually convened in Tiflis on June 25. The representatives of Georgia (Svanidze and

Todriya); Azerbaijan (Guseinov, Gadzhinskii and Rasulzade) and Armenia (Aleksandr Bekzadyan) met to solve the question of internal boundaries between the three republics. However, it immediately became clear that the representatives of the republics were unable to find a solution due to their uncompromising positions. Already at the first meeting the Armenian representative demanded territorial adjustments in those districts with an Armenian majority – the Akhalkalak *uezd* of Georgia and the mountainous part of Karabakh – while the representatives of Georgia and Azerbaijan categorically rejected such a proposal on the grounds of the necessity to struggle with their own internal nationalist opposition. They also could not agree on the border in the Karayaz steppe region. The inability to find a solution to the boundary question, and the heated nature of discussions, prompted the presence of Ordzhonikidze and other members of *Kavburo* during the next session. The uncompromising stand of the Azerbaijani delegation during the session on June 25 prompted Ordzhonikidze and Kirov to send an urgent telegram to Narimanov the next morning:

> The interruption of negotiations on the establishment of a boundary with Armenia, given the existing situation in Zangezur, will make quite a negative impression. Therefore, the departure of [foreign commissar] Guseinov is postponed until June 27. We ask [you] to convoke at once the *Politburo* [of *TsKa* Azerbaijani Communist Party], *Sovnarkom* and solve the question of Karabakh so that tomorrow on June 27 the negotiations can be finalized. If you want [to know] our opinion, then it is as follows: in order to resolve all the frictions and to establish truly friendly relations when solving the question of Nagornyi Karabakh it is necessary to be guided by the following principle: not a single Armenian village should be attached to Azerbaijan, equally not a single Muslim village should be attached to Armenia.
>
> (Kharmandarian 1969: 103; Barsegov 2008: 635)

The advice given by Ordzhonikidze and Kirov to Narimanov in their telegram was a thinly veiled demand to renounce Azerbaijani claims to the Armenian populated parts of Karabakh so that the question of boundaries could be concluded without further delay.

At the same time, the Azerbaijani authorities in Baku were alarmed by developments affecting the question of Karabakh. The telegram from Ordzhonikidze and Kirov requiring Azerbaijan to renounce, once again, its claims on the mountainous part of Karabakh, and the dispatch of the Armenian extraordinary commissar for Karabakh, were extremely worrying signs. The Azerbaijani government realized that if such a commissar established himself in Karabakh then the Armenian claim there would become much stronger and the outcome might not be favorable to Azerbaijan. As a result, Narimanov and the Azerbaijani government immediately took energetic measures to neutralize such a possibility.

On June 26 – the same day the telegram from Ordzhonikidze and Kirov was received in Baku, and Karaev brought news that the Armenian commissar for

Karabakh, Askanaz Mravian, was on his way to Karabakh – the Azerbaijani *Politburo* and *Sovnarkom* assembled. The Azerbaijani Bolsheviks took a bold stand and decided to ignore the "advice" of Ordzhonikidze and Kirov by voting against attaching the mountainous part of Karabakh to Armenia. In order to avoid accusations of nationalism their formal justification was that economic ties and administrative efficacy should prevail over ethnic principles (Kharmandarian 1969: 103). At the same time several telegrams were also sent to the *Kavburo* in Tiflis and to the Armenian government in Erevan demanding that the powers of the Armenian extraordinary commissar for Karabakh be canceled and Mravian be recalled from Karabakh (Barsegov 2008: 637–8).

The Azerbaijani foreign commissar, Guseinov, delivered Baku's response on the question of Karabakh to the *Kavburo* and the border commission the very next day, on June 27. It became clear that resolution of the boundary question could not be reached and the representative of Soviet Armenia, Bekzadian, asked for the matter to be decided upon by the *Kavburo* (Kharmandarian 1969: 102). The presidium of the *Kavburo*, in turn, decided to call an extraordinary session of the *Kavburo* and summoned Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders – Myasnikian and Narimanov – to Tiflis (Mikaelian 1992: 645).

Thus, thanks to the daring and timely actions of Nariman Narimanov, the Azerbaijani government succeeded in postponing the final resolution of the Karabakh question and preserved the existing status quo. Invaluable time was won which most likely decided the final outcome of this territorial dispute in favor of Azerbaijan. In order to understand why winning time was crucial for sealing the outcome of the territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan one has to turn to events in Zangezur.

The developments in Zangezur in late June and early July were another intervening factor in deciding the question of Karabakh. As noted earlier, the two instances of Azerbaijan's renunciation of its claim to Karabakh took place under pressure from Ordzhonikidze and the *Kavburo* to facilitate, at first, the sovietization of Armenia, and then the capture of Zangezur.

Zangezur was a source of constant annoyance to the Bolsheviks. They had suffered a humiliating defeat there in October–November 1920; it was there also that the Dashnak rebels had retreated after the suppression of the February rebellion in Armenia; and finally it was there that Garegin Nzhdeh had proclaimed the Republic of Mountainous Armenia. It was in this context that the Bolsheviks were prepared to grant the Armenian populated part of Karabakh to Armenia to ease the sovietization of Zangezur and avoid costly battles.

The start of Red Army operations against the rebels in Zangezur coincided with the sessions of the border commission in Tiflis and the decision of the Armenian Bolsheviks to appoint a representative in Karabakh. The Red Army offensive was successful and in the early days of July it had already captured Goris/Gerusy and, a few days later, the stronghold of Nzhdeh – Katar Mines/Kapan. Thus practically all of Zangezur was now under Soviet control except for its southernmost part around Megri. With Zangezur rapidly becoming sovietized, and the resulting disappearance of the very reason for the Azerbaijani

renunciation of its claim on Karabakh, the Azerbaijani leadership gained a window of opportunity to avoid making good on its earlier decision to grant the mountainous part of Karabakh to Armenia.

Meanwhile, in Tiflis the general plenum of the *Kavburo* together with representatives of the three Caucasian republics, the military, and other party functionaries, assembled to discuss the current situation in the South Caucasus on July 2–3. Thereafter, on the evening of July 4, the plenum of the *Kavburo*, together with Stalin (who was not a member of the *Kavburo* and did not vote), met to decide the disputed question of Karabakh. During the discussion two competing projects emerged and were put to the vote.

On the one hand, was the question of a referendum – whether to conduct one in the entire Karabakh (the mountainous part and the lowlands) or to conduct it only in the mountainous part (the Armenian dominated area) – or on the other hand, whether to leave all of Karabakh within Azerbaijan or to include its mountainous part in Armenia. The proposals were grouped as follows (Kazandzhian 1997: 42–3):[33]

The voting turned against Azerbaijan. Not only did the majority of *Kavburo* members vote for the inclusion of the mountainous part of Karabakh in Armenia, they also rejected the idea of conducting the referendum in all of Karabakh, the outcome of which might have been in favor of Azerbaijan. In this desperate situation Narimanov resorted to the last remaining option – he appealed for the question to be decided by *TsKa RKP(b)* due to its importance for Azerbaijan. The *Kavburo* acceded to his request and decided to defer the question to Moscow.

Table 4.1 *Kavburo* projects and voting breakdown on the question of Karabakh (July 4, 1921)

Project I		*Project II*	
Proposal:	*Voting:*	*Proposal:*	*Voting:*
To leave [entire] Karabakh within Azerbaijan	For: Narimanov, Makharadze, Nazaretian Against: Ordzhonikidze, Myasnikov, Kirov, Figatner	To include the mountainous part of Karabakh within Armenia	For: Ordzhonikidze, Myasnikov, Figatner, Kirov
To conduct a referendum in the entire Karabakh among the whole population of Armenians and Muslims	For: Narimanov, Makharadze	To conduct a referendum only in Mountainous Karabakh, i.e. among Armenians	For: Ordzhonikidze, Myasnikov, Figatner, Kirov, Nazaretian

One of the most puzzling decisions was taken the next day. On July 5 at another session of the *Kavburo*, Ordzhonikidze and Amayak Nazaretian, the *Kavburo* secretary, and a member of Georgian *Revkom*, proposed to revise the previous day's decision to solve the Karabakh question in Moscow. With little disagreement the previous decision was revoked and a new one adopted. This called first, on the grounds of "the need for national peace between Muslims and Armenians and [the existing] economic ties between upper and lower Karabakh, [and] its permanent link with Azerbaijan," for Nagorno Karabakh to be left "within the ASSR while granting it a wide regional autonomy in the town of Shusha," which was also included in the autonomous region; and second, for the commission of the *TsKa* of the Azerbaijani Communist Party "to determine the boundaries of the autonomous region and submit them for *Kavburo* approval" (Guliev 1989: 92).

This *Kavburo* decision put a formal end to the political part of the problem – the disputed status of the region – by eventually deciding to preserve Azerbaijani control over it. However, the reason for such a dramatic change of opinion remains unclear. Some authors explain this sudden change of mood among *Kavburo* members by reference to the influence of Stalin who, having considered all the circumstances after the evening session on July 4, must have expressed his opinion (Kharmandarian 1969: 108). If Stalin indeed influenced the *Kavburo* decision on July 5 then what were the new circumstances that emerged during the night of July 4–5? In my opinion the most likely development was news that the Red Army had practically completed the conquest of Zangezur. With almost all of Zangezur in Soviet hands the very reason why the Bolsheviks were prepared to grant the mountainous part of Karabakh to Armenia had disappeared. Given the stubborn and energetic behavior of Narimanov, which sharply contrasted with the slow and half-hearted responses of the Armenian Bolsheviks, it is of little surprise that the *Kavburo* decided to leave things as they were – preserving the existing status quo.

Notes

1 In 1886 the tsarist authorities compiled detailed "posemeinye spiski naseleniia Zakavkaz'ia" and in 1897 the first population census of the Russian Empire took place.
2 Article 3 of the Batum Treaty stipulated that when the borders between the three new states were decided they would be added to the Treaty of Batum. At the invitation of the Turkish government, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia sent representatives to a conference in Constantinople/Istanbul that was intended to decide upon the question of borders. However, the conference never took place.
3 It was only in March 1919 that the Armenian government started discussing the possibility of building at least an unpaved road linking Daralagiaz with Zangezur (Keshishkend-Gerger-Gndevaz traversing Kochbek Pass-Bazarchai-Angelaut (Mikaelian 1992: 143–4).
4 Khosrov Bek Sultanov was a large landowner of Kurdish origin whose family was based around the village Pichanis.
5 The British also instructed the Erevan government to occupy Nakhivhevan Province in May 1919, despite the fact that the Turkic population had been predominant there

even before the war, and in 1919, after the expulsion of the Armenians, it constituted an overwhelming majority (Barsegov 2008: 339–40).

6 ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 61, pp. 1–4, "Letter of the Government of the Mountainous Armenia to the Representatives of the Soviet Armenia," typed original, translated from Armenian, p. 1 back.

7 "Provisional Accord between the VII Armenian Council of Karabakh with the Government of Azerbaijan" – Russian text is available in Mikaelian (1992: 323–7) and an English translation is available in Hovannisian (1971: 186–7).

8 The town of Shusha never recovered from the destruction of March 1920. In 1886 the total population of Shusha was 26,806 (15,188 Armenians and 11,595 Tatars) and according to the 1897 census Shusha had 25,881 inhabitants (14,436 Armenians and 10,785 Tatars) (Troitskii 1904: 78–9), but in 1926 the population was only 5,104 with just 93 Armenians remaining in the town (TsSU 1929: 79). In 1959 the town had a population of only 6,117 (Itogi 1963: 15).

9 Dro-Drastamat Kananian was one of the commanders of Armenian volunteer units of the Russian Army during the First World War. In the period 1918–20 he was military commander of Armenian forces. After the sovietization of Armenia in 1920 he briefly collaborated with the Bolsheviks, but later emigrated.

10 This can be seen from the fact that the *Kommunist* newspaper, published in Baku, was publishing his telegrams and reports.

11 Sultanov was initially arrested and brought to Baku, but eventually was released and allowed to emigrate to Iran.

12 The anti-Bolshevik revolt started in Ganja on the night of May 24–25. The Red Army units stationed in Shusha were sent to suppress it, leaving behind the former Musavatist regiment that had recently changed sides. However, on June 4 the officers and soldiers of this regiment started a rebellion which lasted for about a week until the Red Army, after suppressing a rebellion in Ganja, once again entered Shusha on June 13. The leaders of the Shusha rebellion escaped to Persia. A further rebellion in Zakatala on June 9 was suppressed by June 20 (Karmandarian 1969: 42–3).

13 Nzhdeh (Garegin Ter-Harutiunian) was a Bulgarian officer of Armenian origin who had participated in the Balkan wars. During the First World War he was commander of the Volunteer Armenian Battalion of the Russian Army. In 1919 he was sent to Zangezur by the Armenian government to oversee military preparations. After sovietization he emigrated and settled in Bulgaria, where he was arrested by the NKVD in 1944. He died in a Soviet prison in 1955.

14 ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 61, pp. 5–16 "Protocols [of] the meetings [between] Government of Mountainous Armenia and Soviet Armenian Government official representatives." Page 6 mentions 87 hostages executed by machine guns by the retreating Red Army.

15 See *Kommunist* (Baku, Armenian language version), November 29, 1920, No. 160, report on the operations of a Turkish Red Regiment in Zangezur since October 1920; ANA, fund 114, register 2, file 70, p. 21 "To the Commander of Syunik. Complaint of Armenian women from Goris and surrounding districts."

16 *Kommunist* (Baku, in the Armenian language), October 22, 1920, No. 129.

17 After the sovietization of Zangezur, Tevan Stepanian emigrated to Persia and settled in Tabriz. In 1941, when Soviet troops entered Iran, he was captured by the NKVD and subsequently executed in Baku.

18 *Kommunist* (Russian language, Baku), No. 178, December 2, 1920; *Pravda*, No. 273, December 4, 1920. It should be noted that at the time three newspapers called *Kommunist* were printed in the South Caucasus – two were published in Baku in Russian and Armenian, and one was published in Yerevan in Armenian. This often leads to confusion since most secondary sources do not specify precisely which newspaper is quoted. In this article I differentiate between different newspapers with the same name by noting the place and language of publication.

19 *Kommunist* (Erevan, Armenian language), December 28, 1920.
20 ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 61, p. 6 back.
21 ANA, fund 114, register 2, file 70, pp. 35–9, "Report of the Armenian Bolshevik Delegation to Zangezur." Typed original.
22 The delegation left Erevan on May 1 and arrived in the frontline village of Gerger on May 3, and on the same day it established contact with the forces of Mountainous Armenia stationed in the nearby village of Gndevaz.
23 ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 61, pp. 5–16, "Protocols [of] the meetings [between] Government of Mountainous Armenia and Soviet Armenian Government official representatives." Typed original, translated from Armenian.
24 "[From the Government of Mountainous Armenia] To the representatives of the government of the Soviet Armenia comrade A. Karinian and Russian Red Army comrade V. Mel'nikov, May 15, 1921." ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 61, pp. 1–4, p. 3 back.
25 Armenian SSR, "Announcement of the Council of the People's Commissars. To the Authorities of Zangezur. June 13, 1921." ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 61, p. 26. Original printed leaflet, translated from Armenian.
26 *Khorhrdayin Hayastan*, July 13, 1921, No. 125.
27 "Protokol No. 4. Zasedanie Prezidiuma TsKa KPA ot 23 Maya 1921 g.' ANA, fund 1, register 1, file 39, p. 5.
28 In my opinion, the *Kavburo* resolution concerning Nagorno Karabakh was primarily intended to smooth the process of the sovietization of Zangezur and had only a secondary intention of solving the territorial question. Two facts seem to corroborate this opinion. At that time the Bolsheviks were conducting negotiations with the Dashnaks in Zangezur for the peaceful transfer of the region to the Soviet authorities (the Bolshevik delegation, headed by the commissar of internal affairs and a representative of the 11th Army, met with representatives of Mountainous Armenia on May 12, 1921 (Abrahamian 1991a, p. 13). It seems clear that the *Kavburo*'s resolution was intended primarily as propaganda to facilitate the transfer. It should also be noted that the resolution on Karabakh was only one of the points of a broader resolution dealing with the Zangezur question. Despite that, some Armenian authors (Khurshudian 1989: 31; Galoian and Khudaverdian 1988: 30) tend to view point five of the resolution outside of the context of the whole resolution, and as evidence of a the true granting of Karabakh to Armenia.
29 "Protokol No. 8. Zasedaniya TsKa KPA ot 6-go iyunia s/g [1921]." ANA, fund 1, register 1, file 39, p. 9.
30 ANA, fund 1022, register 2, file 197, pp. 1, 2.
31 ANA of Political Parties, fund 1, register, 1, file 39, p. 10 back. "Protokol No. 10. Zasedaniia TsKa KPA ot 15/VI 21g."
32 *Khorhrdaiyn Hayastan*, June 19, 1921.
33 In the original document the proposals are presented as continued text. In order to highlight the differences and make a comparison of the projects easier I have reorganized them according to the discussed proposals and outcome of voting.

5 Towards Karabakh autonomy (1921–25)

Most writers dealing with the question of Karabakh autonomy conclude their investigation with the dramatic events of the night of July 4 and the morning of July 5, 1921. Sure enough, the complete overnight reversal of the decision taken by *Kavburo* members, as well as enigmatic presence of the future Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, are seen as a spectacular culmination of the long struggle between Armenia and Azerbaijan for control of this disputed land. What remains overlooked is that this decision signified the end of one process, the open political dispute – but at the same time the beginning of another process, that of granting autonomy. Usually the story is fast forwarded to July 7, 1923, when the creation of autonomy was announced in *Bakinskii Rabochii* newspaper. What remains unclear is why it took two years to officially declare the autonomy? This is especially striking when compared with South Ossetia (whose autonomy was declared in April 1922) and Abkhazia (which received SSR status in March 1921). What was happening on the ground during the course of these two years? What were the positions of the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijani SSR towards the Karabakh autonomy during this period? And finally, what was the nature of the autonomy declared in July 1923? This chapter looks at the process of implementing the *Kavburo* decision to grant autonomy to the Armenian populated part of Karabakh. I attempt to understand and explain the reasons for the delay of the creation of autonomy, the positions of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the central authorities during this period, as well as the nature of the autonomy declared in July 1923.

Soon after the *Kavburo*'s decision on the Karabakh question a telephone conversation took place between Myasnikyan and Ordzhonokidze on July 21. The Armenian leader assured Ordzhonokidze that: "The [*Kavburo* decision on] the Karabakh question was received with dignity and loyally [sic],"[1] yet despite these assurances the Armenian leadership remained disgruntled. A few days earlier, on July 16, the *TsKa KPA* had adopted a resolution stating that the question was not to be decided by the Caucasian bureau and that the *Kavburo* decision on the Karabakh question was unsatisfactory; and it called for new proposals on the issue of autonomy.[2] At the same time, in Baku, Narimanov reported his personal victory to the presidium of the Azerbaijani *TsIK* on July 19, stating that Karabakh would remain an indivisible part of Azerbaijan (Mil'man 1971: 249).

Meanwhile, the political victory that preserved Azerbaijani control over Karabakh came at a price – the obligation to grant autonomy to Armenians resident there. Before the sovietization of Azerbaijan the Musavatist government came very close to forcing local Armenians into accepting Azerbaijani rule without any provision of autonomy. Quite clearly the Soviet Azerbaijani leadership likewise would have preferred that no autonomous status be granted to the Karabakh Armenians. The creation of autonomy in Mountainous Karabakh would divide the historical province of Karabakh and create a political unit for the homogenous Armenian majority. Given the recent conflict between the two peoples this would be a highly undesirable outcome for Azerbaijan.

It is of little surprise, therefore, that the Azerbaijani leadership tried to avoid granting autonomy to the Karabakh Armenians. At first, on September 26, 1921, the Azerbaijani Communist Party *Politburo* adopted by a majority vote (Narimanov and Bunyatzade were opposed) a rather straightforward resolution that called on the *Kavburo* to reconsider its decision to separate Nagorno Karabakh into an autonomous unit, not to declare autonomy in the meantime, and to create a special commission to collect material on the question (Guliev, 1989: 96–7). A month later, on October 21, the members of the "special commission," together with Bolshevik functionaries from Karabakh (both mountainous and lowland), produced a resolution aimed at establishing peace and order in Karabakh and thus resolving the conflicted situation. A number of measures were proposed, including the summary execution of those guilty of robbery, punishments including fines of no less than 10 million rubles for villages providing shelter to robbers, the execution of those guilty of spreading ethnic conflict, and the dismissal of all functionaries showing nationalist tendencies. The commission also noted that "[t]he conference of the Karabakh functionaries finds it inexpedient to separate Nagorno Karabakh into an autonomous region and finds that all the measures mentioned in the above resolution are in fact a solution of the Karabakh question" (Guliev 1989: 99–101). Thus, by implementing draconian measures, the Azerbaijani leadership hoped to eliminate banditry and calm down the situation, which could then be presented to the *Kavburo* as a solution to ethnic conflict, rendering the creation of autonomy unnecessary.

However, there was no unity among the Azerbaijani leadership on the question of Karabakh. While some members of the Azerbaijani leadership were trying to avoid granting autonomy to Karabakh Armenians, others (albeit of Russian origin) tried to implement the *Kavburo* decision. In October 1921, at the session of the Azerbaijani Communist Party *Orgburo TsKA* under the chairmanship of Kirov, it was decided to create a special commission to determine the boundaries of the Karabakh autonomy (Mil'man 1971: 249). However, this attempt yielded no practical results.

By the end of the year, in December 1921, the Karabakh question had become a matter of discussion at the conference of the leadership of one of the Karabakh *uezdy*. The resolution of that conference stated:

> [T]here is no specific, so-called "Karabakh question"; [it] does not exist; it spawns [from] the general weakness of party and soviet work in Karabakh,

> the absence of firm, direct and consistent policy; and this question can be resolved not by some extreme and complicated reforms but only by intensified work in Karabakh. The conference believes that it is necessary to create a Karabakh *Oblast'*.
>
> (Guliev 1989: 103–4)

The solution proposed by the conference was similar to previous suggestions, but it also called for the creation of a Karabakh *Oblast'*, a region that would encompass both mountainous and lowland parts of Karabakh. It offered a way in which the creation of a predominantly Armenian autonomous unit in the mountainous part of the region could be avoided. During 1921 the position of the Azerbaijani leadership regarding Karabakh autonomy had been that suppression of banditry in the region would solve the ethnic conflict, and that there would be no need to grant autonomy to the Armenian populated part of Karabakh. This tactic was successful in the short term.

However, in order to understand better the political maneuvering surrounding the question of Karabakh autonomy one needs to consider the position of ethnic Armenian Bolsheviks working in Azerbaijan. If Armenian Bolsheviks in Baku were, at best, indifferent to the question of Karabakh, local Armenian Bolsheviks in Karabakh were active supporters of autonomy. They took steps to counter attempts by the Azerbaijani leadership to avoid granting autonomy. Anonymous reports outlining in detail the situation in Karabakh were sent to Erevan, thus keeping the Armenian *TsKa* up to date with steps being taken by the Azerbaijanis.[3]

The Armenian leadership was well aware of the reluctance of Azerbaijan to implement the *Kavburo* decision, and seeing that the implementation of autonomy was being delayed it eventually petitioned a higher political body – in the hope of compelling Azerbaijan to grant Karabakh Armenians autonomous status. On June 5, 1922, the Armenian *TsKa* appealed to the *Zakraikom* asking it to implement the *Kavburo* decision to grant autonomy to Mountainous Karabakh (Mikaelian 1992: 660). This Armenian appeal generated some results. On October 27, 1922, the presidium of the *Zakraikom* decided that the *TsKa AKP* should implement the *Kavburo* decision. An ethnic Armenian, Armenak Karakozov was to become chairman of the Karabakh *Ispolkom* (Guliev 1989: 127; Mil'man 1971: 279).

Three days later the presidium of the Azerbaijani *TsKa* complied with the *Zakraikom* demands and created a three-person commission to work out the question of autonomy for Karabakh (Guliev 1989: 128). This commission apparently produced no meaningful results in terms of preparing for autonomy, and the *Zakraikom* intervened once again at its session held in Baku on December 14, 1922. This time the *Zakraikom* adopted a "special detailed decision" in which it outlined steps the Azerbaijani government would need to take to implement autonomy in Nagorno Karabakh. Among the measures suggested were the creation of a "Central Commission on Nagorno Karabakh Affairs" made up of Kirov, Mirzabekyan and Karakozov as well as another seven-member committee on Karabakh affairs based in Shusha. The Azerbaijani *TsIK* was obliged to publish a decree on the creation of the aforementioned commission within a week (Kharmandarian 1969: 280; Guliev 1989: 132–3).

Following the harsh and direct intervention of the *Zakraikom*, the Azerbaijani leadership eventually published a short announcement in the newspaper *Bakinskii Rabochii* on December 20, 1922 (Shadunts 1922), and on January 2, 1923, the Azerbaijani government created a *Komitet po delam Nagornogo Karabakha* (Committee on the Affairs of Mountainous Karabakh) (Mil'man 1971: 249). With the creation of the named committee the movement towards autonomy apparently halted once again.

It was only six months later that the question of Karabakh autonomy resurfaced again. On June 1, 1923, the presidium of Azerbaijani *TsKa AKP* put the Karabakh question on its agenda and it was decided to prepare a decree on autonomy (Guliev 1989a: 148–9). Meanwhile, members of the *Zakraikom* turned again to the question of autonomy for Karabakh at the end of June. After listening to the report of the Karabakh Committee (Shadunts and Karakozov) the *Zakraikom* obliged the *TsKa AKP* to create an Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh within a month (Guliev 1989a: 149).

The latest intervention of the *Zakraikom* prompted the Azerbaijani leadership to make concessions on the question of autonomy. On July 1 the presidium of the Azerbaijani *TsKa AKP* finally conceded the granting of autonomy to Karabakh. The announcement was to be made by the Azerbaijani *TsIK* (Guliev 1989a: 149–51). On July 4 the *AzTsIK* discussed the question of autonomy and prepared guidelines for the decree on autonomy for Karabakh. The guidelines reveal that the practical aspects of autonomy (such as the governing body, legal statute and borders) had not been previously considered by the Azerbaijani leadership. It called for the creation in the mountainous part of Karabakh of an autonomous region with its center in Khankendy [Stepanakert] headed by an executive committee, and, until the creation of this executive committee, the establishment of a *Revkom* to govern Mountainous Karabakh; and for the creation of a commission to determine the borders of autonomous Karabakh and the administrative delimitation of Lowland Karabakh (Guliev 1989a: 151–2).

Based on these points a decree on "The Creation of the Autonomous Region of Nagornyi Karabakh" was adopted on July 7, 1923, and published in *Bakinskii Rabochii* two days later. In addition to the points already discussed by the Azerbaijani *TsIK* it added a requirement to prepare a statute on the autonomous region and determine its boundaries by August 15, 1923.[4] Two years after the *Kavburo* decision to leave Karabakh within Azerbaijan, on condition that it was autonomous, the autonomy of Karabakh was eventually announced. However, this formal proclamation was hastily composed under pressure from the *Zakraikom* and specified neither its boundaries nor its legal statute. These subjects were to be determined in the coming years.

Determining the borders

The early boundaries of Nagorno Karabakh are a matter of considerable confusion. First of all, there are very few maps showing Karabakh boundaries in the early 1920s. When the borders of Karabakh are shown on Soviet maps they are

often quite different. For example, in the first *Atlas of the USSR*, published in 1928, the maps of the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijani SSR each showed different borders of Nagorno Karabakh (Enukidze 1928: 89, 93). To add to the complexity, none of those early maps show sufficient detail to understand exactly what was added or omitted in each particular case. In preparation for the map in Figure 5.1 showing the different boundaries and projects for Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region, I combined several map sources – tsarist military and administrative maps from the early twentieth century and Soviet military maps from the late 1970s and early 1980s.[5] The boundaries of border projects were drawn according to the lists of place-names included within Nagorno Karabakh by each boundary project. They are schematic representations of the territory included within an autonomous region and not an actual boundary prepared by the commission.

Second of all, another methodological problem is posed by analysis of the ethnographic boundary of Nagorno Karabakh. The ethnographic data for the settlements within the Nagorno Karabakh boundary comes from two sources – the rural survey conducted by tsarist authorities in 1886, and the rural census of Azerbaijan of 1921. The comparison of these two sources allows for a quite precise recreation of the ethnographic composition within the 1925 borders of AONK. However, the only source of ethnographic data for the settlements outside the 1925 borders was the 1886 rural survey.

The Turkic population inhabiting the region between the Kura lowlands and the mountainous part of Karabakh in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was engaged in pastoral nomadism. The number of permanent settlements was limited as nomads had temporary winter encampments in the lowlands and summer encampments in the mountains of Karabakh. The nomads were settled in permanent villages in the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, after irrigation work in the lowlands was carried out by the Soviet authorities. As a result, the 1886 population survey did not record nomad encampments as they were not considered as settlements. Similarly, the early twentieth century tsarist military maps only rarely mention nomadic encampments. Hence, the village-level ethnographic data is much more complete for settlements within the boundaries of Nagorno Karabakh, and is far less accurate for the Turkic population living outside Karabakh. Finally, in the late nineteenth century the tsarist authorities encouraged the settlement of Russian colonists in some parts of Karabakh. Unfortunately, the ethnographic data is absent for these settlements. The colonization occurred after the 1886 rural survey, and during the civil war the Russian population fled the region. As a result the 1921 census did not provide data for Russian settlements.

Soon after the formal announcement of Karabakh autonomy, the commission that was to decide the statute and boundaries of Karabakh proposed the first boundary project in July 1923. As shown in Figure 5.1 (June 1923 project) the project listed 173 villages that were to be included within the boundaries of the autonomous unit (Guliev 1989a: 164–6). The project outlined a core Armenian territory in the mountainous part of Karabakh but made some important exclusions: a

Figure 5.1 The making of Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region – tsarist administrative divisions and Soviet boundary projects (1923–25).

number of Armenian villages located on the fringes of the Armenian populated territories were not included within the borders of the autonomy, and, most notably, the town of Shusha and its surrounding villages were also excluded. At the time when the boundaries project was prepared the population of Shusha was predominantly Turkic, as were the surrounding villages. Despite this, the Armenians, who before their failed rebellion and the resulting *pogrom* of 1920 constituted just over half the population of the town, disagreed with this decision (Guliev 1989a: 165).

Another disputed area was the territory colonized by Russian settlers just before the First World War in the eastern fringes of Karabakh – the Khonashen [Martuni] region and Skobolevskoe *obshchestvo*. The Russian population had fled during the civil war and the lands were claimed by both sides. Geographically, the area was closer to Lowland Karabakh, but Armenians of Mountainous Karabakh claimed the land because of the shortage of arable land in the mountains. Territorial amendments were soon introduced into the project. Following the report of the boundary commission the Azerbaijani *TsKa* decided on July 16, 1923, to include the lands of the Skobolevskoe *obshchestvo* as well as the town of Shusha within the Karabakh autonomous unit (Guliev 1989a: 154–5).

On July 24, 1923, the Committee on Mountainous Karabakh was replaced by a five-member Provisional Revolutionary Committee headed by Karakozov. The Provisional *Revkom* was to govern the autonomous region during the transition period until the convocation of the *Oblastnoi Soviet* (Mil'man 1971: 250; Guliev 1989: 158–9). At the end of August the Karabakh *Obkom* asked the Azerbaijani *TsKa* to speed up the publication of the statute on the Autonomous Region of Mountainous Karabakh and its territorial composition (Guliev 1989: 180–1).

The creation of the Autonomous region for Karabakh Armenians apparently generated resentment among the local Turkic and Kurdish population. The chairman of the *Uispolkom* of the newly created Kurdistan *uezd*, Gadzhiev, wrote an article in *Bakinskii Rabochii* suggesting that

> [t]he village of Abdallar [Lachin] cannot be the center of Kurdistan. There is insufficient water. The only solution is to leave [the town of] Shusha as its [Kurdistan] center; otherwise buildings can be erected in Lisagorsk whose climate and position are better than those of Abdallar [Lachin]"[6]

The resolution of the Azerbaijani *TsKa* of October 8, 1923, calling for the popularization of the notion of Karabakh autonomy among the Turkic population also confirms existing tensions and resentment of the Armenian autonomy among the local Turkic population. The same resolution again confirmed that the town of Shusha should remain part of Karabakh Autonomous Region (Guliev 1989a: 192–4). The Karabakh boundaries were again discussed on October 18 (Guliev 1989: 207–8). A month later, on November 15, 1923, one of the members of the boundary commission, Buniuat-zade, reported on the question of the disputed lands of Khonashen [Martuni] region, and announced that it was decided to allocate the land first of all to the "[M]uslim population … and the remaining lands to transfer to the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh."[7]

By April 1924 the question of the Karabakh boundaries was still far from resolved. The presidium of the Azerbaijani *TsKa AKP(b)* adopted a resolution on April 17 in which it was admitted that the boundary commission had failed in its task. A new six-member commission was established and charged with the task to "finally determine the administrative boundaries of the Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh," and to complete it by May 1, 1924 (Guliev 1989a: 236–7). Yet in June 1924 the boundary commission was still resolving the conflicting situation that arose around the lands of the Skobolevskoe *obshchestvo* – in particular the village of Kuropatkino. The commission confirmed that the village should remain part of the Karabakh region (Ibid.: 242–3).

In the summer of 1924 discussion of the legal status of Karabakh was still under way. The Constitution of Karabakh was drafted and discussed at several meetings of the Azerbaijani *TsKa* (Ibid.: 248–9). However, according to the Soviet administrative hierarchy, Karabakh had the lowest autonomous status possible and did not warrant its own constitution. Hence, the project of a Karabakh Constitution was eventually dropped. Instead, on November 26, 1924, the statute on the "Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh" was finally published in a supplement of *Bakinskii Rabochii*.[8] It provided detailed descriptions of the central and local authorities in the autonomous region and outlined the territory of it – which included 201 villages. Thus, for the first time, an official description of Karabakh's borders was published. The new project added a number of villages to the earlier 1923 project, and most notably the town of Shusha, the area of Kaladarasi village, and Skobolevskoe *obshchestvo*. However, despite earlier decisions to include the village of Kuropatkino within Karabakh it did not appear in the published list of 201 villages, and some other Armenian villages located on the fringes of Karabakh were not included either. In 1925 a new description of the Karabakh borders appeared that now included 214 villages (223 if one counts hamlets) (Kocharian 1925: 48–51).[9] This added several villages to the territory of Karabakh including the disputed Kuropatkino village and the remote Armenian enclave of Maralyan Sarov (see Figure 5.1, 1925 project). However, in the following decades, the borders of Nagorno Karabakh were to undergo further changes.

Conclusion

The Karabakh issue had emerged with the collapse of the Russian Empire and the further fragmentation of the South Caucasus. Each of the three independent states proclaimed in May 1918 – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – claimed its territory based on two principles: (1) the old administrative divisions were used as convenient building blocks, the predominant group claiming the entire province including all the minority groups living there; (2) the kin minority groups living in neighboring provinces were by no means forgotten and were also claimed. Karabakh was one of the regions where overlapping claims led to conflict. Armenia claimed the mountainous part of Karabakh on the grounds of its predominantly Armenian population, while Azerbaijan considered it an inseparable part of the Elisavetpol *gubernia*.

In addition to the conflicting relations between the republics, the situation was further complicated by the involvement of several Great Powers – the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey. Each of these actors pursued its own goals but usually possessed insufficient resources to impose its will in an unconditional manner. This created an opportunity for the independent republics to advance their own goals by making their cooperation with the Great Powers conditional upon support for their territorial claims.

The Great Powers could not afford to ignore the interests of the republics and had to adapt their goals to existing realities. The British policy is a good illustration of this trend; having no resources to establish their own direct rule over the disputed areas they merely sanctioned the existing situation. In Karabakh, they allowed Azerbaijan to establish its governor-general, and in Nakhichevan they invited the Armenians to take control. When they encountered resistance in Zangezur they left the troublesome district under its own administration.

The arrival of the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1920 is another good example of the way a Great Power pursued and adapted its interests to conditions on the ground. After sovietization, Azerbaijan became the main base for further conquest of the region. However, the Bolshevik position in Azerbaijan was weak and in order to remain in power Ordzhonikidze had to support Azerbaijani territorial claims, often in violation of Moscow's political line. Thus, he supported the Azerbaijani claim on Zakataly District – granted to Georgia according to the Georgian-Soviet Treaty of May 1920 – as well as Azerbaijani claims to the disputed regions of Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan. When the Bolsheviks needed to facilitate the sovietization of Armenia in December 1920 the interests of Azerbaijan were sacrificed – Narimanov was forced to renounce his claim on disputed territories. However, the Armenian Bolsheviks never managed to use this opportunity to extend their rule to Karabakh, and Azerbaijan remained in control of that disputed district.

Bolshevik policy changed when the conquest of the South Caucasus was complete and the question of the border with Turkey was settled in March 1921. They inherited a region with immense territorial problems – the relationship between republics and their minorities was extremely tense and the borders were unclear. The Bolsheviks now had to solve the problems between the "fraternal" republics. A somewhat naive attempt to resolve the territorial issue at a conference of the three republics in June 1921 failed spectacularly – the heated discussions and quarrels between the representatives of the republics were quite embarrassing and the attempt was abandoned.

The Bolshevik approach to the Karabakh problem was a curious mixture of several trends: first, it was a genuine attempt to solve the conflict; second, they pursued their own political goals; and third, they had to accommodate the conflicting interests of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In May 1921 the *Kavburo* was prepared once again to grant Karabakh to Armenia. It was necessary to suppress the rebels in Zangezur, and the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia would undoubtedly facilitate the conquest. At the same

time, this decision also reflected an attempt to resolve the conflict between the two peoples – as can be seen from the telegram of Ordzhonokidze and Kirov stating that "not a single Armenian village should be attached to Azerbaijan, equally not a single Muslim village should be attached to Armenia." However, due to the slow reaction of the Armenian Bolsheviks and the fast advance of the Red Army in Zangezur, the Armenian Bolsheviks failed to establish their presence firmly in Karabakh before the end of the Zangezur operation. Thus, the very reason for awarding Karabakh to Armenia disappeared. In this situation Azerbaijan was still in control of the disputed territory and Narimanov proved himself a stubborn politician and refused to renounce his claim. Under the circumstances the *Kavburo* decided to leave things as they were, leaving the disputed province under Azerbaijani control. To sweeten the pill for Armenians, Karabakh was to receive autonomy.

It is clear that what mattered in the end was control over the disputed territory at the time of the decision. This leads us to another interesting observation – the principal factor that determined the outcome of the contest for Mountainous Karabakh in the period 1918–20 was the geography of that terrain. In the struggle for Mountainous Karabakh, Armenia had a demographic advantage – the majority of the population of the disputed region were Armenians who were prepared to defy Azerbaijani rule. However, the main Armenian disadvantage was difficulty in accessing the region and poor communications between parts of Mountainous Karabakh itself. First of all there was no direct road suitable for wheeled transport connecting Armenia with Karabakh and it was faster to travel from Erevan to Karabakh via Georgia and Azerbaijan than it was to cross the mountains of Zangezur. Well into the mid-1920s there was not even a road connecting Armenia with Zangezur, and all cart transport had to go via the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan.[10]

In contrast to the Armenians, the Azerbaijani government faced the opposite situation – a homogenous and hostile population in the mountains of Karabakh, but very easy and convenient access to the mountainous part of Karabakh. The journey from Baku took just two days by railway to Evlakh station and then along a paved main road to Shusha. This advantage of access permitted the establishment of Azerbaijani control over the region, which in the end decided the outcome of the political struggle.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that to solve the conflicts in the South Caucasus the Bolsheviks relied primarily on ad hoc solutions rather than preconceived planning. Their possibly genuine desire to solve these conflicts was constrained by the need to accommodate the national interests of the Caucasian republics. In the case of Karabakh the granting of autonomous status was a compromise solution that did not solve the problem in the long run. On several occasions Armenians tried to attach Karabakh to the Armenian SSR, starting in the 1960s; and during the 1970s appeals were made to the Soviet authorities (Mouradian 1990: 417–25; Libaridian 1988: 42–52). With the democratization campaign of Mikhail Gorbachev, the issue resurfaced once again, quickly becoming the first national conflict in the USSR.

Notes

1 ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 75, p. 1, typewritten transcript of a telephone conversation between S. Ordzhonikodzhe and A. Myasnikian, July 21, 1921.
2 "Protokol zasedaniia TsKa KPA. 16 iyulia 1921 g." Typewritten Armenian original. ANA, fund 1, register 1, file 39, p. 18 back. A Russian translation is available in Virabian and Balikian (1989: 78).
3 "Gornyi Karabakh. Svodka za No. 1. Sekretno." ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 7, pp. 42–5.
4 *Bakinskii Rabochii*, July 9, 1923, No. 151, 879. See also Guliev (1989a: 153).
5 Tsarist military map from 1904 (5 *versts* per inch), administrative map of Caucasus from 1903 (20 *versts* per inch) and Map of Russian General Staff from 1903 (40 *versts* per inch), Soviet military maps from late 1970s and early 1980s (1:200,000 and 1:100,000).
6 *Bakinskii Rabochii*, September 15, 1923, No. 232, 960.
7 *Bakinskii Rabochii*, November 15, 1923, No. 258, 986.
8 *Pravitel'stvennyi Vestnik*, supplement to *Bakinskii Rabochii*, November 26, 1924, No. 269, 1292, p. 2.
9 A practically identical list of 214 villages is in "Spisok vsekh sel Avtonomnoi Oblasti Nagornogo Karabakha s ukazaniem chisla dush oboego pola 1925g." ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 116, p. 42.
10 "19 VII 1922. TsKa KPA Doklad Ekonompredstavitelia S.S.R. Armenii v Nakhkrae Sero Manutsyana," ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 26, pp. 79–83; "24 VI 1922 TsKa KPA Doklad chlena partii i Ekonom-Predstavitelia S.S.R.A. pri Nakhrespublike Sero Manutsyana," ANA, fund 113, register 3, file 13, pp. 48–50.

6 Arbitrary borders?

The Bolsheviks drawing boundaries in the South Caucasus

So far three individual case studies have been considered – the creation of ethnic autonomies in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh. In this chapter I would like to make a comparison between these cases to highlight any similarities that might exist between them as well as to assess the way the Bolshevik leadership approached these conflicts. A useful vantage point would be to consider the question of boundary-making in the Caucasus. This approach will allow me to address several persistent issues that continue to dominate both popular and academic thinking about this region. One is that the Bolshevik leadership purposefully created autonomous units as a way of exercising leverage against union republics (Hunter 2006: 113, Zürcher 2007: 154, 230–40). The other pervasive explanation argues that economic considerations prevailed. By drawing on the case studies and comparing them to other regional entities I will try to prove that the Soviet leadership had neither long-term political manipulation in mind nor any long-term economic policy goals when creating administrative units in the South Caucasus.

The Caucasian boundaries were frequently a subject of academic enquiry. Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union it became clear that the unfolding violent ethnic conflicts in the region were challenging the existing boundaries. Several interesting collections were published at that time addressing this issue (McLachlan 1994; Wright *et al*. 1996; Coppieters 1996; Power and Standen 1999). However, the focus of the essays dealing with the question of boundaries was primarily historical and dealt more with the developments in a particular region rather than with the question of boundary creation. These works provided a deep historical context but what they lacked was the actual treatment of the boundary-making process. How were the boundaries created in the South Caucasus? What principles did the Bolsheviks use when creating boundaries? These rather practical questions relating to the Bolshevik policies of the 1920s are important for understanding the present day conflicts in the region.

In the early 1920s the Bolsheviks created autonomies in potentially explosive areas that were inhabited by minority groups. Particularly striking are the cases of Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia, where no prior unit of similar shape ever existed. Granting these minorities political autonomy within union republics was sowing the seeds of future conflict – or to use a popular metaphor, the

Bolshevik leadership buried landmines. It was precisely these territories that exploded in violent conflict in the 1990s. Was this a divide-and-rule approach? Or perhaps ideological and economic considerations prevailed? Why else would the Soviet leadership provide the Abkhaz, Ossetians and Armenians with autonomous structures within Georgia and Azerbaijan?

Two-tier approach to the Soviet borders in the Caucasus

In this chapter I will try to challenge the established view that the borders in the South Caucasus were the result of either economic logic or a divide-and-rule approach, and propose a framework which will explain such a paradoxical and some might say deliberate creation of *matreshka*-like political institutions in the areas of potential conflict. I will argue that the explanation lies in the fact that the decision was taken on two separate levels – a level of allocation and level of delimitation. And, most importantly, the decision taken at each level followed a different logic.

Allocation tier

After the Bolshevik coup of October 1917 the South Caucasus quickly separated from the Russian Empire and soon the three republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia proclaimed their independence. Shielded from the Russian civil war by the Caucasian Mountains, the brief period of independence in the South Caucasus was nevertheless characterized by violent territorial and ethnic conflicts between all three republics. The situation changed when in early 1920 the Red Army began to emerge as the winner of the Civil war and received an opportunity to reclaim the Transcaucasian possessions of the tsarist empire. The Bolshevik armies captured Azerbaijan in April, Armenia in December 1920 and completed the conquest of the South Caucasus with the sovietization of Georgia in February 1921.

Soon after the capture of the region the question of the external boundary of the South Caucasus with Turkey was settled by the signing of the Moscow Treaty of March 16, 1921. The Bolshevik leadership could now turn to solving the question of the internal frontiers between the Soviet republics of the South Caucasus. This, however, proved more difficult than anticipated. Initially the organ representing Moscow in the Caucasus – the *Kavburo* – expected that the Bolshevik leaders of the three South Caucasian republics would be able to settle the territorial problems in an amicable manner, and to this end a conference was called in the Georgian capital Tiflis in June 1921 (Kharmandarian 1969: 101). The conference failed spectacularly; the representatives of the three republics quarreled and were unable to agree on boundaries. In the words of the Soviet Armenian leader, Myasnikian, "it seemed that Agaronyan, Topchibashev and Chkhenkeli[1] were [participating] at the last meeting of [the] *Kavburo*" (Galoian and Khudaverdian 1988: 33).

In dealing with territorial disputes in the South Caucasus the Bolsheviks faced the following problems. First, they had inadequate resources to impose their

unconditional will and therefore depended heavily on the support of the local pro-Bolshevik actors.[2] Second, they often pursued a policy of tactical short-term promises and concessions to conflicting parties in order to gain support on the ground.[3] Such a policy was characterized by inconsistency and involved changing decisions about the same issue several times. Third, the local actors tried to advance their own goals by exploiting the dependency of Moscow on their support. As a result the *Kavburo* was unable to enforce its vision of the conflict resolution and instead became entangled in the different (often contradictory) promises it made.

There were two hypothetical options available to the *Kavburo* when solving the conflicts. One approach would have been to separate the conflict areas – a solution which would satisfy the ethnic minority groups but alienate the host republics. Another approach would be to leave these areas as integral parts of the republics – a solution favored by the republics but detested by ethnic groups. In this hopeless situation the solution adopted was to allow the winner to keep the territories they controlled at the moment of sovietization (thus the Bolshevik leadership simply legitimized the existing situation) but at the same time, as a concession, the ethnic minority group would receive autonomous status.

In practical terms this meant that Azerbaijan retained control over the mountainous part of Karabakh but was obliged to grant autonomy to the Armenians living there. Similarly, Georgia retained control over the Ossetian populated territories but was forced to grant them autonomy. Georgia was also promised that Abkhazia, which in the aftermath of the Bolshevik invasion of Georgia was allowed to proclaim itself independent, would "voluntarily" enter into union with Georgia (Tulumdzhian 1957: 26–7; Akhalaia *et al*. 1961: 52). The allocation phase was completed rather quickly with all principal decisions relating to this taken before the end of 1921.[4]

Delimitation tier

In contrast to the allocation process, delimitation took much longer to complete and dragged well into the mid-1920s. When it came to delimitation the *Kavburo* met with understandable and stubborn opposition from both Azerbaijan and Georgia – neither wanted the creation of ethnic autonomous units, especially since no such units had existed before.[5] Nevertheless, the *Kavburo* was able to fully enforce its decision to create autonomous formations in the areas of violent conflict.

Two aspects of the delimitation process are worth noting – first, the Bolshevik leadership was extremely firm in enforcing the process of delimitation. This probably stems from very practical considerations. The reason behind such an unbending desire to implement the earlier allocation decision was probably fear of losing support from the minority populations. The failure of the Bolsheviks to implement their promise to grant autonomies would have been extremely damaging to their legitimacy since both minority groups and union republics would see this as a weakness of central authority. The second notable aspect was the

clear attempt of the Bolshevik leadership to separate the ethnic groups, i.e. the principle of an ethnographic boundary was the dominant rationale when drawing the borders.

To sum up – the allocation of the disputed territories was achieved through the meticulous application of *realpolitik* logic – those who controlled the disputed territory retained this control under Soviet rule. At the same time, on the delimitation level – the Bolsheviks demonstrated a strong determination to implement the principles they saw as necessary to solve the conflicts.

Economic considerations

The economic considerations are also one of the prominent explanations for the Bolshevik boundary-making in the South Caucasus. There are two types of argument used to demonstrate the economic rationale behind boundary-making. On the one hand, the alleged economic importance of the disputed regions was used by the local leadership as an argument during the allocation phase in all three cases. What is more, the question of economic efficacy would appear at the moment of a crucial political decision.[6] The use of economic arguments by the Bolshevik functionaries is therefore often seen as evidence of economically motivated decision-making. However, I am skeptical about the sincerity of the declarations of the local Bolshevik functionaries as I have not seen any significant documentary evidence pointing to the existence of acute economic issues that could only be resolved by territorial transfer. This is not to say that the economic ties mentioned by the local communist leaders during the allocation phase did not exist. Obviously South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh, due to their geographic location, had strong economic ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan respectively. Abkhazia as well had economic ties with Georgia. However, the economic arguments conveniently appeared when they could help advance territorial claims during the allocation phase. It seems that the local leaders skilfully adopted economic rhetoric as it fitted neatly into the Bolshevik political discourse. In my opinion the economic argument was a mere façade for the justification of territorial claims.

On the other hand, it is assumed that allocation decisions fitted into the general pattern of Moscow's economic policy (De Waal 2004: 130–1). In other words, it was Moscow that gave preference to economic principle over the ethnographic one. Thus, leaving Abkhazia and South Ossetia within Georgia, and Karabakh within Azerbaijan, served economic goals. It should, however, be noted that the boundaries of South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh cut across supposedly intended economic ties. From the economic point of view it would make much more sense not to create ethnic autonomous units in the first place. What is more, this point of view completely ignores numerous allocation decisions taken at the same time that run against all economic logic. The best example of this is the allocation of Nakhichevan and Zangezur. It was absolutely illogical from an economic point of view to attach Nakhichevan to Azerbaijan and Zangezur to Armenia as these regions had very little, if any, economic connection with the states they were attached to.

Does this mean that the Bolsheviks disregarded economic considerations when creating administrative units? In my opinion the Bolsheviks used an economic rationale extensively in their administrative policies in general, and in the Caucasus in particular. However, the operational unit was not a small autonomous region like Nagorno Karabakh, with its wine making and pastoral nomadism, or poor agricultural South Ossetia, both of which were practically devoid of any industry and proletariat. It was not these backward agricultural regions that served as a unit of economic consideration. The Bolsheviks saw the entire South Caucasus as one economic unit. At the end of 1921 they were forcing the three South Caucasian republics into an economic unity – a process commenced by uniting the railways and abolishing customs between the republics that culminated in 1922 with the creation of the ZSFSR. The autonomous regions must have been seen as a nuisance – a concession to national feelings and not as a primary unit of economic thinking.

Principles used when drawing boundaries

In the following section I will try to understand the principles used when delimiting the autonomous units in the South Caucasus. The Bolshevik blueprints as to how to draw a boundary are unavailable. Such documents probably never existed. Therefore, I will employ the "reverse engineering" approach. I will try to discern from the location of boundaries what the reasons might be for laying the frontier there. I will consider three possible variables that might have influenced the location of an autonomous frontier – the antecedent border (i.e., border that followed some older boundary), geophysical considerations, and the ethnographic considerations. Since the creation of the borders of South Ossetia and Karabakh has been discussed in Chapters 3 and 6, I will only provide a general summary here. The borders of Abkhazia never featured during the decision-making process, leading to the establishment of the Abkhaz SSR and its later demotion to "treaty republic" status in December 1921. Hence I will use this opportunity to discuss them here in some detail.

South Ossetia

Once the *Kavburo* took a political decision to create the South Ossetian autonomy on October 31, 1921, the location of boundaries of the new unit had to be decided. This was not an easy question for several reasons. The main problem was the geographic divide that characterized the Ossetian populated territory. In order to illustrate the complexity of the geographic situation it is worth pointing out that some rivers originating in the western part of South Ossetia flowed to the Black Sea, while rivers originating in the eastern part flowed to the Caspian Sea. The Ossetian population inhabited mountainous gorges that had poor communication lines between them and were better connected to the neighboring Georgian populated areas in the lowlands. Because of these geophysical features there was no previous administrative unit encompassing the Ossetian population of Georgia. Therefore, the boundaries of the Ossetian autonomy were to be drawn from scratch.

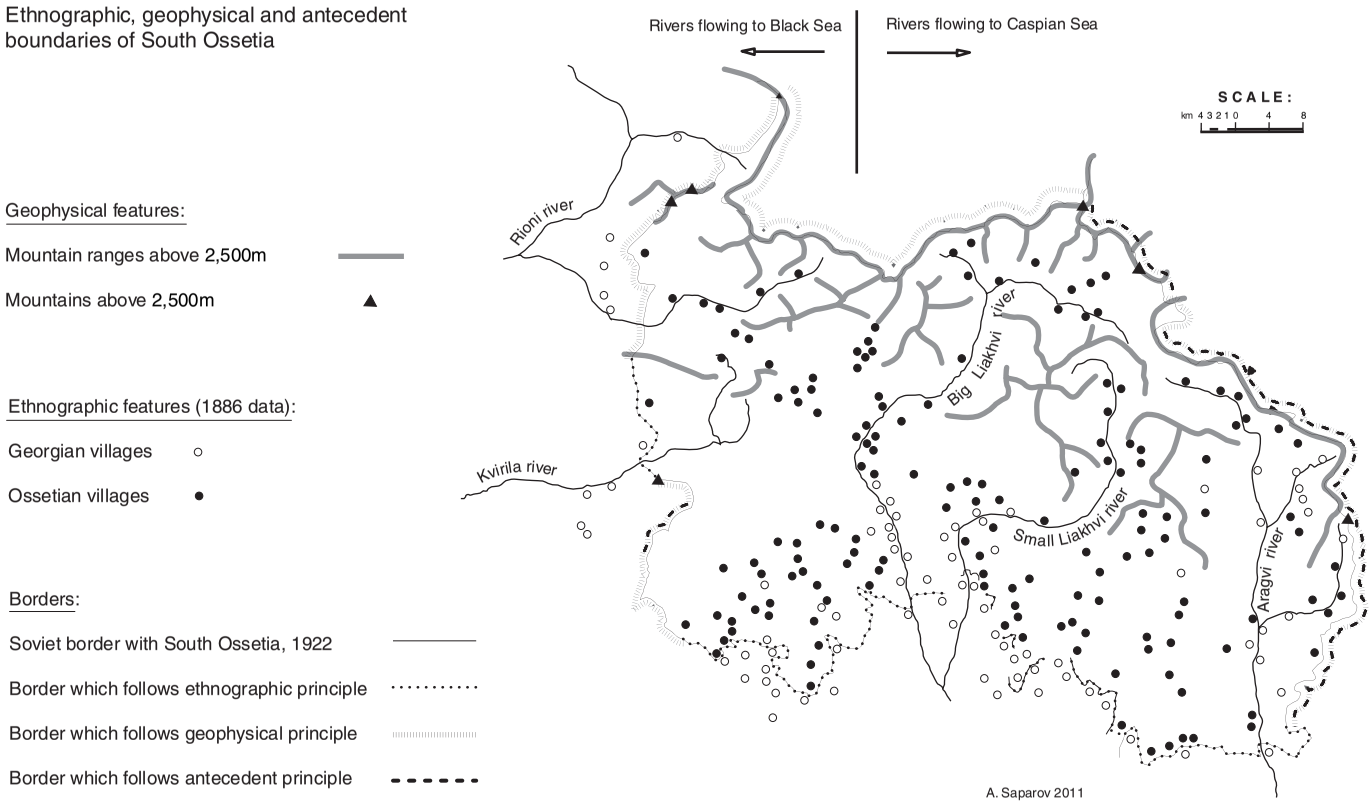

Figure 6.1 Ethnographic, geophysical and antecedent boundaries of South Ossetia.

Following the decision to create autonomy for South Ossetians, a special boundary commission was formed, comprising representatives of the Georgian and Ossetian *Revkomy*. The commission worked on the project presented by the Ossetians (I. N. Tskhovrebov 1960: 226–9) and after some difficult negotiations the boundaries of the South Ossetian autonomy were decided upon on December 20, 1921 (V. D. Tskhovrebov 1981: 131). Analysis of the resulting boundary reveals that several principles were used in creating it – geophysical characteristics of the terrain, antecedent boundaries, ethnographic and political considerations. Among these principles it appears that the ethnographic considerations prevailed.

Nagorno Karabakh

For nearly three years after the collapse of the Russian Empire the independent states of Armenia and Azerbaijan fought over several disputed territories. With the Bolshevik conquest of Azerbaijan in April 1920, and Armenia in December 1920, violence in the disputed region subsided and the problem received political consideration.

The political decision to create the autonomy for Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh was taken on July 5, 1921 at the session of the *Kavburo*. This decision marked the end of the political dispute between Soviet Armenia and Soviet Azerbaijan over the mountainous part of Karabakh – inhabited by Armenians but geographically linked to the Kura lowlands. Azerbaijan was to retain this disputed territory but had to provide autonomy to the Armenian population of Mountainous Karabakh. Implementation of the *Kavburo* decision dragged on for several years due to the understandable reluctance of the government of Azerbaijan to create an autonomous region for a hostile minority group.

The official declaration of Karabakh autonomy was made in July 1923[7] – under strong pressure from the *Zakraikom* to implement the decision of July 5, 1921. However, this short declaration contained neither details of the political organization of the autonomy, nor a description of its boundaries. It took another year-and-a-half to settle these issues. In the meantime, several border projects were created and modified after difficult negotiations. Finally, on November 26, 1924, the statute on the "Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh" was published,[8] which included the legal framework regulating the functioning of the autonomy and a description of its territory. Unlike the description of the South Ossetian boundary, the territory of Nagorno Karabakh was simply described as a list of 201 villages included within the autonomy. There was no formal description of a boundary as such. The following year a new, more detailed, description of the settlements included within the Nagorno Karabakh autonomy appeared (Kocharian 1925: 48–51).[9] These lists of settlements, as well as the Soviet administrative borders from the late 1970s and the early 1980s, were used together with tsarist military and administrative maps to analyze the principles employed in drawing the frontiers of Nagorno Karabakh.

Analysis of the boundaries of Nagorno Karabakh reveals similarity with the boundaries of South Ossetia. In the mountainous areas, where settlements were rare, separation of the ethnic groups occurred by the use of geophysical features – mountain ranges. As was the case with South Ossetia, in the mountains the boundary of Nagorno Karabakh often coincided with the antecedent administrative borders of *uezdy* from the tsarist period.

But geophysical and antecedent principles for drawing the boundary were completely abandoned in the densely populated lowland areas. There, the ethnographic principle prevailed over all other considerations and it was this method that was employed to separate the two ethnic groups. The entire eastern and southern portion of the boundary was carefully designed to separate the two groups.

There were several cases where political considerations prevailed over ethnographic ones. For example, the town of Shusha and the surrounding Turkic populated villages were included within the boundaries of the autonomy. Another area where political considerations prevailed over ethnographic ones was in the former lands of Russian settlers whose villages were destroyed and whose populations escaped during the civil war. This now-vacant territory was claimed both by the Armenians of Karabakh and by the Turkic population of the lowlands and was divided between the two.

The main principle used to draw the boundaries of Nagorno Karabakh was ethnographic – the border separated two ethnic groups with a history of recent conflict. In the sparsely populated mountainous areas the antecedent frontiers that followed the geophysical features were adopted. As such the borders of Nagorno Karabakh resembled very closely the South Ossetian boundaries.

Abkhazia

The case of the Abkhazian boundary differs significantly from the boundaries of the two other ethnic autonomies in the region. During tsarist times and before the Bolshevik conquest of the region in 1921, Abkhazia had existed as a political and administrative entity. By contrast, the Autonomous Regions of South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh were created, from scratch, by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s. Therefore, the discussion of the Abkhaz boundary requires an investigation into an earlier period when the region was integrated into the Russian Empire.

The administrative aspect

Abkhazia formally accepted Russian suzerainty in 1810. Its remote location combined with poor overland communications and exposure to seaborne attack resulted in a minimal Russian administrative and military presence in the first decades of the nineteenth century. As a result, the region continued to exist as a semi-independent principality, ruled by its prince and supported by a Russian garrison. It was only after the completion of the Caucasian war that the Russian

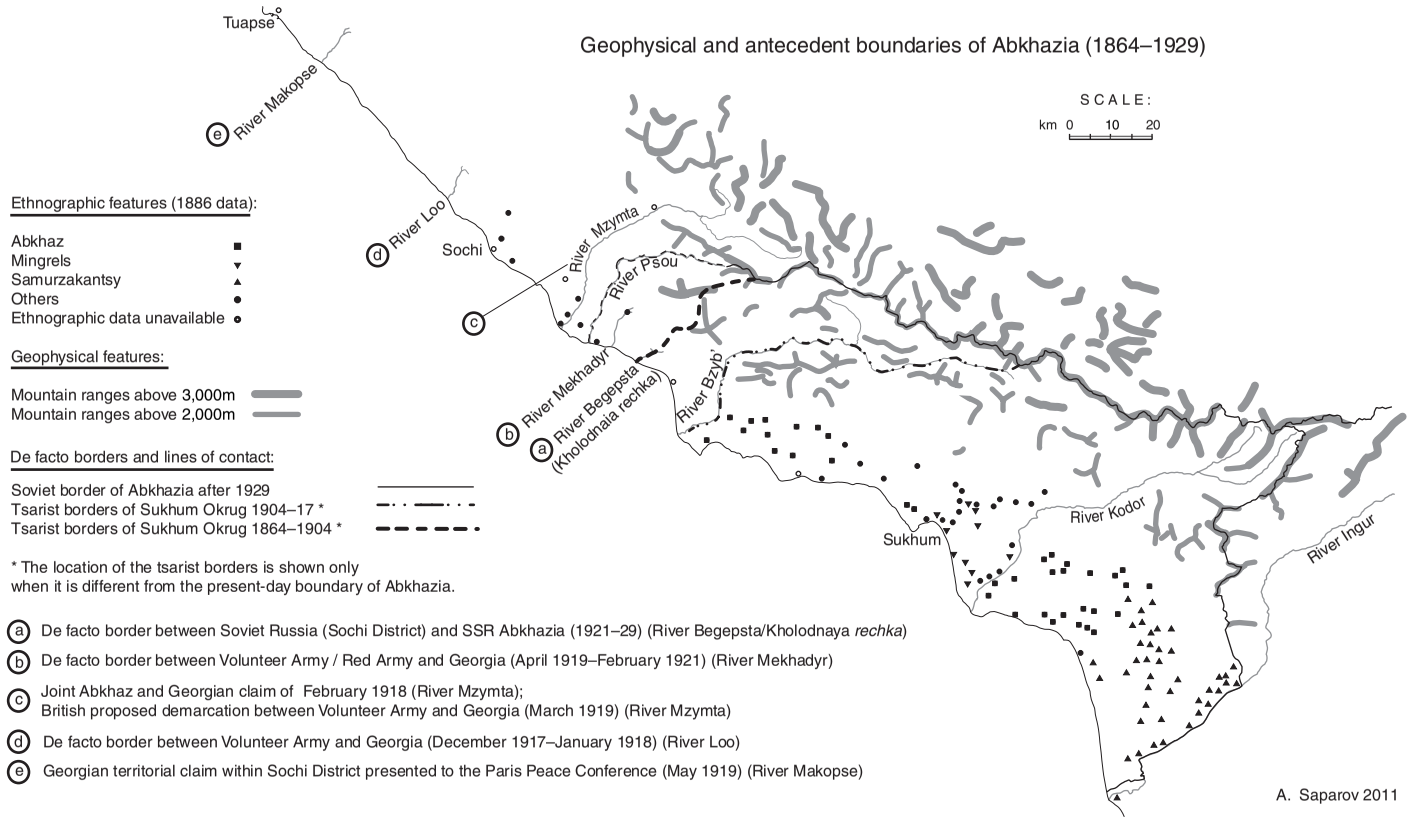

Figure 6.2 Ethnographic composition, geophysical and antecedent boundaries of Abkhazia (1864–1929).

authorities terminated the region's semi-independent status, in 1864. This made Abkhazia the last of the South Caucasian principalities to become fully integrated into the Russian Empire.

The shaping of the administrative boundaries of Abkhazia took place in the aftermath of the Caucasian War. The territory of the former Abkhaz principality was reorganized as *Sukhumskii voennyi otdel* (Sukhum Military Department) in 1864. The depopulated lands of the Dzhigets, a tribe related to the Abkhaz (territory between the Rivers Mzymta and Begepsta [Kholodnaia *rechka*]) were not attached to Abkhazia; instead they became part of the newly created Chernomorskii *okrug* (Sagariia 1970: 109) (see Figure 6.2). However, Abkhazia (Sukhum Military Department) benefited from inclusion of the Samurzakano region – a territory traditionally disputed by Abkhaz and Mingrel princes.[10] Thus, in 1864 Abkhazia included the territory between Gagra (River Begepsta) and the River Ingur. In 1893 *Sukhumskii voennyi otdel* (Sukhum Military Department) was renamed *Sukhumskii voennyi okrug* (Sukhum Military District) and was subordinated to the governor of Kutais *gubernia*.

In 1904 Gagra and its environs (the territory between the Begepsta [Kholodnaia *rechka*] and Bzyb' Rivers) were separated from Sukhum *okrug* and subordinated to Chenomorskii *okrug*. The main reason for that administrative change was that the relative of tsar prince Ol'denburgskii started the construction of a "Climatic Station" – a luxury holiday resort in Gagra a year earlier. After this administrative change Sukhum *okrug* encompassed a territory between the River Bzyb' and the River Ingur. This administrative division survived until the revolution of 1917. The separation of Gagra District from Sukhum *okrug* was seen as an act of imperialism by the Georgian and Abkhaz public.

The borders of Abkhazia during the Russian civil war

The events of the Russian civil war had a profound effect on the boundaries of Abkhazia. The fall of the Romanov dynasty in February 1917 presented a convenient opportunity to amend the territorial policies of tsarism. A prominent Georgian social democrat, Akakii Chkhenkeli, traveled to Gagra in June 1917 to persuade the population to petition the provisional government for the inclusion of Gagra District into Sukhum *okrug* (Sagariia 1998: 42). The question of reattaching Gagra to Sukhum *okrug* was later discussed by the Transcaucasian Commissariat on October 30, 1917 (ibid.: 8). Four days later, and just a few days before the Bolshevik takeover, Chkhenkeli appealed to the provisional government to change the borders of Sukhum *okrug* (ibid.: 9). With the provisional government overthrown, the Transcaucasian Comissariat unilaterally restored the old border on December 7, 1917 (Gamakhariia 2009: 454).

Another document concerning the Abkhaz borders appeared in a situation of growing political instability. Facing thousands of deserting Russian soldiers the local authority in Sukhum *okrug* – the *Abkhazkii Narodnyi Soviet* (Abkhaz People Council) sought to conclude an agreement with the authorities in Georgia on February 9, 1918. The agreement included a clause on borders: "to reinstate

Abkhazia between Ingur and Mzmyta" (Gamakhariia and Gogiia 1997: 402). If fulfilled, the Abkhaz border would now extend further northwest beyond the recently restored Gagra District. What is also important, the agreement confirmed the Abkhaz border along river Ingur, i.e. Georgians did not claim the Mingrel populated Samurzakano region.

Soon after the Georgian-Abkhaz agreement was concluded, local Bolsheviks with the support of deserting sailors and soldiers captured Sukhum and proclaimed Bolshevik rule. Georgian troops intervened, and by the end of May 1918 they had prevailed. Pursuing the retreating Bolsheviks along the coast, the Georgian troops crossed the Abkhaz border, reached Sochi, and briefly captured Tuapse in July. There they came into contact with the Volunteer Army that was advancing from the north.

While the Georgian Republic advanced a claim on the entire Sochi *okrug* that came under their control, the Volunteer Army demanded the withdrawal of Georgian troops stationed beyond the River Bzyb' (i.e., to the 1904 border of Sukhum *okrug*). A conference between the Volunteer Army and the Georgian Republic on September 25, in Ekaterinodar, failed to resolve the boundary issue (Sagariia 1998: 10; Dokumenty 1919: 388–90). Relations between the two remained strained. In February 1919 the forces of General Anton Denikin, taking advantage of the Georgian-Armenian war, overwhelmed a small Georgian garrison in Sochi, pushing them beyond Gagry and reaching the River Bzyb'.

In this situation the British intervened in early April and proposed a border along the River Mzymta in an attempt to stop the conflict between the Volunteer Army and Georgia (Burdett 1996: 524). However, this proposal was never implemented as Georgian troops crossed the Bzyb' River and pushed the Volunteer Army across the River Mekhadyr (Kenez 1977: 204). Another fruitless attempt was made to resolve the boundary issue at a Georgian-Volunteer Army conference on May 23–24 (Sagariia 1998: 15, 54). As a result, the River Mekhadyr remained the de facto boundary between Georgia and the Volunteer Army until the latter collapsed in early 1920. Around the same time, on May 1, 1919, the Georgian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference presented its territorial claims – which included territory as far as the River Mekopse (Sagariia 1998: 53; Menteshashvili 1990b: 64–9).

By early 1920 it became clear that the Bolsheviks were prevailing in the civil war, and Red Army troops were approaching the frontiers of the South Caucasus. In this situation the Georgian government signed a treaty with Soviet Russia on May 7, 1920. According to this treaty the border between Russia and Georgia was to be along the River Psou (RSFSR 1921: 9). Despite this, judging from military reports at the time, it seems that the border between Soviet Russia and Georgia ran along the Mekhadyr River, i.e. former Volunteer Army positions (Dzidzariia 1967: 167–8).[11]

In February 1921 Bolshevik forces invaded Georgia and proclaimed Soviet rule there. In the turmoil of an invasion the Soviet authorities in Sochi District moved the boundary deeper into Abkhaz territory – annexing the area of

Pelenkovo [Gantiadi] and establishing a border along the 1864 Abkhaz border that ran along the River Begepsta [Kholodnaia *rechka*] (Sagariia 1970: 110). Apparently the population of Pelenkovo District (Armenians and Greeks) welcomed this development because they were opposed to inclusion within Abkhazia.[12] It was only in 1929, after long bureaucratic exchanges, that the Abkhaz authorities managed – with the help of Georgia – to re-establish the border along the River Psou (ibid.: 110–12).

This brief overview of the development of the Abkhaz borders reveals that most of the frontier problems were concentrated along the Abkhaz-Russian boundary. The separation of Gagra District from Sukhum *okrug* in 1904; the constant fluctuation of the frontier during the civil war; the disputes over the Pelenkovo area which lasted until 1929 – all testify to tensions over that particular frontier. At the same time the Abkhaz-Georgian boundary established along the River Ingur in 1864, stands as a striking contrast. This frontier was not contested before, during or after the civil war.

Another important observation is that there was very little Bolshevik involvement in Abkhaz boundary-making. The only Bolshevik decision concerning Abkhaz borders was in the treaty of May 7, 1921, that established a border along the River Psou; and the decision of 1929 that granted the disputed Pilenkovo District to Abkhazia, thus restoring the border along the River Psou. The rest of the Abkhaz borders were inherited from the tsarist period without much contestation. Finally, it is surprising that the boundaries of an autonomous unit for an ethnic minority were created practically without ethnographic consideration. These peculiarities set the case of Abkhaz boundaries apart from the two other ethnic autonomies in the South Caucasus. Not only were the Bolsheviks heavily involved in drawing the borders of South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh, ethnographic considerations played a particularly important role in the boundary-making of these two autonomies. Such important differences require an explanation. Why was there so little Bolshevik involvement with boundary-making? Why did not ethnographic considerations play an important role in boundary-making in the case of Abkhazia?

One area of Abkhazia with potential for conflict was the Samurzakano region. This area, with a Mingrel majority, was attached to Abkhazia in 1864 and one might expect Mingrels to prefer to join Georgia in the post-imperial chaos that followed the 1917 revolution. However, no such attempt was made during the civil war even though Georgian forces controlled Abkhazia and had the possibility of attaching this region to Georgia proper.

It appears that conflict over Samurzakano was avoided for two mutually complementing reasons. In my opinion Georgians were not interested in annexing Samurzakano since they expected to attach Abkhazia in its entirety. In this context, the annexation of Samurzakano would have significantly lowered the proportion of the Georgian population in Abkhazia and weakened Georgian claims upon the entire region. At the same time it seems that the Abkhaz hoped both to retain their independence from Georgia and preserve control over Mingrel populated Samurzakano. Hence the Samurzakano region never became

a source of dispute between Abkhazia and Georgia. Further evidence of an extension of this curious cooperation is seen over the issue of the northern boundary of Abkhazia; on several occasions both Abkhaz and Georgians worked together to extend the northern borders of Abkhazia.

Conclusion

This chapter has enabled us to reach several important conclusions. First, it seems clear that what might appear as an intentional decision of the Soviet leadership to "divide and rule" was most likely the outcome of a contradictory decision-making process that occurred at two levels. Each level of decision catered for a different problem. Allocation was utlized as the easiest way to end violent conflict in a situation where the Bolsheviks lacked the resources to impose their will. The primary goal of delimitation was to implement earlier decisions regarding the creation of autonomous regions. Failure to have done so would have significantly undermined the Bolshevik position in the region. As a result, areas of ethnic conflict were left under the control of the victorious side; but at the same time they were carefully separated into political units based on ethnographic principles. This solution worked as long as the Soviet Union existed, but quickly descended into violent conflict as soon as the central authority weakened.

Second, it is clear that several principles were used when drawing boundaries: antecedent borders; geophysical features; political, economic and ethnographic considerations. It is also clear that the ethnographic principle was the dominant one. It was this principle that was used most in densely populated and ethnically mixed territories to separate two groups in conflict – the cases of South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh, where economic and geophysical considerations were sacrificed, confirm that. The case of Abkhazia might appear different since the ethnographic principle did not feature prominently in boundary-making here, but this case still fits within the general Bolshevik logic. The ethnographic principle was not applied since both sides were in agreement on the location of boundaries. As a result the boundaries of Abkhazia mostly followed antecedent tsarist borders.

These cases also demonstrate strong similarities with Central Europe, where simultaneously Wilsonian principles of self-determination were being put into practice. In the Caucasus, just like in Central Europe, the principle of self-determination was not followed to the letter – and as a result of certain political decisions some minority groups were left on the "wrong" side of the new border.

A further aspect of Soviet nationality policy becomes clear – the Soviet government awarded autonomy to areas where there was ethnic conflict as a part of its conflict resolution effort. Autonomous status was not awarded simply because an ethnic minority group resided in a certain area, even if it was a sizable and compact group. This explains why large and compact groups of Lezgins, Talysh residing in Azerbaijan, and sizable Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia did not receive autonomous status.

Notes

1 Nationalist leaders of the independent South Caucasian republics overthrown by the Bolsheviks.
2 The Red Army operating in the South Caucasus had insufficient resources to fully control the conquered territory. This can be seen from the numerous anti-Bolshevik rebellions that took place as soon as the Red Army was deployed elsewhere. Thus, rebellions occurred in rural Azerbaijan in the town of Ganja in May, and in the town of Shusha – and later on in Zakatala District in June 1920. Zangezur region rose in rebellion in October 1920. Major rebellion occurred in Armenia and southern Karabakh in February–April 1921 when the Red Army departed to conquer Georgia.
3 This can be illustrated by examples from Karabakh and Abkhazia. The Bolsheviks used the disputed territory of Karabakh to strengthen their position in the region. At first, and immediately after the sovietization of Azerbaijan, they unconditionally supported Azerbaijani claims to this disputed territory. When the Bolsheviks needed to facilitate the takeover of Armenia in December 1920 they forced the Azerbaijani leadership to renounce their claims over this disputed territory. Later, in May 1921, the Bolshevik leadership used the Karabakh issue as a way of undermining anti-Soviet resistance in Zangezur – by declaring that it would be granted to Armenia. Similarly, in the case of Abkhazia, it was granted formal independence in March 1921 as a means of gaining support for the Bolsheviks there. Later the same year it was rushed into union with Georgia – with total disregard for legal formalities – as a means of undermining the position of Georgian Bolsheviks who were resisting the creation of the Transcaucasian Federation.
4 The question of Abkhaz status was decided on March 31 in Batum; the political decision on the future of Nargono Karabakh was taken after a stormy session of the *Kavburo* on July 5, 1921; and the decision on the creation of South Ossetian autonomy was taken on October 31, 1921.
5 In the case of South Ossetia autonomy was proclaimed in April 1922; in the case of Nagorno Karabakh the formal declaration was made in June 1923 but the legal status and borders were only drawn by 1924–25.
6 Thus, Nariman Narimanov used economic arguments during the *Kavburo* decision concerning Karabakh on July 4 and 5; similarly, both sides used economic arguments to further their territorial claims when it came to the creation of the South Ossetian boundaries; finally, when the Abkhaz leadership was pressed into union with Georgia at the end of 1921 the economic argument conveniently surfaced once again.
7 *Bakinskii Rabochii*, July 9, 1923, No. 151, 879.
8 *Pravitel'stvennyi Vestnik*, supplement to *Bakinskii Rabochii*, November 26, 1924, No. 269, 1292, p. 2.
9 See also Armenian National Archive, fund 113, register 3, file 116, p. 42.
10 The small principality of Samurzakano, located on the border between Abkhazia and Mingrelia, was source of dispute between Abkhaz and Mingrel princes. In 1840 it was placed under Russian military rule as *pristavstvo*. When the semi-autonomous status of Mingrelia was revoked, and in its place Kutais *gubernia* was created, Samurzakano was administered as part of Kutais *gubernia* (1857). Following the dissolution of the Abkhaz principality and the creation in its place of Sukhum Military Department in 1864, Samurzakano was removed from Kutais administration and included within Abkhazia's borders.
11 In his 1923 report the head of the Abkhaz government, Nestor Lakoba, mentions the River Mekhadyr as a border between Soviet Russia and Abkhazia (Tulumdzhian 1957: 199).

12 The issue of separatism in this region of Abkhazia re-emerged in the aftermath of the unilateral Russian recognition of Abkhazia in 2008. In March 2011 ethnic Russian residents of the small village of Aibga on the Psou River petitioned to be placed under Russian jurisdiction. This generated tension between the Abkhaz and Russian authorities since the Abkhaz public is very sensitive to territorial issues. See: www.rferl.org/content/a_russian_land_grab_in_abkhazia/3542144.html [accessed December 31, 2011]; http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/03/30/abkhazia [accessed December 31, 2011].

7 From autonomy to conflict (1921–91)

An observer of the Caucasus will notice that despite a highly complex mixture of peoples and religions, combined with a number of existing ethnic tensions, violent ethnic conflicts occurred only in the areas of the autonomous formations – in Nagorno Karabakh, in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia. The astonishing speed with which the violent conflicts unfolded suggests that the conflicts that emerged in the wake of the collapse of the USSR were already ripe and the only thing needed for them to erupt was the removal of the constraints imposed by the Soviet regime. In this chapter I will try to show how the conflicting perceptions were shaped during the Soviet period.

First of all, there is institution of political autonomy. The discussion in the previous chapters argued that in all three cases, ethnic autonomies in the South Caucasus were created as a result of violent conflict. Thus, from the outset, the likelihood of an antagonistic relationship between the autonomous unit and its host republic was present. Current literature dealing with the question of federalism and violent conflict takes an ambivalent view of political autonomy. While some claim that granting autonomy can ease ethnic tensions through decentralization, others point at the examples of the USSR and the former Yugoslavia – where autonomous institutions undermined the federative states. In any case, it cannot be denied that autonomous institutions can act as a powerful mobilizing and identity-forming tool.

It was often considered that despite the declared federative nature of the USSR it wasn't a real federation, but rather a unitary authoritarian state. Hence, the autonomous and republican institutions had no real power and were an empty shell – a mere decoration of the Soviet regime. Undoubtedly the autonomous institutions functioning within the authoritarian Soviet system were subject to extremely rigid ideological constraints. However, I will try to prove that this did not render them impotent as tools of identity and mass mobilization. It should be noted that the role and importance of these institutions was not fixed throughout the Soviet era. During the period of *Korenizatsiia* the development of minority cultures was encouraged, a policy that was then replaced by Stalinist repression, to be followed by liberalization under Khrushchev, and then finally subject to the conservative stagnation of Brezhnev's era.

Another important distinction needs to be made between political and cultural institutions and their role within the Soviet system. The political institutions – the local parliament (*soviet*), and government (*TsIK*), remained conspicuously silent during most of the Soviet period. Despite their nominal political prominence their role as identity-makers and champions of local interests remained marginal. At the same time, the status of political autonomy entitled a minority group to a number of cultural institutions. In the post-Stalinist period these cultural institutions acquired the role of political ones. With the official Soviet doctrine stating that the nationality question had been solved, the discussion of inter-ethnic relations and current political issues – such as the rights of republics and autonomies – was banned. Hence, the public debate shifted from political institutions to cultural ones, with Aesopian language being used to express ethnic concerns and grievances. As a result, there existed a passionate public debate concerning medieval and ancient history, linguistics, ethnography, anthropology and onomastics. Even though the subjects of such historical studies might be as far remote as the Iron Age,[1] it was clear to everyone concerned that such studies had altogether contemporary political implications. Studies produced in the republics were designed to undermine the opponent's (i.e. autonomies' or neighboring republics') claims to legitimate statehood. Meanwhile, the opposite side naturally came out with completely different conclusions and implications.

While the political institutions remained dormant throughout the Soviet era, their importance should not be disregarded. They provided a ready-to-use political framework at the moment when the democratization campaign of Mikhail Gorbachev began. Once in use, these political institutions acquired legitimacy and overtook the cultural institutions as champions of political discourse (Brubaker 1996). It not surprising that most of the new leaders who challenged the communist authorities in the Caucasus had a social science and humanities background and were not representatives of state bureaucracy. Such figures included Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba, a historian, Georgian leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia, an English language specialist, Armenian leader Levon Ter-Petrosian, a historian, and Azerbaijani leader Abulfaz Elchibey, an interpreter.

In order to understand how conflicting tensions accumulated during the Soviet period I will consider several aspects that seem responsible for the latent development of conflict: (1) the availability and function of the cultural and political institutions within autonomies; (2) memories and narratives justifying hostility towards the "host" republic originating from either underground or official sources; (3) the policy of oppression (perceived or real) by the "host" republic, and; (4) the perception of the autonomy by the union republic within which it was situated.

An autonomous status within the Soviet state framework implied the existence of a number of formal, but symbolically important, institutions. These institutions provided a sense of "stateness" and included such diverse devices as political institutions (constitution, parliament), state symbols (flag, coat-of-arms), cultural institutions (theaters, national dance ensembles, branches of the Academy of Science, research institutes, publication of academic books), educational institutions

(schooling in the native language, universities, newspapers, radio and television broadcasts in the native language), institutions confirming the territorial ownership of the autonomy (place-names, road signs and borders on maps creating a sense of territorial segregation from the host republic).

The availability of cultural institutions enabled the creation of works that strengthened ethnic identity and legitimized the existence of an autonomous unit. Since the ethnic autonomies were created as a result of violent struggle during the civil war it was rather easy to explore memories of the conflict, albeit memories that were presented within the rigid limits of class struggle against bourgeois oppression.

The policy of oppression (perceived or real) by the "host" republic was yet another important ingredient generating ethnic tension. The political, cultural and educational institutions that clearly reinforced the notion of a separate statehood in the autonomies were seen in an entirely different light in the autonomies and "host" republics. In the "host" republic, regional autonomous institutions were seen as disproportionate, unjustly forced upon the union republic by the central authorities in Moscow, and infringing on its rights. This perception of the autonomies led to a policy aimed at imposing clear signs of the republic's sovereignty; at limiting the rights of autonomous areas; and, ideally, at the abolition of their autonomous status. In practical terms this meant that the "host" republic attempted to bring about uniformity between the autonomous area and the republic in terms of official language, school programs, state symbols, etc. Attempts to control and to fill key administrative and cultural positions in an autonomous area were meant to limit its ability to pursue an individual path. Finally, a policy designed to change the demographic pattern in the autonomous area was combined with the abolition of any indicators as to its ethnic character.

Needless to say, the perspective of the autonomies was quite different – they saw the autonomous institutions as grossly insufficient and subordinated to the "host" republic. This resulted in different types of policies adopted within the autonomies to secure and improve their position with regard to the "host" republic. The most popular way was to bypass the "host" republican institutions and complain directly to the higher authority, i.e. Moscow. In a number of cases the central authorities intervened, reinstating or improving the rights of the autonomies. These appeals to Moscow led the "host" republics to view the autonomies as being the fifth column of the central authorities. The following pages will show how these general features played themselves out in the particular cases of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh.

The role of the autonomous institutions in consolidating Ossetian identity

When South Ossetia became an autonomous region in 1922 it received the lowest administrative status awarded to an ethnic group within the USSR. Yet in the early years South Ossetia had an unusually large institutional base that was on a par with the higher ranking autonomous republic.

The South Ossetian government – the *TsIK* (Central Executive Committee) – was independent of the Georgian government. Usually autonomous regions were ruled by the *Oblispolkom* (Regional Executive Committee), which was directly subordinated to the republican government. Unlike other autonomous regions, South Ossetia possessed a number of *narkomats* (ministries) some of them were subordinated to corresponding Georgian *narkomats,* while others were only responsible to the Ossetian government. This disproportional institutional base remained in place until 1937. It was during this early period that a number of important cultural establishments came into existence in South Ossetia. Together with the political institutions, these cultural institutions formed the backbone of a complex identity-generating and enforcing mechanism.

One of the most important components for establishing identity was the founding of a network of newspapers, journals, and a publishing house promoting the Ossetian language, and literature. From January 1924 an Ossetian language newspaper was published that also served as a tribune for literary publications. In 1927 *Fidiuag* ("Herald"), a specialist literary journal, emerged. It is noteworthy that this journal was the only literary publication available to both South and North Ossetia until 1934, when North Ossetia received its own literary journal. The Ossetians were thus able to publish and develop a literature in their native language.

The provision of publishing tools (newspapers, journals and printing presses) was the easiest way to reach out to the population and demonstrate the superiority of the socialist path of development, as well as address the grievances of the civil war. It did not require sophisticated equipment and was logistically quite simple. The provision of these institutions came from Moscow, apparently bypassing Tbilisi. In the early 1930s a further set of cultural institutions was established. In 1931 the South Ossetian *TsIK* established the State Theatre of Drama, and the following year a State Pedagogical Institute was established in Tskhinvali (Alborov 1981: 158). Within the network of South Ossetian cultural institutions one of the most important one was the Institute of Language, Literature and History,[2] and its annual journal was launched in 1933. The journal published academic articles from a variety of disciplines – ranging from geology and economics to history and literature. The second issue featured memoirs and articles dealing with the civil war and establishment of the South Ossetian autonomy, reinforcing and dwelling upon the memories of the recent violent conflict.

In the second half of the 1930s the Soviet Union was entering a period of repression. The cultural development of the minorities was ubiquitously curtailed. The vibrant social science research themes dominant during the 1920s and early 1930s in the Ossetian publications disappeared altogether from the research agenda. The focus shifted to politically neutral subjects like the study of mineral and industrial resources in South Ossetia. In the 19 years between 1936 and 1955 the Ossetian Scientific Research Institute published only three volumes (1941, 1946, 1948)[3] of its supposedly annual or bi-annual journal.

While repression and curtailment of *Korenizatsiia* policies was initiated by the center, and affected all ethnic groups within the USSR, it nevertheless often

acquired a local flavor. A good illustration of this is the question of the Ossetian alphabet. In the nineteenth century the Russian linguist, Andrei Shergen, created a Cyrillic-based script for Ossetians that remained in use until the establishment of Soviet power. In the early 1920s Latinized alphabets, considered to be more progressive, were introduced for national minorities throughout the Soviet Union. The Ossetians received a Latin-based script in 1923, but in the mid-1930s Soviet policy made a dramatic U-turn and all recently created Latin-based scripts were replaced with Cyrillic ones.

In North Ossetia the Latin alphabet was replaced with Cyrillic in 1938. South Ossetians had their Latin alphabet replaced a year later. However, their new alphabet was based not on Cyrillic, but on Georgian graphics. Thus, a paradoxical situation emerged – while Ossetia was considered to be one nation, it had two different and mutually incomprehensible alphabets – North Ossetians used Cyrillic, while South Ossetians used Georgian script. The official explanation for this move is worth mentioning:

> The introduction of an alphabet for South Ossetia [that was] based on the Georgian alphabet and eliminating the Latinized alphabet significantly eased the task of popular education. The uniformity of the Georgian and South Ossetian alphabets allows [one] to learn reading and writing in Ossetian and Georgian languages and brings the South Ossetian people closer to the fraternal Georgian people, their language and high culture.
>
> (Bigulaev 1952: 54)

In other words, while North Ossetians were meant to assimilate into Russian culture, South Ossetians were to assimilate into Georgian culture. The introduction of the new alphabet was coupled with the closure of Ossetian schools in 1940 (Hewitt 1989: 139). For five or six years after the introduction of the Georgian alphabet in South Ossetia all academic work carried out by the Ossetian Scientific Research Institute was directed at "addressing the issues of the new alphabet, orthography" (Abaev 1948: 8). It was only after Stalin's death, that South Ossetians re-adopted the Cyrillic alphabet used in North Ossetia in 1954. These changes in the Ossetian alphabet inevitably left long-lasting negative memories and a fear of assimilation among Ossetians.

Stalin's death brought about a brief period of liberalization initiated by Nikita Khrushchev. In South Ossetia Krushchev's thaw was characterized by the revival of cultural life – the annual journal resumed its publication after almost two decades of neglect. Book publications soared.

Analysis of published works reveals several trends among Ossetian authors. First, South Ossetia is always dealt with as a single entity to emphasize the foundations of a political unit. Such an emphasis contrasts South Ossetia with the rest of Georgia, creating the impression of the existence of a South Ossetian entity prior to 1922. The research is largely focused on the peasant movement, i.e. revolts in South Ossetia in the nineteenth century. It depicts the (often violent) struggle of (Ossetian) peasants against (Georgian) landowners and

nobility. While operating within the seemingly neutral social categories of oppressed peasants and oppressing landowners, the subtle message is clear – the oppressed are Ossetians and the oppressors are Georgians. The following quotation perfectly summarizes the message conveyed by Ossetian authors:

> In order to "pacify" the Ossetians, the causes of the revolts had to be removed. And one of the main causes was the claims of the Georgian landowners on the Ossetian peasants and their oppression. Therefore, Machabeli and Eristavi landowners became not the support of the [tsarist] government but an obstacle … to making the Ossetians obedient.
>
> (Vaneev 1985: 182)

In other words, it gives retrospective advice to the tsarist rulers of the Caucasus (and perhaps to the Soviet rulers as well) – if they want to prevent Ossetian rebellions they should stop supporting the Georgian landowners.

Another important difference between the Ossetian and Georgian interpretations lies in the emphasis on different territorial traditions of the region. While Georgian scholars tend to show the territory of South Ossetia as part of a larger Georgian territorial unit, Ossetian scholars demonstrate instances when Ossetians were given a territorial unit by the tsarist administration, and especially when that unit bore the name "Ossetia" – such as the "Osetinskii *okrug*" (Ossetian District) (Vaneev 1985). Ossetian authors generally preferred the theme of administrative divisions in the Caucasus during tsarist times (M. P. Sanakoev 1985). Other favorite themes were the arrival of Ossetians in South Ossetia (Togoshvili 1983), and the ethnic origins of various historical personalities who played an important role in medieval Georgian history (this implied that Ossetians were not newcomers) (Togoshvili 1981: 102–13).

One of the most important trends dealt with the violent events of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict during the civil war. Presented as a revolutionary peasant struggle against bourgeois Menshevik oppression, Ossetian authors continued to demonstrate instances of their victimization at the hands of the Georgian Mensheviks.

While operating strictly within the Soviet ideological framework, Ossetian authors were able to express their ethnic grievances. This body of literature served to reinforce the Ossetian claim for autonomy and strengthened Ossetian identity by emphasizing past violent conflict with Georgia.

The removal of Khrushchev in October 1964 signaled the curtailing of the relatively liberal cultural policy. In South Ossetia book publication started to decline and historical works published in the aftermath of the thaw became much more ideologically sterile. In the early and mid-1970s the Soviet Union entered a period of stagnation, a period when negligible economic growth resulted in a drop in real incomes among the population. It was in this era that declining social and economic conditions in South Ossetia became the main theme of intellectual debate.

A number of social and economic conditions were notably worse in South Ossetia than in Georgia. The social and economic underdevelopment of

Ossetia was perceived by Ossetian intellectuals to be the result of deliberate Georgian policies. The Ossetians pointed out that their salaries were lower than those in the rest of Georgia. In 1974, for instance, the average monthly pay of an industrial worker in the USSR was 155 roubles, in Georgia it was 135 and in Ossetia only 131.3 roubles. However, the difference in the pay of agrarian workers was even more striking; the average Soviet agricultural worker earned 124.2 roubles, in Georgia 79, and in Ossetia 49 (Kabisova 1978: 61–2). In the decade from 1965 to 1975 the wage level in the Ossetian agricultural sector increased only marginally from 42 to 49 roubles (Kabisova 1980: 42). Since the rural population made up 60 percent of the South Ossetian population, the income disadvantage of Ossetia looks even more striking (Kabisova 1980a: 194). Another area of concern for Ossetians was the poor economic output of the Ossetian industrial complex when compared with the rest of Georgia. For instance, production output per capita in 1984 in South Ossetia was half the average Georgian output. Almost 94 percent of production was concentrated in the Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali. This disproportion was cited as one of the causes of rapid urbanization (Dzagoeva 1987: 175). Urbanization was perceived negatively, primarily due to its effect on declining birth rates.

The economic and social hardships of rural Ossetia, combined with the poor industrial capacity of the Ossetian capital, resulted in another worrisome trend for Ossetians – high emigration rates. For decades South Ossetia had a negative rate of migration. The long-term results can be seen in the often-cited (by Ossetian sources) fact that the population of South Ossetia in the early 1980s was lower (102,000) than the pre-Second World War population of 106,000 (Kabisova 1980: 179).

Obviously these economic and social conditions were not unique to South Ossetia – many other Soviet regions were in a similar situation in the mid-1970s. However, in the context of Georgia, their economic underdevelopment was seen by Ossetians as a deliberate policy of discrimination.

The assertive manner in which Ossetian intellectuals expressed their grievances did not go unnoticed by their Georgian colleagues. For obvious ideological reasons it was impossible to refute Ossetian claims of victimization at the hands of the Menshevik regime, and that of the Georgian landowners before this. Instead, the focus of discussion shifted mainly to the subject of recent Ossetian migration into Georgia, the subordinate status of Ossetian peasants to the Georgian feudal nobility, and the absence of an Ossetian political entity in Georgia prior to the establishment of the autonomy in 1922.

For instance, in 1971 an article appeared in a Georgian newspaper that claimed that the toponymy of South Ossetia was mainly of Georgian origin. Ossetian authors responded with an article entitled "Once again about Ossetian toponymy" (Tskhvrebova 1971: 241–8), which provided a detailed response and concluded that "Mamiev [the Georgian author] is not competent to make the claim that 'an overwhelming number of South Ossetian toponyms are of Georgian origin' " (ibid.: 243).

In analyzing this debate it is interesting to note that Ossetians deemed it necessary to issue a proper academic response to a newspaper article. The claim that South Ossetian toponyms are, in fact, Georgian, meant that Ossetians who had recently migrated to South Ossetia had apparently displaced the indigenous Georgian population. The far-reaching implication of such an interpretation was that Ossetian autonomy was an artificial creation and therefore lacked legitimacy. It is clear that Ossetians could not agree with this claim.

In 1985 an attempt was made to reconcile the views of Georgian and Ossetian scholars by producing a jointly authored book on the history of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. However, bringing together Georgian and Ossetian scholars failed to establish common ground and only highlighted the problem – while Georgian authors tended to overlook the Ossetian presence in the territory of South Ossetia the latter, in turn, avoided any mention of Georgia. In an article entitled "The Monuments of the Feudal Period," Rcheulishvili (1985) persistently refers to South Ossetia as "Shida Kartli" (internal Kartli). The use of the geographic term Shida Kartli instead of South Ossetia implied two notions – on the one hand, it emphasized that this territory belonged to the Georgian province of Kartli and, at the same time, it diluted the notion of any Ossetian political unit. Modern South Ossetia is described in the wider historical context of Georgia, the historical monuments in the region are Georgian and often have similar architecture to other regions of Georgia. There is no mention of Ossetian monuments. The Ossetians are completely excluded from the narrative.

Dissatisfaction with the situation in South Ossetia was also voiced by Georgian dissident intellectuals in the *samizdat* publications. In 1981 a letter entitled "The Demands of [the] Georgian People" was addressed to the head of the Georgian Communist Party, Eduard Shevarnadze, and to Leonid Brezhnev, outlining numerous Georgian concerns relating to the preservation of Georgian language and culture. One of the points demanded that "Georgian cadres should be admitted to the South Ossetian Research Scientific Institute."[4] Apparently the South Ossetian Institute was seen as a hotbed of Ossetian nationalism; appointment of Georgian cadres was seen as necessary to contain this.

The Georgian dissident intellectuals, unconstrained by ideological limitations, were able to state quite clearly what official historians were just hinting at – namely, given that Ossetians were relative newcomers without a statehood tradition in the South Caucasus, their autonomy lacked legitimacy and had been imposed upon Georgia by force in the aftermath of Bolshevik occupation. This can be seen from the 1987 letter of the future president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia:

> Autonomous entities were artificially created [in Georgia]. … South Ossetia was proclaimed in the Eastern part of Georgia even though Ossetians [historically] were a minority [who were] later resettled in these territories. …[T]he present day South Ossetia … was ruled by Machabeli princes and [one] can find ancient Georgian historical monuments but not the Ossetian ones.[5]

A year later the newly created National Democratic Party stated in its program that

> a methodical extermination of the Georgian nation takes place in Georgia by means of artificial change of demographic balance.… On a historical Georgian land autonomous units were created in Georgia: the so-called Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and Autonomous Region of South Ossetia have always been historical Georgian territory.[6]

The Ossetian autonomy was an intermediate solution adopted by the Bolsheviks to address the Georgian-Ossetian conflict during the civil war. As such it did not satisfy either party, but was favorable to the Ossetians since they received a political entity where none had existed before. The decision was imposed against the wishes of the Georgians, who strongly opposed it.

The availability of cultural institutions enabled South Ossetian intellectual elites to create and reinforce their national identity by reviving memories of victimization during the civil war. From the Ossetian point of view the autonomous status received in 1922 was a result of their struggle, and a guarantee against assimilation or expulsion. The exclusive focus on the territory of the autonomy and its retrospective projection into the past isolated South Ossetia from Georgia in the popular imagination of the Ossetian intellectuals.

Meanwhile, Georgian intellectuals developed a completely opposite narrative. Unhappy with the way the Ossetian scholars presented South Ossetia outside of a Georgian context, they worked to undermine the Ossetian claim for legitimacy. This was fully articulated by Georgian dissidents, who saw the sovietization of Georgia in 1921 as a violation of Georgia's sovereignty. Ossetian autonomy was seen as a reward by the Soviet authorities for their support against the Menshevik government. In other words, the Georgian public perceived South Ossetian autonomy as an entirely illegitimate entity.

By the late Soviet period Ossetian and Georgian identities were in a state of latent conflict. The weakening of the USSR, which became evident in the late 1980s, offered the possibility for openly voicing previously latent Georgian concerns. This, in turn, prompted Ossetians to demand first an upgrade to a higher autonomous status (which highlights their insecurity with regard to their existing autonomous status), and later full unification with North Ossetia after the Georgian response of removing their autonomous status entirely. These escalating demands, and the Georgian response, eventually sparked violence.

Escalation to war

Some observers have commented that the rapid escalation of the conflict in South Ossetia to the level of violence seemed "quite unexpected because in the relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali there had never been such tensions, as for instance, in the Abkhazian case" (Baev *et al.* 2002: 23) However, if one takes into account the mutual perceptions of the two societies, it is possible to understand the escalation to conflict. The beginning of *perestroika* unleashed

submerged anxieties in Georgian society and views about the illegitimacy of Ossetian autonomy began to be voiced openly. The Ossetians responded by creating their own National Front – *Ademon Nykhas* – in 1988. The first significant tension between Georgian and Ossetian nationalists was provoked by a letter written by the leader of *Ademon Nykhas* in support of the Abkhazian demands for separation from Georgia, which was published in the Abkhaz press. The letter also suggested that the South Ossetian Autonomous *Oblast'* should be upgraded to the level of autonomous republic. It led to some isolated clashes (Fuller 1991a: 21).

The next stage in the conflict came in August 1989, when, a month before the start of the new academic year, the Georgian Supreme Soviet adopted a language law. The law stipulated that Georgian should be the principal language of instruction in schools and universities in the entire territory of Georgia. This was perceived in the autonomous formations as a sign of outright discrimination and an attempt at assimilation. The Ossetians reacted by adopting a similar law on the Ossetian language, thus discriminating against their own Georgian minority.

Despite a history of relatively smooth relations between the two nations, this strong feeling of the illegitimacy of the Ossetian autonomy aggravated the threat of violence. Several facts point to this; the depiction of the South Ossetian territory by some Georgian scholars exclusively as part of the Georgian province of "Shida Kartli" was intended to highlight the artificial – i.e., imposed and therefore illegitimate – nature of the Ossetian autonomy. The Ossetians, in turn, responded to these threats by creating the popular front and requesting the Georgian Supreme Soviet to upgrade Ossetian status to that of an autonomous republic on November 10, 1989.[7] This request was ignored.

The first instance of violence was triggered by the march on Tskhinvali organized by Gamsakhurdia on November 23, 1989, when some 12,000–14,000 Georgians attempted to enter the Ossetian capital. Clashes occurred with Ossetians leaving several people dead.[8] From that point onwards the violence steadily escalated, reaching the level of full-scale military confrontation by December 1990.

Meanwhile, confrontation continued on the legal front where both sides engaged in a "war of laws," abolishing each other's decrees. Thus, on the eve of parliamentary elections, the Georgian Supreme Soviet adopted a law preventing South Ossetian *Ademon Nykhas* from participating. This decision further radicalized the Ossetians. They escalated their previous demand for elevation in status from autonomous region to autonomous republic within Georgia and declared separation. They adopted a decision in September 1990 to join the USSR as a union republic. In other words, Ossetians demanded the same political status as the Georgian SSR. Gamsakhurdia's government responded by abolishing the autonomous status of South Ossetia in December 1990, turning South Ossetia into an integral part of Georgia (Fuller 1990). To implement this decision a state of emergency was declared and several thousand members of the Georgian militia were despatched to enforce it. From that point the conflict turned into a full-scale war.

During the whole of 1991 periodic skirmishes occurred between the two sides in Tskhinvali and its nearby villages, and thereafter the most intense clashes occurred in spring 1992. In the summer of 1992 the military phase of the conflict came to an end with a ceasefire agreement and the introduction of a joint Ossetian, Georgian and Russian peacekeeping mission.

The outcome of the conflict was to leave Ossetians in control of a large portion of the Ossetian populated part of the autonomy, while the Georgian government controlled the Georgian populated parts. According to some sources nearly 100,000 Ossetians were expelled from elsewhere in Georgia while about 23,000 Georgians living in South Ossetia had to flee (Helsinki Watch 1992: 3).

Abkhazia

The creation of the Abkhaz SSR immediately after the Bolshevik takeover of Georgia created a range of opportunities for the Abkhaz to establish a network of political and cultural institutions. This institutional network eventually played an important role in shaping and consolidating the Abkhaz national identity in the course of the Soviet era.

The policies aimed at reviving Abkhaz culture were seen as necessary to overcome local nationalism and improve inter-ethnic relations that had been tainted by the Menshevik rule. Along with educational policies such as introduction of teaching in the Abkhaz language, a network of educational institutions was created in the early 1920s. Already in 1921 an educational college (*tekhnikum*) was created in Sukhum. Within a decade the number of colleges grew to nine.

More importantly, an Abkhaz Scientific Society was established in 1922 to explore Abkhaz history and language. Within a year it had launched two academic publications. In 1924 or 1925 another important cultural institution – the Academy of Abkhaz Language and Literature – was created. This was soon followed by publication of books and dictionaries on Abkhaz history and literature in Leningrad and Tbilisi. Already, by 1925, Dmitrii Gulia had published in Tbilisi the *History of Abkhazia* and the next year a Russian-Abkhaz dictionary was published in Moscow.

In 1930 the Abkhaz Academy and Abkhaz Scientific Society were merged and an Abkhaz Research Scientific Institute of Local Studies was created. This became the main cultural establishment which shaped the national identity of the Abkhaz throughout the Soviet era. In 1932 a Sukhum Pedagogical Institute was established.

The other side of cultural development was the wide network of local newspapers published in Russian, Abkhaz and Georgian languages – the first being published as early as 1921. Already, by 1932, 12 newspapers were published in Abkhazia (including two republican and one literary newspaper). In 1927 the Abkhaz Association of Proletarian Writers was created; this was later (1932) renamed the Writers' Union of Abkhazia. Finally, in the early 1930s, two publishing houses were established – *AbGIZ* (Abkhaz State Publishing) and *Abpartizdat*, a local Communist Party publishing house.

The Soviet policy of *Korenizatsiia* that ensured the political advancement of minority groups led to the growth of the number of Abkhaz in the local *soviets* to 32 percent, and their overwhelming domination in other key political institutions by 1929. The impressive number of cultural institutions that the Abkhaz created in the decade after sovietization surpassed the institutional networks of other autonomies and allowed for the creation of cultural products that reinforced Abkhaz national identity.

Despite the visible development of cultural institutions, the early 1930s saw the decline of the political status of Abkhazia – most notably the downgrading of Abkhazia from SSR to ASSR status as a part of standardization of the Soviet administrative system. The diminishing of the political institutions initially did not affect the cultural ones. However, rise of Lavrentii Beria as chief of the Transcaucasian Communist Party in the early 1930s would soon lead to a crackdown on cultural institutions. As a part of a campaign to consolidate his grip on the Transcaucasian politics Beria eliminated a number of his political rivals, among them Nestor Lakoba – who led Abkhazia from the early 1920s. After Lakoba's poisoning in 1936 the Abkhaz experienced a period of sustained repression that lasted until the deaths of Stalin and Beria in 1953.

In 1938 the Abkhaz had their alphabet transformed from its earlier Latin-based form into a Georgian-based orthography (Hewitt 1998: 171). This was particularly striking as at this time most other new alphabets of the Soviet minorities were being transformed from a Latin to a Cyrillic orthography. The outbreak of the Great Patriotic War in 1941 and subsequent hardships resulted in the notable decline of Abkhaz cultural establishments. Thus, in 1941, local radio broadcasting in the Abkhaz language ended. In the same year, teaching of the Abkhaz language and literature was stopped at the Sukhumi State Pedagogical Institute. Similarly, publication of the Abkhaz literary-artistic journal was temporarily suspended, apparently due to the outbreak of war though it was never resumed afterwards. In 1942 the residence of the Union of Soviet Writers of Abkhazia was taken away and the number of Abkhaz newspapers was reduced to just one.[9] While all this was occurring in the context of the Second World War, the Abkhaz viewed such policies as evidence of discrimination that specifically targeted their cultural establishments. After the end of the war the curtailing of Abkhaz cultural institutions continued. The transfer of teaching of all subjects in Abkhaz schools from the Abkhaz language to Georgian took place in the academic year 1945–46. No official explanation was given at first and it was only a year later, in November 1946, that an article in the local Abkhaz newspaper explained the need for such a transfer. Among the reasons cited was the following curious argument: "[T]he system of teaching [in the Abkhaz language] had interfered with and held back the further growth of the culture of the Abkhazian nation."[10] Furthermore, during the first year of the reorganization of Abkhaz schools, children were not allowed to transfer to Russian ones. Along with the transfer of schooling from the Abkhaz language to Georgian, the preparation of Abkhaz teaching cadres was gradually stopped.[11]

The Abkhaz language was not the only area targeted. Place-names and public signs in the Abkhaz language were also affected. The removal of these symbolically important markers designating the ownership of territory was intended to undermine the legitimacy of the Abkhaz claim to that territory. The resolution that notices and signs in public places should be written in Russian and Georgian was adopted by the Council of Ministers of the Abkhaz ASSR in 1946. The official and self-evidently preposterous excuse for the removal of the Abkhaz notices was their unsatisfactory appearance. In a similar fashion, numerous Abkhaz place-names were replaced by the Georgian form (either through the addition of the Georgian suffix –i, or by a complete replacement). For example, in 1936 the town of Sukhum was renamed Sukhumi, Tkvarchely became Tkvarcheli, and Ochamchiry changed to Ochamchiri.[12]

The demographic aspect of these policies was a program of resettlement of Georgians in Abkhazia in order to change the population balance. The first signs of the resettlement program appeared as early as 1937, when an organization with the curious name "*Abkhazpereselenstroi*" was established (Dzhonua 1992: 242). This name can be translated as the Abkhazian Transmigration Construction Trust. The trust was engaged in resettling Georgian villagers into Abkhazia for the entire 1937–53 period, except for the war years. The new settlements were apparently strategically placed in order to break up the concentration of Abkhaz populations, as well as on the border of Abkhazia with Russia.

The period of repression came to an end in 1953 with the death of Stalin and the subsequent execution of Beria. The new political climate in the USSR and the condemnation of Stalin's and Beria's regime allowed for outright reversal of the assimilation policies. It also allowed the Abkhaz to voice their grievances and put forward political and cultural demands. In November 1953 two Abkhaz authors sent a letter to Nikita Khrushchev complaining about "distortions in the Soviet nationality policy" (Hewitt 1996: 266).

The reversal of policies in Abkhazia should be seen in the context of a de-Stalinization campaign that was particularly difficult in Georgia, where, at that time, Stalin's personality cult remained strong. The restoration of the Abkhaz political and cultural institutions would be seen by Moscow as leverage against the position of Stalinists in Georgia. The new policies in Abkhazia occurred on both political and cultural levels – the Abkhaz were once again given priority access to executive positions in local party organs, in numbers greatly exceeding their share of the population. They increased their representation among city and district first secretaries from 4 percent in 1949 to 30 percent in 1963, and made up 37.5 percent in 1978. Abkhaz occupied 28 percent of heads of party positions in 1949, but this figure grew to 40 percent in 1963 and to 45 percent in 1978 (Slider 1985: 54).

Another indication of the special status enjoyed by the Abkhaz was the fact that an Abkhaz occupied the position of regional first *and* second party secretary from the late 1950s through to the early 1970s (d'Encausse 1979: 144). Usually, in non-Russian republics, the first party secretary was drafted from the local population while the less visible second secretary would be Russian. This

apparent anomaly also points to the fact that the Abkhaz were viewed as being loyal enough to occupy both positions. The interference of Moscow becomes even more obvious when one considers that in 1973 the Georgian authorities actually complained in the Tbilisi newspaper *Zaria vostoka* about over-representation of the Abkhaz in positions of political power in Abkhazia (Dobson 1975: 185), suggesting that such "over-representation" was achieved without the consent of the Tbilisi authorities.

All this coincided with the revival of cultural institutions. The immediate visible result was a tremendous growth in book publications in Abkhazia. During the Stalinist period the number of book titles steadily declined – from 88 in 1938 to 62 titles in 1940 and only 35 in 1954. With de-Stalinization book publication revived – from 58 titles in 1955, climbing to 96 the next year, and peaking at 115 in 1961 (Table 7.1). A number of books published in this period addressed Abkhaz grievances; dealing with the period of the civil war and the establishment of Soviet power in Abkhazia, and the ethno-genesis of the Abkhaz. These works addressed the ideologically permissible theme of the struggle for Soviet power, but at the same time emphasized the Abkhaz oppression at the hands of Georgian Mensheviks. Abkhaz political and cultural gains that came as a result of de-Stalinization were seen by the Georgian intellectual elites as discriminating against Georgians living in Abkhazia.

In 1950 the Georgian journal *Mnatobi* (Luminary) published an article by Pavle Ingoroqva in which he advanced a theory questioning the autonomous status of the Abkhaz. In his view, the ethnonym "Abkhazians" actually referred to a medieval Georgian tribe, while the modern Abkhazians were, in fact, seventeenth century migrants from the North Caucasus who displaced the original Abkhazians and took over their name.[13] This argument was later repeated in a book Ingoroqva published in 1954. In light of the policies of repression mentioned earlier, and in the context of the Stalinist times, the publication of such an article could be interpreted as a justification for the outright removal of Abkhazia's autonomous status, or perhaps the deportation of the Abkhaz as had happened in numerous nations in the North Caucasus just a few years earlier (Anonymous 1990: 23). In April 1957 two senior Abkhaz politicians (the president of the Abkhaz Council of Ministers, and the secretary of the Abkhazian *Raikom*) sent a letter to the presidium of the Communist Party complaining about Ingoroqva's book.

Open letters constituted part of confrontational politics and were a reaction to culturally sensitive events such as the publication of books and articles. Thus, the 1976 publication of a book entitled *Questions of the Ethno-Cultural History of the Abkhazians* (Inal-Ipa 1976) sparked just such a debate when local Abkhaz and Russian newspapers published editorials containing a positive review of the book by scholars of the Oriental Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences on January 4, 1977. A few months later both newspapers, as well as the local Georgian newspaper, once again turned to Inal-Ipa's work by simultaneously publishing an unsigned editorial article entitled "On the profound scholarly study of the history of Abkhazia" on May 14, 1977.[14] This time the editorial contained harsh

criticism of the book and its author. The simultaneous publication of this anonymous editorial by all three local newspapers was hardly accidental.

The Abkhaz responded to this apparently orchestrated criticism by sending a letter to the Department of Science of the Central Committee of the CPSU in Moscow, as well as to the first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, Eduard Shevardnadze, and to his Abkhazian colleague, in June 1977. The letter was prepared by scientific workers at the Abkhazian State Museum and dealt mainly with the academic aspects of the published criticism (Hewitt 1996: 269–82). Despite its apparent academic content, both sides undoubtedly saw this letter as a political manifestation. The fact that it was sent to political figures in the Communist Party leadership clearly reveals its real intent.

The early 1970s was a period of growing tension between Moscow and Georgia. The appointment of Eduard Shevardnadze, with his extensive MVD background, signaled Moscow's attempts to combat corruption in Georgia. The anti-corruption campaign, however, was perceived by Georgian society largely as an aspect of Moscow's Russification policies since it allowed Moscow to purge indigenous cadres and replace them with people amenable to Moscow's influence (d'Encausse 1979: 209–13). It should also be noted that the language issue played an unexpectedly important role in the symbolization of nationhood in both the Abkhaz, and especially the Georgian, traditions. As a result, any sign of limitation of the Georgian language, especially in favor of Russian, was perceived as a threat. For instance, the opening of experimental teaching in Russian in one of Zugdidi's schools, and the introduction of some Russian courses and text books in Tbilisi State University, prompted a Georgian writer, Revaz Japaridze, to speak against the policies of Russification in the presence of the Georgian first secretary, Eduard Shevardnadze, during the Eighth Congress of Georgian Writers in April 1976.[15] The publication of *VAK*'s decision that candidate and doctoral dissertations should be submitted in Russian similarly prompted a letter of complaint from 365 Georgian intellectuals to Brezhnev and Shevardnadzhe.[16]

The situation eventually reached a climax in 1978, when unauthorized demonstrations took place in Tbilisi, protesting against the removal of the article on state language in the draft of the republic's constitution published earlier that year. This was seen as another clear sign of Russification. Public protest in Georgia eventually resulted in the reinstatement of the clause in question. While the Georgians managed to protect their own national agenda, the events in Tbilisi had been mirrored in Abkhazia as well. The Abkhaz, however, protested against what they saw as a campaign of Georgianization. The 1977 "Abkhaz letter" already mentioned complains about Georgian discrimination, and it was followed by unauthorized protests in Abkhazia's capital Sukhumi, and a 12,000-strong gathering in the village of Lykhny.[17] The demonstrations were accompanied by industrial action in the town of Tkvarcheli.[18] The Abkhaz protests also took more violent forms, such as the vandalizing of the Shota Rustaveli monument,[19] the destruction of Georgian language public signs, and the defacement of all Georgian road signs on a highway between the Inguri and

Psou Rivers (i.e. from the Mingrelian to the Russian border).[20] In short, as a Georgian dissident summed it up, the Abkhaz demanded separation from Georgia and incorporation into the Russian Federation, establishment of their own state symbols and language, and removal of Georgians from executive positions.[21] The Georgians reacted to the Abkhaz mobilization by organizing their own demonstrations in Gagra in September 1978 where they protested about discrimination against Georgians in Abkhazia.[22]

Events in Abkhazia received significant attention in Moscow and triggered the visit of a high-ranking delegation headed by *Politburo* member I.V. Kapitonov (Slider 1985: 60). Following this visit a number of resolutions emerged that provided the framework for cultural developments in Abkhazia. The major change for Abkhaz cultural institutions was the transformation of the Sukhumi Pedagogical Institute into the Abkhaz State University as early as 1979. It appears that the university in Abkhazia was opened instead of the one due to open in Ajaria (Anonymous 1990: 23). The university had three sectors – Abkhaz, Georgian and Russian – the latter being the largest. The opening of Abkhaz State University had several implications. From the Georgian perspective, which perceived Moscow's attempts at Russification as a threat to Georgian identity, the establishment of a university with a significant Russian sector in an area with a large Georgian population seemed a clear policy of discrimination against Georgians. What is more, the granting of a university to such a small group as the Abkhaz was seen as another sign of the disproportionate concessions granted by Moscow to the minority.

Among other measures that emerged after the 1978 events was the opening of a TV station broadcasting in the Abkhaz language in November. Two Abkhaz language journals were also launched (Hewitt 1989: 141); and a theater in Sukhumi which had previously accommodated both Abkhaz and Georgian sections was given exclusively to the Abkhaz, while the Georgian section was left without a building until a new theater could be built (Slider 1985: 63). Thus, the Abkhaz were able to attain a number of important institutions that fostered a sense of identity and statehood and served as a platform for voicing their concerns.

The cultural gains of the Abkhaz and the sudden introduction of teaching in Russian and Abkhaz prompted a number of Georgian protests. The writer Revaz Japaridze wrote a personal letter to Eduard Shevardnadze in 1979 on behalf of Georgian intellectuals from Sukhumi, in which he demanded the opening of Georgian sectors in all faculties of Abkhaz State University – with the exception of the Abkhaz language and literature faculty. The Abkhaz sector attracted his special attention:

> [W]ith regard to the Abkhaz sectors, they are nothing but setting up privileges to the Abkhaz and young careerists. They [Abkhaz] study in the Abkhaz [language] only until the third grade [in school]! Where is the elementary logic [of granting them special sectors at the University]?.... It is done to satisfy the Abkhaz extremists.[23]

Unauthorized demonstrations once again took place in Tbilisi in 1981. Some Georgians from Abkhazia took part in these protests, demanding the protection of Georgians in Abkhazia "against discrimination,"[24] and "Freedom for Markozia."[25] Shevardnadze was compelled to meet with the demonstrators and allegedly promised to find a solution to the "Abkhaz problem."[26] In the aftermath, some of their demands were fulfilled – the construction of the new Georgian theatre in Sukhumi was speeded up, a monument to Rustaveli which had been vandalized was restored,[27] and Markozia was given a suspended sentence, apparently as a result of the demonstrations.[28] Despite these measures, Georgians interpreted the outcome of the 1978 events as a sign of Russian and Abkhaz discrimination against the Georgian population in Abkhazia, and Georgian identity in general. Repercussions from the events of 1978 were felt throughout the 1980s. Georgian dissidents, both in Georgia proper and in Abkhazia, continued to protest about the over-representation of the Abkhaz in state and cultural institutions in Abkhazia until the beginning of Gorbachev's *perestroika*.[29]

Escalation to war

The limited political liberalization initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in early 1987 led to unintended consequences in the union republics. In Georgia, deep-seated grievances against Soviet policies began to be voiced. Initially the expression of discontent was channeled through environmental demands – in the aftermath of Chernobyl it became a convenient and safe avenue for the expression of discontent. But the demands soon went beyond purely environmental issues and spread to areas of the preservation of Georgian cultural heritage and language rights. A National Front was created, and demands were made in February 1989 for the protection, in particular, of the rights of Georgians domiciled in those parts of Abkhazia where the ethnic Abkhaz were over-represented in political structures (Fuller 1989a). The Abkhaz, observing these developments in Georgia, responded in the summer of 1988 by sending a letter signed by 58 Abkhaz intellectuals to the Nineteen All Union Party Conference demanding secession from the Georgian SSR. This letter served as the basis for new demands for restoration of the 1925 Abkhaz Constitution arising from a mass meeting in Lykhny village on March 18, 1989 (Fuller 1989b).

The situation deteriorated into inter-communal violence in the summer of 1989 when the Georgian population of Sukhumi attempted to establish of a branch of Tbilisi State University in Sukhum. Clashes took place, leaving more than a dozen people dead.[30] The violence eventually subsided but confrontational politics continued – in response to the Georgian election law that prevented regional political parties from participation, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet declared the establishment of the Abkhaz SSR on August 25, 1990.

Meanwhile, the demoralized communist leadership in Georgia suffered further humiliation when nationalist opposition leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia became chairman of the Georgian Supreme Soviet in October 1990. A few months later (in December 1990) the Abkhaz nationalist politician Vladislav

Ardzinba was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia. With the election of two popular nationalist leaders in Abkhazia and Georgia the politics of confrontation was bound to continue. Unsurprisingly, the Abkhaz wholeheartedly supported the new draft of the Soviet Constitution – which granted equal rights to autonomous units and stipulated that in the case of those union republics opting to separate from the Soviet Union the autonomous units contained within them could opt to remain – a desperate attempt by Gorbachev to introduce leverage against separatist tendencies. In a similar manner, Abkhazia participated in an all-union referendum on the new Soviet Constitution – which was ignored by Georgia.

Yet despite these confrontational politics, in the spring of 1991 an unusual compromise was negotiated between the Georgian and Abkhaz governments. A new election law for Abkhazia stipulated a fixed number of places for major ethnic groups in Abkhazia – 28 places for the Abkhaz, 26 places for Georgians and 11 places for the other minority groups. It clearly discriminated against the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia – Georgians – and granted disproportionate power to the Abkhaz minority. But in a situation of unfolding war in South Ossetia this concession somewhat stabilized the situation.

The situation in Georgia was overtaking developments in Abkhazia. In May 1991 Gamsakhurdia was elected as Georgian president. After the failure of the 1991 August coup in Moscow the situation in Georgia continued to deteriorate – not only was conflict with South Ossetia still looming, the authoritarian politics of Gamsakhurdia was alienating his allies. By September 1991 large-scale anti- and pro-Gamsakhurdia demonstrations were taking place in the Georgian capital, and by December the opposition – aided by paramilitary formations – was laying siege to Gamsakhurdia in a parliament building and demanding his resignation. By January 6, 1992, Gansakhurdia had been ousted but the new ruling body – a military council – found itself lacking any international legitimacy. The solution was to invite Shevarnadze – former first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party (and later a foreign minister under Gorbchev), and who enjoyed certain legitimacy in the eyes of international leaders, to take over. In March he was elected a head of a new state council – a transitory body until new elections could be held.

Shevarnadze inherited a country in a state of turmoil – general lawlessness was supplemented by smoldering conflict in South Ossetia, continued support for the ousted Gamsakhurdia in western Georgia, as well as an uncertain situation in an Abkhazia that was falling outside Georgian control. By June 1992 Shevarnadze had signed a ceasefire agreement in South Ossetia, brokered by Russia, which resulted in the de facto loss of Georgian sovereignty over parts of it. The last installment of confrontational politics between Georgia and Abkhazia ensued in summer 1992. Shevarnadze rescinded the Georgian Constitution of 1978 and replaced it with the one of 1921. Abkhazia responded by reinstating the 1925 Abkhaz Constitution. This last move symbolized a declaration of Abkhaz independence since the 1925 Abkhaz Constitution depicted Abkhazia as a sovereign republic.

On August 14, 1992, Georgian forces entered Abkhazia under the pretext of defending the railway, an act that signaled the beginning of a full-scale military conflict. Georgian troops were initially successful, capturing most of Abkhazia except the Gudauta region. The Abkhaz received support from volunteers from the North Caucasus, as well as tacit Russian support, and launched a counter-offensive in October. After a temporary stalemate Abkhaz forces stormed Sukhumi in summer 1993, expelling Georgian troops as well as the entire Georgian population from Abkhaiza – nearly 250,000 people. Abkhaz victory in the war resulted in dramatic demographic change – by expelling Georgians the Abkhaz became the majority in Abkhazia for the first time since 1867.

Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region (1923–88)

Nagorno Karabakh was the last region to achieve autonomous status in the South Caucasus, in 1923. Like South Ossetia it received the lowest administrative status of autonomous region. In the early years its political institutions were similar to the South Ossetian ones, and were wider-ranging than in other autonomous regions within the USSR. But this advantage did not translate into the establishment of a network of cultural institutions that could be used to manufacture the identity discourse.

The higher education institution in Karabakh was the Pedagogical Institute, which was opened quite late in the Soviet period – in the early 1970s. However, it did not play any noticeable role in manufacturing identity discourse. Karabakh did not have any scientific institutions or an academic journal dealing with scientific issues. Overall Nagorno Karabakh had fewer of the sort of cultural establishments which, as has been shown, proved crucial in Abkhazia and South Ossetia for the development of local identities. This disparity becomes even more apparent when one compares the number of books published in Nagorno Karabakh with the number published in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The table below is a compilation of book publishing data from the ethnic autonomies of the South Caucasus for the period 1938–67.

In a striking contrast with the Georgian autonomies, Nagorno Karabakh did not publish a single volume until 1963 – when two books were printed. These were followed by seven more titles in 1965, after which book publication once again declined. One more book – a statistical yearbook – was published in 1974 to illustrate the achievements of 50 years of Soviet rule in Karabakh (Astsaurian

Table 7.1 Publication of books in the autonomies of the South Caucasus

	1938	*1954*	*1955*	*1956*	*1957*	*1958*	*1959*	*1960*	*1961*	*1962*	*1963*	*1964*	*1965*	*1966*	*1967*
Abkhaz ASSR	88	35	58	96	91	107	103	99	115	78	82	60	83	89	95
South Ossetian AO	38	52	61	53	59	61	64	63	60	41	45	37	49	63	47
Nagorno Karabakh AO	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	N/A	7	N/A	N/A

1974). No more books were printed in Karabakh until the outbreak of conflict in late 1980s.

This might appear as a sign of discrimination, especially in comparison with Abkhazia and South Ossetia where dozens of books were published each year. But taken in the context of Azerbaijan this is not necessarily the case. Azerbaijan published significantly fewer book titles than Georgia, and its second autonomy – Nakhichevan ASSR – did not publish any books in the surveyed period. More revealing is perhaps the fact that unlike any other autonomous formation within the USSR, NKAO never published a single title related to the establishment of Soviet authority in Karabakh.

The absence of such publications originating from Karabakh is significant as it was through such publications that local authors in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were able to manifest their grievances against Georgia while remaining within the permitted ideological framework. The paucity of cultural institutions in Nagorno Karabakh did not prevent Armenians from expressing their grievances in a similar manner to the South Ossetians or the Abkhaz. This task was undertaken by the academic establishments within the Armenian SSR.

Before turning to the scientific confrontations between Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars it is necessary to provide here a brief account of the political developments around Nagorno Karabakh which have intricately influenced the academic debates from the 1960s until the late 1980s. The political voice of Nagorno Karabakh throughout the Soviet period remained weak; but instead, the Armenian SSR acted on behalf of Nagorno Karabakh Armenians – making several attempts to attach Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia. These attempts remained largely concealed from the general public view but undoubtedly influenced attitudes and perceptions among the leadership of the two republics.

One of the early attempts was made soon after the end of the Second World War and occurred in the context of Soviet territorial claims against Turkey and Iran. The USSR refused to evacuate Iranian territory that it had occupied during the war, and hoped to attach it to Soviet Azerbaijan. At the same time territorial demands on behalf of the Armenian and Georgian SSRs were made against Turkey. In this environment, when the territories of all three Transcaucasian republics were expected to expand, the Armenian leadership appealed to Moscow for the attachment of Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia. In view of the anticipated aggrandizement of Azerbaijan at the expense of Iran, loss of the Armenian populated Nagorno Karabakh was seen as being of negligible consequence. But the attempt failed; the leader of Azerbaijan, Mir Jafar Bagirov, skilfully navigated dangerous waters by agreeing with Armenian demands in principle but demanded in exchange the Azerbaijani populated territories of Armenia. Following this, the Armenians recalled their proposal (Imranly 2006: 175–6).

Another attempt was made during the Khrushchev era, within a few years of the transfer of the Crimea from Russia to Ukraine. The leadership of the Armenian SSR appealed to Moscow in 1960 in the hope of attaching Karabakh to Armenia – but this appeal was rejected by Khrushchev (Imranly 2006: 180–1).

Despite the secrecy of such attempts, rumors began to spread among the population about what was happening behind closed doors. The Soviet leadership's official response was that it had no right to decide upon such matters unless Azerbaijan was willing to cede the territory in question (Libaridian 1988: 151).

In mid-1960s the Armenian SSR experienced a surge of nationalist sentiment. In 1965, unauthorized mass demonstrations took place in the Armenian capital Yerevan commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. Among demonstrators' slogans were demands for the return of the lost territories from Turkey, but also those lost to Azerbaijan. Around this time a *samizdat* letter signed by 2,500 Karabakh Armenians appeared, a letter that detailed instances of alleged discrimination directed against them by Azerbaijan and asking for the removal of Nagorno Karabakh from Azerbaijani jurisdiction and instead for it to be placed within Armenia or Russia.[31] In these circumstances the Soviet Armenian government responded to popular sentiment and appealed to Moscow asking for the transfer of Nagorno Karabakh (Libaridian 1988: 151). Moscow made some symbolic concessions but refused to make any territorial changes.

The attempt to change the status of Nagorno Karabakh was not limited to official channels and was complemented by numerous *samizdat* activities. Armenian activists from Karabakh compiled numerous letters of protest addressed to the Soviet leadership, in which they outlined their grievances against Azerbaijan.[32]

Existing tensions surfaced once again in the mid-1970s when a book volume commemorating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Soviet Karabakh was withdrawn and the entire print run destroyed, apparently due to an unacceptable representation of the history of Nagorno Karabakh (Shnirel'man 2001: 160). Instead a statistical yearbook was published in 1974. Thereafter, the next publication, devoted to the 60th anniversary, was published in Baku rather than in Stepanakert (Muslimov *et al.* 1983).

These political events provide an essential background to the understanding of the academic debates between Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars. The following short overview is based on an analysis of the confrontational scholarship produced in Armenia and Azerbaijan made by Viktor Shnirel'man (2001). It aims to outline the main trends of these debates and their relevance to the political process, and to the shaping of conflicting national identities.

Prior to the late 1950s Armenian-Azerbaijani disagreements did not spill out into academic disputes. It appears that one reason for this was the near total absence of native historians in Azerbaijan during the early Soviet period (Shnirel'man 2001: 96). The Bolsheviks, in the 1920s, encouraged the development of national cultures and established a number of academic institutions in Azerbaijan. But the few Azerbaijani historians who were active in this early period did not fit well with the ideological dogma of the time (ibid.: 97). Due to the absence of reliable local cadres practically all early Soviet historians of Azerbaijan came from Russia. It took a generation before Soviet Azerbaijani historians were trained and started writing their own history. Another reason

preventing the emergence of any confrontational debate between Armenian and Azerbaijani historians before the 1960s were restraints imposed by Soviet ideology. Any hint of nationalism or deviation from the official dogma was dangerous. The Khrushchev era was an important turning point; the system relaxed and the first generation of native Azerbaijani historians began to publish their works. Another factor that undoubtedly explains the direction of their studies is the recent experience of the Azerbaijani political elite of Armenian separatism – by the mid-1960s Armenians had already twice attempted to annex Karabakh. The political leadership of Azerbaijan felt a need to undermine Armenian historical claims to Karabakh; history was seen as a useful tool to achieve this.

Two trends can be distinguished in the Azerbaijani historiography of the post-Stalin period. The first generation of scholars believed it necessary to ignore references to the Armenian presence in the territory of Azerbaijan. A rather crude and naive technique was used to achieve this – a number of sources were republished in which references to Armenia were carefully removed, creating a vision of the territory of modern Azerbaijan without any trace of Armenians.[33] A particularly important figure was Zia Buniatov, who published ideologically important work on the history of medieval Albania in which he claimed that Armenians (with the help of Arabs) assimilated the Christian Albanians and destroyed their culture (Shnirel'man 2001: 153).

Another trend emerged in the second half of the 1970s; new works on the origins of the Azerbaijani nation advanced hypotheses that linked Azerbaijanis to the medieval state of Caucasian Albania (ibid.: 161). The emphasis now shifted away from ignoring the presence of Armenians and towards attributing all early Christian heritage located in the territory of Azerbaijan, to Albanians (ibid.: 165). This achieved two goals; on the one hand it undermined Armenian historical claims to these territories, while at the same time it reinforced Azerbaijani historical claims through their association with Caucasian Albania.

Armenian academicians responded to these challenges by publishing numerous critical reviews of the Azerbaijani works in Armenian journals (Ganalanian *et al.* 1978; Melik-Ogandzhanian 1968; Mnatsakanian and Sevak 1967). But they had little success stemming Azerbaijani publications since the latter were apparently supported by the political leadership of Azerbaijan.

These academic trends curiously found their reflection in the official lists of protected historical monuments issued by the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijani SSR. The first such list, published in April 1968, included 591 historical monuments. Among those, 25 monuments were mentioned from Nagorno Karabakh but the confessional nature of some of these monuments was obscured, making it unclear whether these were Armenian churches or other religious monuments. A similar list published in 1988 included 3,142 monuments of which 283 were located in Nagorno Karabakh. This time all the churches before the thirteenth century were mentioned as Albanian churches while the later ones were referred to as temples and therefore could not be associated with Armenians.[34]

This brings us to another aspect present in all three ethnic autonomies – the expression of grievances. Grievances emerging from Karabakh were never

addressed to the Azerbaijani leadership in Baku. They could be addressed directly to the Soviet authorities in Moscow, and at the same time to their compatriots in the Armenian SSR; also, unlike Abkhaz or Ossetian grievances, the Karabakh Armenian complainants circulated in *samizdat*, eventually finding their way to the West. Karabakh Armenian grievances focused on issues of autonomous status, the official language, demographics and the socio-economic situation.

The decree of July 7, 1923, announced the establishment of the Nagorno Karabakh autonomy, and specified that Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Region would be created from the Armenian populated part of Mountainous Karabakh.[35] The more precise statute on the NKAO published in *Bakinskii Rabochii* in November 1924 remained silent about the ethnic nature of its autonomy. The only hint that its population might be ethnically different was given in Article 2, which stated: "[A]ll official correspondence, court proceedings and primary education is being conducted in [the] native language."[36] However, the "native language" was not specified. The Constitution of the Azerbaijani SSR from 1937 devoted an entire chapter to outlining the rights of the NKAO. Article 78 stated that "[d]ecisions and decrees of the Soviet of Deputies of NKAO are being published in [the] Armenian and Azerbaijani languages" (Abramovich and Rasulbekov 1966: 17). Finally, in June 1981, the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijani SSR adopted a new statute of NKAO which in its entire 52 pages avoided any mention of the ethnic character of the autonomous region, and only in vague terms hinted that the population might have been different since the court proceedings were to be conducted in a "language of [the] autonomous region or in Azerbaijani" (Zakon 1981: 49–50). Yet there were no clues as to what the "language of the autonomous region" might be.

Reference to the Armenian character of the autonomy appeared and disappeared throughout the Soviet period, like the Cheshire Cat. Given that unlike most ethnic autonomies within the USSR the official name of Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAO) did not reflect its ethnic character, it becomes clear that the disappearance in official documents of all references to Armenian as an official language was perceived as a deliberate policy aimed at stripping the region of its autonomy.

Another aspect of Armenian grievance concerned demographic policies. In the late 1960s the Azerbaijani population of the autonomous region began to exponentially grow while the growth of the Armenian population stalled. Karabakh Armenians saw this as further evidence of an attempt to abolish their autonomous status by subtley shifting the demographic balance in favor of Azerbaijanis – and once the balance tipped it would be easy to remove their autonomy. In order to dramatize the demographic trends in Karabakh, Armenian nationalists often drew comparisons with the situation in Nakhichevan where the Armenian population declined from nearly half the population to a mere 0.6 percent by the end of the Soviet era (Itogi 1993: 494). This comparison is not entirely correct since the figure of nearly half the population relates to pre-1914 statistics. During the civil war, and as a result of inter-communal clashes, the

Table 7.2 Ethnic distribution of the population in Nagorno Karabakh

	1926		*1939*[1]		*1959*		*1970*		*1979*		*1989*	
Armenians	**111,700**	89.1%	**132,800**	88%	**110,053**	84.3%	**121,068**	80.5%	**123,076**	75.8%	**145,450**	76.9%
Azerbaijanis	**12,600**	10.5%	**14,053**	9.3%	**17,995**	13.8%	**27,179**	18%	**37,264**	22.9%	**40,688**	21.5%
Russians	**600**	0.5%	**3,984**	2.7%	**1,790**	1.3%	**1,310**	0.9%	**1,263**	0.8%	**1,922**	1%
Total	**125,300**		**150,837**		**130,406**		**150,313**		**162,181**		**189,085**	

Note
1 Poliakov *et al*. (eds) 1992: 71.

Armenian population of Nakhichevan dramatically declined. By the beginning of the Soviet era Armenians made up only about 10 percent of the population of Nakhichevan ASSR; the dramatic decline being mostly due to expulsions during the civil war.

The table 7.2 reveals that the two main ethnic groups in the autonomous region were increasing disproportionately – between 1959 and 1970 the Azerbaijani population increased by 51 percent while Armenians grew by 10 percent; between 1970 and 1979 the Azerbaijani population increased by 37 percent while the Armenian population grew by just 1.6 percent. The situation somewhat reversed between 1979 and 1989 when the Azerbaijani population increased by 9.2 percent and the Armenian one by 18 percent; however, this probably reflects the influence of a conflict that started in early 1988 and which saw a number of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan brought into Karabakh while some Azerbaijanis must have fled.

Interestingly enough, confirmation of the deliberate demographic change policy pursued by the Azerbaijani authorities in Karabakh comes from a 2002 interview of Azerbaijani president, Heidar Aliev, who in 1969 became the head of Soviet Azerbaijan:

> I talk about a period when I was the First Secretary [of the Azerbaijani CP] and helped a lot at that time with the development of Nagorno Karabakh. At the same time I tried to change the demographics there. Nagorno Karabakh petitioned for the opening of an institute of higher education there. [In Azerbaijan] everybody was against it. After deliberations I decided to open one, but on condition that there would be three sectors – Azerbaijani, Russian and Armenian. After [the institute] opened we no longer sent Azerbaijanis from the neighboring regions to Baku [and] instead [sent them] there [to Karabakh]. [We also] opened a large shoemaking factory there. In Stepanakert itself there was no workforce [so] we sent there Azerbaijanis from the surrounding districts. With these and other measures I tried to increase the number of Azerbaijanis in Nagorno Karabakh and the number of Armenians decreased. Those who worked at that time in Nagorno Karabakh know about it.
>
> (Aliev 2002)

A number of grievances related to what was seen as the deliberate hindering of communications between Nagorno Karabakh and the Armenian SSR. Allegedly the Azerbaijani authorities neglected the maintenance of the stretch of the road between Shusha and Goris, which was the shortest route between Karabakh and Armenia. As a result the regular bus service between Yerevan and Karabakh was directed via a much longer route: Yerevan-Kazakh-Kirovabad-Agdam-Stepanakert. Another complaint was related to the fact that all main paved roads connecting the regions of Karabakh were designed in such a way as to pass through neighboring Azerbaijani regions outside the boundaries of the NKAO. In the few instances where such roads passed within the territory of Karabakh they necessarily traversed Azerbaijani settlements. Thus, from the Armenian

point of view, the transportation infrastructure was deliberately laid out so as to hinder communication between the Armenian parts of Nagorno Karabakh.

While these allegations have truth to them, it should also be noted that from a geophysical point of view the mountainous regions have better and cheaper communication lines with the adjacent lowlands and consequently communication between mountainous regions is easier via the lowlands. This situation is very much reminiscent of the problems in South Ossetia where different mountainous Ossetian regions were better integrated with lowland Georgian regions. Yet, unlike Karabakh, South Ossetia received funding to build a road linking its poorly connected mountainous parts.

By the end of the Soviet era serious tensions existed between the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh and the political and intellectual leadership of Azerbaijan. Both sides developed mutually exclusive and uncompromising perceptions of each other. The Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh suspected the Azerbaijani leadership of pursuing policies directed at terminating their autonomous status through the deliberate resettlement of Azerbaijanis in Karabakh; through creation of conditions that encouraged local Armenians to leave; and through appropriation of their cultural heritage. From their point of view the only way out was to separate from Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani leadership suspected the Armenians of Karabakh of separatist tendencies that were demonstrated on numerous occasions during the Soviet period. Their implementation of demographic policy, attempts to limit contact between Nagorno Karabakh and the Armenian SSR, as well as an interpretation of history and cultural heritage that excluded Armenians from the narrative was partly a reaction to the Armenian secessionist challenge. The conflict resurfaced almost immediately once Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnoist'* policy allowed a limited expression of grievances.

Escalation to war

Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno Karabakh was the first large-scale violent ethno-national conflict in the USSR. Unlike conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which gained momentum over several years, the conflict in Karabakh very quickly turned violent, presenting the Soviet leadership with a dilemma which it ultimately failed to resolve.

Surprisingly little is known about the early stages of mass mobilization in Karabakh. What seems clear is that the local activists, capitalizing on the campaign of *glasnost'* announced by Gorbachev in 1987, started to collect signatures in support of the transfer of the autonomous region from Azerbaijan to Armenia. In their minds this was the right time to act since the Soviet authorities themselves were denouncing old errors; the granting of Karabakh to Azerbaijan was seen as a violation of Leninist principles of nationality policy. The demand, backed by 75,000 signatures, was submitted to Moscow sometime in the summer of 1987. In early February 1988 a low-level official in the Central Committee responded that the demand had been rejected.[37] This in turn triggered a chain of events in Nagorno Karabakh itself.

By early 1988 the lowest level *raion soviets* in Nagorno Karabakh began passing resolutions calling for the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia. This was accompanied by unauthorized meetings in the capital of the autonomous region – Stepanakert. Eventually, on February 20, the Armenian deputies to Nagorno Karabakh Oblast' Soviet adopted a resolution calling for the transfer of the *oblast'* to Armenia.[38] It was at this moment that the issue spread to the Armenian capital, where a number of environmental protesters had been campaigning over the previous few months against pollution-causing factories.[39] Within days the streets of the Armenian capital were filled with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators demanding the unification of Karabakh with Armenia.[40]

This mass mobilization in Armenia produced a backlash in Azerbaijan – in February a large crowd of Azerbaijanis from the town of Agdam, on the border with Karabakh, marched towards Stepanakert. A clash occurred in which two Azerbaijanis died.[41] The deputy soviet public prosecutor, Katusev, speaking on Baku Radio, mentioned the incident and revealed the nationality of the dead men on February 27.[42] Apparently this announcement sparked a violent anti-Armenian *pogrom* in the industrial town of Sumgait near the Azerbaijani capital; this lasted three days and left 32 people dead, with law enforcement authorities failing to intervene. The significance of the Sumgait *pogrom* was that it marked a point of no return in the conflict. Armenians saw it in the context of the genocide perpetrated against them in the Ottoman Empire, and it thus served to confirm the brutality of Azerbaijani society and the impossibility of Karabakh remaining within Azerbaijan. A non-violent solution likely became impossible after Sumgait.

Moscow's leadership was caught completely unprepared to deal with a vicious nationalist conflict that had already turned violent. Measures adopted by the Soviet leadership revealed just how inadequate their understanding of the depth of the ethnic conflict was. On the one hand, in March 1988, a large economic package was devised for Nagorno Karabakh as a way of defusing the situation, an action that reminds of similar measures implemented following the nationalist manifestations in Abkhazia in 1978.[43] On the other hand, the party leadership of Armenia and Azerbaijan were dismissed in May.[44]

During the course of 1988, Moscow's inability to formulate a policy to deal with the problem resulted in the rapid erosion of Communist Party authority – first in Armenia, but then also in Azerbaijan. The grassroots nationalist leaders in both union republics emerged as a serious challenge to the ineffective communist leadership, establishing alternative centers of authority – the Karabakh Committee in Armenia in 1988, and the National Front in Azerbaijan in 1989.[45] Violent incidents became commonplace with the forcible expulsion of "enemy" minority groups from the republics.

On January 20, 1989, Gorbachev placed Nagorno Karabakh under the direct rule of Moscow, disbanding local soviet.[46] Once again this was more of a desperate measure than a thought-out plan for conflict resolution. It alienated both Armenians and Azerbaijanis – the former resented disbandment of the local soviet, while the latter suspected that Moscow was planning to detach the region

from Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, low-level violence was becoming commonplace – the region was descending into civil war. Direct rule from Moscow lasted until November 28, 1989, when Gorbachev restored Azerbaijani authority over Karabakh (Fuller 1989c: 12–13). In response, on December 1, 1989, Armenia adopted a law that incorporated Karabakh into Armenia.[47]

A new crisis occurred in January 1990. The nationalist movement in Azerbaijan was dissatisfied with the weak stance of its communist leadership over the Karabakh issue, and began mass protests. These protests deteriorated into another anti-Armenian *pogrom* in Baku and eventually led to an attempt to overthrow the Azerbaijani communist leadership. At this point Moscow intervened by sending in the Soviet Army, which brutally crushed the protests and saved communist rule in Azerbaijan. Following the *pogrom* in Baku, and the violent Soviet Army intervention in Azerbaijan, Moscow's position became even more precarious. In the summer of 1990 the Communist Party of Armenia lost out in the elections to the nationalist leadership of Levon Ter Petrosian, who became chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Armenia. The new Armenian leadership made no secret of its intention to pursue independence. In this situation Moscow had little option but to begin backing Azerbaijani communist leader Ayaz Mutalibov as a way of putting pressure on Armenia.

The situation in Karabakh continued to deteriorate – with the region brought back under Azerbaijani control and ruled by the Baku-appointed *Orgkomitet* (Organization Committee) the leadership apparently decided to solve the problem by changing the demographic situation. This policy exacerbated tensions, with low-scale warfare breaking out in Karabakh, near-daily clashes, and casualties becoming commonplace.

The political crisis continued when in March 1991 the Armenian parliament decided to hold an independence vote – scheduled for September 1991 (Sheehy 1991: 21). This came as a direct challenge to Gorbachev, who was attempting to revitalize the USSR based on a new constitution and new union treaty. Another affront to Gorbachev was the confiscation of the property of the Communist Party in Armenia.[48] Largely as a response to the short-sighted confrontational policies of the Armenian leadership, the Soviet government heaped on pressure by sanctioning the deportation of ethnic Armenians from Karabakh in the so-called "Operation Ring" of May 1991.[49]

The abortive coup of August 1991 was a game changer. The Soviet Union was visibly crumbling – and on August 30 Azerbaijan declared independence. In response Karabakh also declared independence, on September 2.[50] This was followed by the Armenian referendum on independence later the same month. Finally, on November 26, 1991, the Azerbaijani parliament took the symbolic action of abolishing the Karabakh autonomy and renaming its capital.[51] By the end of December 1991 the USSR ceased to exist and two newly independent states – Armenia and Azerbaijan – were left facing each other off.

From this moment the conflict escalated into a full-scale war that lasted until 1994 when a fragile ceasefire agreement was signed. The outcome of the conflict left Armenian forces in control of Nagorno Karabakh itself as well as several

adjacent districts of Azerbaijan proper – altogether around 14 percent of the territory of Azerbaijan SSR. The war was accompanied by mutual mass expulsions which left no Azerbaijanis within Armenian controlled territory and no Armenians within Azerbaijan. The conflict remains unresolved even now.

Notes

1 See, for example, the debate between Georgian and Abkhazian scholars on the origins of iron production. While one Georgian scholar arrived at the conclusion that iron production was developed by his Georgian ancestors, an Abkhazian colleague, Vladislav Ardzinba (who became president of Abkhazia in early 1990), argued that iron production was, in fact, discovered by the ancestors of the Abkhazians. Allworth *et al*. (1998), pp. 53–4.
2 It started in 1922 as the South Ossetian Scientific Literary Society. In 1925 it was reorganized as the Local Studies Society (*Obshchestvo Kraevedeniia*) which narrowed its scientific focus. In 1927 or 1928 it became the Institute for Local Studies (*Institut Kraevedeniia*), and in 1936 it was renamed the Scientific Research Institute of Local Studies. Eventually, in 1938, it became the Institute of Language, Literature and History.
3 The Great Patriotic War (1941–45) undoubtedly also contributed to the decline in the number of publications.
4 OSA 300–85–09, box 139, AC 4639, p. 6.
5 OSA 300–85–09, box 172, AC 6170, pp. 5–6.
6 OSA 300–85–48, box 14, "Georgia. Religion 1978–1991", AC 6294, pp. 2–3.
7 OSA 300–5-180, box 26, "Georgia and South Ossetia 1988–1990", "Interview with the chairman of the Popular Front of South Ossetia. Alan Chochiev."
8 *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, December 26, 1990.
9 These facts are mentioned in a letter sent in 1947 by three Abkhaz intellectuals to the Central Committee of *VKP(b)*. The original text of the letter is published in *Abkhazia: dokumenty svidetel'stvuiut 1937–1953* (Sukhum, Alashara 1992), pp. 531–6. An English translation is in Hewitt (1996), pp. 260–6.
10 Abkhaz newspaper *Apsne Qapsh* (Red Abkhazia) is quoted in Hewitt (1996), p. 260.
11 The facts are from a 1985 letter sent by Abkhaz writers to the 17th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. The original text of the letter is published in Markholiia (1994). A partial English translation is in Hewitt (1996), pp. 283–93.
12 See "*O pravil'nom nachertanii nazvanii naselennikh punktov. Postanovlenie tsentral'nogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta SSSR* in *Sovetskaia Abkhaziia*," August 23, 1936. Similarly 80 place-names were renamed in 1948, and 61 place-names were renamed in 1950. See *Abkhazia: dokumenty svidetel'stvuiut 1937–1953*, pp. 501–5.
13 A summary of Ingoroqva's work is in Hewitt (1993), pp. 273–4. An Abkhaz letter complaining about Ingoroqva's book was published in *Abkhazia: dokumenty svidetel'stvuut 1937–1953*. Extracts of that letter are also published in Hewitt (1996): 267. A very good discussion of Ingoroqva's work can also be found in Coppieters (2002), pp. 93–4.
14 The Russian text is in *Sovetskaya Abkhazia*, May 14, 1977. The Abkhaz newspaper was *Apsne Qapsh* (Red Abkhazia) and the Georgian newspaper was *Sabchota Apkhazeti* (Soviet Abkhazia).
15 OSA, 300–85–09, box 86, file 2583.
16 OSA, 300–85–09, box 127, file 4167.
17 *New York Times*, June 25, 1978.
18 OSA, 300–85–09, box 154, file 5232.
19 OSA, 300–85–09, box 139, file 4638 and 4640.
20 OSA, 300–85–09, box 154, file 5232.

21 OSA, 300–85–09, box 154, file 5233.
22 OSA, 300–85–09, box 154, file 5234.
23 OSA, 300–85–09, box 139, file 4638, "Letter of Revaz Japaridze to Eduard Shevardnadze on 28.05.79."
24 OSA, 300–85–09, box 139, file 4638.
25 Markozia was a Georgian arrested in Abkhazia, officially for the possession of weapons but in fact for organizing the 1978 Georgian demonstrations in Gagra. See OSA, 300–85–09, box 133, file 4415.
26 OSA, 300–85–09, box 139, file 4638.
27 OSA, 300–85–09, box 139, file 4640, "Anonymous letter soon after 20.05.1981."
28 OSA, 300–85–09, box 133, file 4415.
29 See for instance, OSA, 300–85–09, box 139, file 5263, "Letter of complaint by [apparently Georgian] workers of MVD of Abkhazia about promotion of the Abkhaz at the expense of Georgians in the executive positions of the MVD. Not earlier than August 1982"; OSA, 300–85–09, box 139, file 4639 "'Demands of the Georgian People' letter to L. I. Brezhnev and E. A. Shevarnadze between 20.04 and 18.05 1981."
30 OSA, 300–80–1, box 232, Georgia-Abkhazia.
31 OSA, 300–85–09, AC1214, pp. 1–7.
32 OSA, 300–85–09, box 36.
33 According to Shnirel'man (2001: 160) Buniatov removed references to Armenians from the book he edited, *Iogan Shtil'berg, Puteshestvie po Evrope, Azii i Afriki s 1394 po 1427*, Buniatov (ed.) 1984.
34 OSA, 300–85–09, AC 6404, vol. 1, pp. 526–8.
35 *Bakinskii Rabochii*, July 9, 1923.
36 *Bakinskii Rabochii*, November 24, 1924.
37 OSA, 300–80–1, box 14, folder "Azerbaijan," RL 91/88, p. 2.
38 OSA, 300–80–1, box 12, folder "Azerbaijan," RL 101/88, p. 2.
39 OSA, 300–80–1, box 12, folder "Azerbaijan," RL 421/87, pp. 1–4.
40 OSA, 300–80–1, box 12, folder "Azerbaijan," RL 101/88, p. 3.
41 OSA, 300–80–1, box 13, folder "Azerbaijan," RL 531/88, p. 1.
42 OSA, 300–80–1, box 13, folder "Azerbaijan," RL 531/88, pp. 1–2.
43 *Izvestiia*, March 25, 1988.
44 *Pravda*, May 22, 1988.
45 OSA, 300–85–48, box 3, folder "Azerbaijan and Armenians," AC 6378, pp. 1–2.
46 *Pravda*, 15 January, 1989; OSA, 300–80–1, box 14, folder "Azerbaijan."
47 *Report on the USSR*, vol. 1, No. 49, December 8, 1989, pp. 25–6.
48 *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, No. 17, April 26, 1991, p. 38.
49 *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, No. 19, May 10, 1991, p. 31; *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, No. 20, May 17, 1991, pp. 31–3; Fuller (1991b), pp. 12–15.
50 *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, No. 37, September 13, 1991, pp. 24–5.
51 *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, No. 49, December 6, 1991, pp. 22–3.

Conclusion

This book has focused on the short period of history in the Caucasus between two imperial rules that are usually studied separately – the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. It has attempted to link the two together by looking at the emergence of different forms of statehood in the South Caucasus during and after the brief interlude of independence in 1918–1920/21.

The period under consideration is situated amid two extended periods of Russian rule over the South Caucasus – it began 116 years after the tsarist annexation of Georgia, and was followed by 70 years of Soviet rule. Its central position in the middle of the two eras allows us to reflect upon existing continuities between two instalments of Russian rule, as well as the simultaneous worldwide social and economic transformation.

Nearly two centuries of Russian rule over the South Caucasus coincided with a crucial time when the world experienced the spread of nationalism in the aftermath of the French Revolution, social transformation as a result of the Industrial Revolution, European colonial expansion, and a radical change in traditional societies through forced exposure to European colonialism. It is in connection with this wider international environment that the experience of Russian rule in the Caucasus should be seen.

When the Russian Empire established its foothold in the South Caucasus in 1801 it was already a recognized European imperial power. This new player in the region qualitatively differed from the two traditional powers that had dominated the Caucasus for centuries – the Ottoman Empire and Iran. These two imperial powers were still pre-industrial societies relying on traditional military organization, rather limited centralization, and a large degree of indirect rule. The two powers were about to be drawn into the world of the capitalist economic system and experience the effects of European imperialism.

The South Caucasus at the beginning of the nineteenth century was a region with a pre-industrial economy where traditional societies lived under autocratic forms of rule. It was at the remote periphery of all three empires – here the Ottomans and Iranians for centuries had permitted the existence of nominally subordinate principalities such as the Georgian kingdoms and khanates of the eastern South Caucasus, principalities that accepted their suzerainty but retained virtual independence in terms of their internal organization and rule.

Russian rule was radically different – their ideal view of the Caucasus was that of a region fully integrated into the imperial structures and ruled by Russian bureaucrats. Russian toleration of semi-autonomous principalities was a result of necessity rather than a chosen way of administration. All indigenous forms of rule, administration, legal codes and court practices were considered backward and were eventually to give way to the "superior" European forms. The first four decades of Russian rule brought about a degree of state centralization formerly unheard of in this region.

The consolidation of Russian control and the centralization of the administration achieved by the mid-nineteenth century were characterized by several important trends. First, the Russian Empire succeeded in the destruction of old loyalties among local populations by consistently removing local ruling elites; by persistently erasing the boundaries and the names of old principalities; and by imposing unified structures and laws. This success in removing those traditional loyalties that were seen as a handicap to Russian rule was accompanied by two important failures. First, there was a profound inability to colonize the region – attempts to resettle ethnic Russians were made as early as the 1820s and were intensified towards the end of the nineteenth century, but despite state support and the generous allocation of land the Russian ethnic colonization of the Caucasus failed. This was largely due to the remoteness of this region from the Russian territories, as well as for environmental reasons – unfamiliar climatic conditions and the scarcity of potential colonists within the empire. The second failure was related to the transformation of the local population – while the Russian Empire succeeded in undermining old loyalties and identities it also managed to create new ones, albeit not the ones that were desired.

Despite its conservative authoritarian nature, the Russian Empire was responsible for the introduction of European ideas of the Enlightenment to the Caucasus. In his attempt to integrate the Caucasus into the empire Viceroy Vorontsov introduced Russian state education for local elites in the hope of enlisting their help in the administration of the region while assimilating them into Russian elite culture. This was unquestionably a success – local elites embraced this opportunity with many of them rising through the ranks of the Russian nobility. However, the effects of this policy were not universal – they certainly succeeded in assimilating some people but at the same time they created an educated stratum of society that despite being able to converse freely in the Russian language was more concerned with the effects Russian colonialism had on their society. This became more visible in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a period which also saw rapid industrialization of the region due to oil exploration efforts in Baku. At that time socialist ideas became widespread among the educated strata of society and the emerging working class.

The economic and social transformations occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century led to ethnic conflicts. The stratification of oil industry workers in Baku along ethno-religious lines, combined with extremely poor working conditions, led to rising tensions between Armenian and Turkic Muslim workers. This animosity culminated in widespread inter-ethnic violence during

the 1905 Russian Revolution, which became known as the "Armenian-Tatar massacres." Another fault line appeared in Tiflis where the Armenian bourgeoisie acquired a dominant position, thereby creating resentment among Georgian intellectuals who saw their kinsmen being marginalized in their own capital.

One little-studied aspect of the Enlightenment policy pursued by the Russian state was the creation of the literary languages based on the Cyrillic script for the native populations of the Caucasus. This was most likely carried out to bring these populations closer, but also in the case of the Abkhazians and Ossetians as a way of undermining Georgian cultural influence there. By the end of the nineteenth century Russian successfully replaced Georgian as the literary language of educated Abkhaz and Ossetian elites.

A century of Russian rule dramatically transformed the Caucasus into an industrialized periphery in which the local populations had acquired new identities, literary traditions and loyalties. Local societies had their intellectuals, bourgeoisie, workers and political parties. Russian rule undermined old societies and unintentionally created new ones – destroying a multitude of Georgian and Muslim principalities, and creating conditions for the emergence of identities that supplanted the old localized ones. It also increased the size of the Armenian population in the province of Erevan which eventually served as the nucleus of the Armenian state. The old order that existed there before 1801 was gone forever and there was no question of reviving it. Instead, the new order was to be created from the legacies left by the now-defunct Russian Empire.

The brief period of independence (1918–21) presents an important bridging point between the two epochs of tsarist and Soviet domination. Yet the dramatic transformation from remote periphery of the Russian Empire into independent states insulated this period, in the minds of its observers, from the preceding and following models of rule. Practically all historical works that deal with this epoch start with the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and end with the ascent of Soviet power in 1921. Possible links and continuities with previous and subsequent periods are thus overlooked.

The existing historiography almost exclusively focuses on the three independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. They are clearly the largest and most prominent local actors yet such selective focus reduces other regional actors to an insignificant background, which does not do them justice.

The overwhelming focus on these three states creates a certain distortion that is present in both Soviet and Western historiographies of the modern period – the existence of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as independent nation states is mechanically accepted as a given. This creates the illusion that these states have always been there, while at the same time rendering insignificant – if not artificial – the autonomous formations. This approach overlooks the fact that the legitimacy of the autonomous formations stems from the same tsarist heritage that provides legitimacy to the independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. All emerging political entities in the Caucasus owe their existence to the same pool of factors left over by a tsarist empire that granted them equal claim to legitimacy.

The focus of this book is deliberately shifted away from the traditional focal point of investigation – the independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The intention was to bring the regions of Abkhazia, Karabakh and South Ossetia into the limelight of investigation. My main interest lies in understanding conflicts present in the periphery of these emerging states, and the possible links and continuities that existed between these conflicts and the subsequent period of Soviet rule.

The overthrow of the Romanov dynasty in February, and the Bolshevik capture of power in October 1917, set adrift the South Caucasian provinces. Shielded from the unfolding Russian civil war by the Caucasian Mountains, and feeling intense pressure from foreign intervention, the region momentarily proclaimed its independence before then disintegrating into three independent states with unclear boundaries. During this turbulent period the regions of Abkhazia, Karabakh and South Ossetia experienced intense interaction with the emerging states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, resulting in political confrontation in the case of Abkhazia, and violent clashes in the cases of Karabakh and South Ossetia. These violent political conflicts evolved from a set of ambiguous social, political and identity claims. Within two years the social component that had been strongly present at the outset, dimmed, while the ethnic and political one crystallized – all of which served to complete the transformation of social conflicts into ethno-political ones.

The outcome of the struggle for control of these territories was similar in all three cases – Georgia and Azerbaijan succeeded in establishing military and political control over these disputed territories but were unable to resolve conflicts with the minority groups who lived there, or to integrate these societies into their state projects. The military and political controls were consolidated just before the Bolshevik takeover of the region between April 1920 and February 1921.

It is often believed that the autonomies in the Caucasus were created to provide Moscow with leverage against the republics – a sinister divide-and-rule policy. The main argument of this book is that the solution adopted by the Bolsheviks was not some deliberate attempt at long-term manipulation, but rather a practical, albeit often clumsy, compromise to contain violent conflicts.

The Bolsheviks inherited a region plagued by ethno-political conflicts which now became their problem. As the sole power in control of the entire Caucasus, the Bolshevik leadership needed to resolve those conflicting issues that prevented the establishment of stable governance. The case studies in this book show that in each case the decision to grant autonomy was a result of short-term goals rather than any long-term planning. The example of Nagorno Karabakh demonstrates this clearly – the *Kavburo* considered it a part of Azerbaijan when it needed to strengthen its position there in the period between the summer and fall of 1920, but was prepared to grant it to Armenia to help with the establishment of Soviet power there in December 1920, or as a way of undermining the rebels in Zangezur in the summer of 1921. Often the rush to solve some immediate problem undermined the legality of the entire process. The Abkhaz case is

an excellent illustration of this – Ordzhonikidze forced the Abkhaz government to sign a treaty with Georgia in December 1921 without the formal approval of the Abkhaz People's Congress because he needed to strengthen his position in forcing Georgia into the ZFSSR. In South Ossetia the Ossetian Bolsheviks presented the *Kavburo* with a dilemma when they proclaimed, without authorization, the establishment of an Ossetian entity in the hope of joining Russia. Eventually a solution was found that could accommodate both Georgian and Ossetian interests – leaving South Ossetia within Georgia, but granting it autonomous status.

Seeing ethnic conflicts as the product of capitalism and bourgeois nationalism, the Soviet leadership was prepared to grant ethnic groups concessions in the form of nominal independence and political autonomy in order to overcome mistrust and conquer latent nationalism. However, this idealistic approach ran into practical problems; inadequate resources to implement their vision; dependence on the cooperation of local actors; and the need to accommodate the conflicting aspirations of both parties involved in such conflicts. The solution adopted in these circumstances was to grant autonomous status to the regions that experienced violent conflicts while preserving republican control over them.

It is important to stress that while the political map of the Caucasus was transformed beyond recognition after the civil war there are unmistakable continuities with the tsarist period. This transformation was the result of social, demographic, identity and economic changes that accumulated throughout the nineteenth century and that came to the surface as a result of the collapse of the tsarist empire.

The Bolshevik conflict resolution policy stabilized the situation they found following conquest. It might be tempting to see the Bolshevik policies in the Caucasus as a freezing of existing conflicts by unilaterally imposing their own compromise solutions upon the region. The "freezing" metaphor is rather unfortunate since by capturing some immediately visible static elements of the Bolshevik solution it creates the illusion of a permafrost-like stability; it also completely overlooks other dynamic aspects of Soviet rule.

Soviet rule inflicted a new wave of social, cultural and identity changes that continued to shape the societies in the region for another seven decades. An affirmative action policy of *Korenizatsiia* (indigenization) implemented in the 1920s was pursued in order to alleviate the national animosities inherited from the tsarist period. Minority groups were empowered, elevated into political and administrative positions, and national languages and cultures were encouraged. In this period both the union republics and their autonomies created a wide network of cultural institutions that became centers of cultural production and identity-making.

In the late 1920s the NEP was abandoned and *Korenizatsiia* was curtailed. The termination of affirmative action policies was followed by a period of repression and great purges that claimed the feeble numbers of newly emerging Soviet intellectual elites. It also gravely undermined the achievements of the cultural renaissance of the 1920s. Yet the reversal was not absolute – the cultural

establishments shrank but survived, even if they practically ceased to produce any cultural output. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia this period is important as they experienced what came to be seen as a deliberate policy of discrimination by the Georgians. While their grievances are multifaceted I would like to highlight here the fact that the linguistic policy of imposing Georgian script on the Abkhazians and South Ossetians, implemented during the Stalinist purges, shows unmistakable historical continuities. This imposition can be seen as an attempt to reverse the nineteenth century Russian incursion into Georgian cultural space by reclaiming Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Georgian literary tradition.

The end of Stalinism and the period of Khruschev's thaw saw a reversal of the assimilation policy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As part of this reversal the Ossertians, and more especially the Abkhazians, were able to reclaim a level of political representation that was often disproportionate to their actual numbers. Unsurprisingly, this generated a backlash in Georgia where concessions to the minority groups, often at the expense of Georgians, coincided with the demotion of Stalin and came to be seen as evidence of the suppression of Georgian culture. This dissatisfaction manifested itself in unauthorized mass demonstrations in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. Armenia also experienced a rise of national sentiment in the early 1960s which in 1965 culminated in unauthorized mass demonstrations to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the genocide in the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in the 1960s, national sentiments and nationalism firmly established themselves as part of the subtle discourse of the South Caucasus.

The dismantling of Stalinism during the Khrushchev era created a limited public space, which in turn led to the emergence of a public debate that was carried out by cultural institutions. While remaining firmly within the state-imposed ideological limits it nevertheless made possible a discussion of subjects virtually absent from official media. The cultural institutions created in 1920 experienced a revival in the 1960s, and became champions for the expression of limited public debate. Cultural, ethnic and economic grievances and concerns could now be tentatively voiced through academic or literary publications – as long as they retained a cloak of Soviet ideology. Historical works in particular became a useful political tool for undermining the legitimacy of opponents, as well as demonstrating one's own cultural superiority.

From this period onwards one can clearly see a period of confrontational politics emerging between South Ossetians and Abkhaz, on the one side, and Georgians on the other. Armenians and Azerbaijanis were also engaged in a bitter conflict over the field of history. While Armenian scholars focused on reasserting their historical continuity, especially in the Nagorno Karabakh region, their Azerbaijani colleagues undertook considerable efforts to deny this in order to undermine any historical claims that Armenians might have had over these territories.

We are observing an unusual phenomenon when cultural institutions are substituting the role of the political ones. In the 1960s they became the champions of limited public debate. At the same time, the formal political institutions

remained dormant throughout Soviet history. Another important development can be seen in the emergence of the dissident movement within the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Extremely diversified in its scope – ranging from human rights activists, to Russian nationalists – they challenged the official discourse by providing alternative discourses not found anywhere else. In the Caucasus the dissident movement was most visible in Georgia and Armenia and was represented by radical intellectuals who outwardly embraced the European discourse of human rights but nevertheless remained, in essence, radical nationalists. They were drawn to the dissident movement because they saw the permissable limits of public debate as inadequate for the expression of their concerns. Expressions of dissent were quite varied in nature and were not exclusively focused on political or national issues, inter-ethnic problems or historical grievances; they included such diverse topics as human rights, environmental problems and the preservation of historical monuments. Yet the one thing that clearly ran across these themes was the denial of the legitimacy of Soviet rule. The Soviet Union came increasingly to be seen as illegitimate, and all its decisions, socio-political structures, and heritage, as illegal. This was the main difference between the dissidents and those who continued to express their grievances through semi-official channels. Dissidents, however, had very little political impact within the USSR, where they were both criminalized and marginalized by an inability to reach out to a large section of the population.

The issue that became a persistent feature of the Soviet system from the 1970s onwards was steady economic decline. Soviet industrial output was falling while the economic expectations of the population were increasing. The Soviet economy was not able to meet popular demand for consumer goods, nor, eventually, even the basic necessities. The woeful inability to provide a steady supply of basic goods was beginning to undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet leadership among larger strata of the population. It was becoming increasingly clear that the Soviet leadership and the economic model were in need of reform, if not replacement.

In response to these challenges the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, initiated economic reforms that quickly met with opposition from conservative elements within the Soviet leadership. In an attempt to overcome this opposition Gorbachev launched a campaign of *glasnost'* (openness). It encouraged criticism and exposure of deficiencies inherent in the system in order to rally popular support for his reforms and to undermine his opponents. Tentative at first, the criticism quickly spread to environmental issues and then into a wider range of problems – including national grievances. Moscow was flooded with a torrent of petitions, complains and demands which it was unprepared to deal with and unable to stem. The open expression of national grievances heightened already-existing tensions, leading to the first instances of violence. Here again Moscow was indecisive, failing to act when necessary and thus further eroding its legitimacy and further fuelling conflicts.

In a situation where the communist leadership was rapidly losing its legitimacy in the eyes of increasing numbers of the Soviet population – due to its

inefficiency and unpreparedness for addressing the new challenges – the dissidents received their moment of opportunity. Their radical discourse of rejecting all Soviet legacies, and their call for the system's dismantlement, gained mainstream currency among the population – momentarily elevating them to a position of power. The autonomous republics experienced a similar awakening and demanded more political and cultural rights. Attempts by the new leaders to redress what they saw as the injustices of Soviet rule quickly led to alienation of minority groups who in turn embarked on a path of separation that then resulted in violent wars in Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia; all in the wake of the Soviet collapse.

Without going into detail about the conflicts that occurred in the 1990s it is worth making several observations. It is clear that the rejection of Soviet legitimacy served as an element that fuelled them. The new leadership of the republics that swept away the Soviet era bureaucrats were pursuing a very naive and romantic notion of restoring historical justice. The idea was to return to an idealized pre-Soviet past by dismantling a Soviet heritage that was seen as illegitimately imposed by the Bolsheviks. In practical terms this meant the removal of the autonomous structures, abandonment of affirmative action policies, and the imposition of a state language. But by rejecting the Soviet legacy the nationalist leaders were undermining the legitimacy of their own republics since both autonomies and union republics owed their existence to the Soviet state-building experiment of the 1920s.

Drawing parallels between the present day situation and the early 1920s reveals a striking contrast between the two periods. If the Bolshevik leadership proved relatively efficient at solving regional conflicts within the period of a few years, then presently the efforts of numerous Great Powers – Russia, the EU and the USA, and international organizations such as the Minsk Group of OSCE and the UN – have remained unsuccessful at peace-building and conflict resolution over the last 20 years or so. Violent conflicts in the Caucasus were causing problems for the Bolsheviks, who were the sole power in control of the region. It was their internal problem, and they were interested in bringing stability – hence the determination to put an end to the conflicts. The situation is quite different in the post-Soviet Caucasus – the regional conflicts seem to be everyone's business now, and as a result they are no one's business. It appears that finding a solution to these conflicts will require coming to terms and working with the existing reality rather than attempting to revive the past.

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Index

Page numbers in *italics* denote tables, those in **bold** denote figures.