

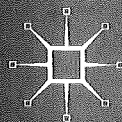
RETHINKING PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES
Series Editor: Oliver P. Richmond

Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict

Karabakh, South Ossetia, and
Abkhazia Wars Reconsidered



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Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia: The Ascent of Ethnopolitical Conflict

The ideological power vacuum which developed upon the breakup of the U.S.S.R. further deepened as a result of the inability, or unwillingness, of the central government in Moscow to effectively prevent interethnic confrontations within the outlying provinces of the former Soviet Union. This, then, resulted in the gradual discrediting of local Soviet authorities and brought about the parallel emergence of nationalist groups, for which the outstanding questions of Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia separatism were the easiest means through which to gain public support and popularity. The rhetorical indulgences of the (post-) Communist nationalists, their respective efforts to display fierce patriotism and devotion to national interests, and their newfound determination to further local nationalist interests at all costs, left little room for negotiation or compromise.

Throughout much of its modern history, Karabakh has been famed for its unique horse races, its spectacular mountainous scenery, and its legacy of artists and warriors. Documented history has borne witness to multiple episodes of Karabakh Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Kurds living peacefully side by side – and, when necessary, fighting together against foreign conquerors. Indeed, prior to the beginning of the twentieth century, there seems to have been no single instance of intercommunal conflict among the area's inhabitants that would profile along the lines of ethnic or religious identity. However, due to the reasons outlined below, there had been a certain level of Azerbaijani–Armenian anxiety during the Soviet period. Some level of competition and mutual mistrust – albeit rather latent – had clearly been present amongst the various ethnic groups within this region prior to the outbreak of violent

conflict in the final years of Soviet rule, a fact attested to by numerous sources, including the Nagorno-Karabakh inhabitants themselves. However, during the late Soviet era the actual scope and frequency of violent episodes based on ethnic animosity remained insignificant, as the vast majority of Armenians and Azerbaijanis managed to coexist peacefully in their daily lives: celebrating common holidays, maintaining friendships, and trading to mutual benefit.¹ As with other areas of prospective ethnopolitical conflict, the interrelationships of ordinary people varied greatly in character, depending upon the presence, or otherwise, of actual triggers for ethnic polarization. Importantly, Nagorno-Karabakh, with its extensive pasture lands, pleasant climate, and relatively advanced industrial base, was known to have been one of Soviet Azerbaijan's most highly developed regions.

Abkhazia, too, had long been considered a virtual paradise on earth, even by Georgian standards. This tiny republic, located as it is on the sunny shores of the Black Sea, traditionally featured – along with the Crimean peninsula and the Sochi area – amongst the favorite summer resorts of the Soviet military brass, high-ranking Communist *nomenklatura* and, indeed, ordinary citizens from across the U.S.S.R. Nevertheless, by the final years of Moscow's rule, Abkhazia's various ethnic communities found themselves increasingly trapped in the net of ethnic conflict. The steep post-Soviet decline in the tourist revenues inflow into the region, which – along with the lucrative export of local citruses and tea – formerly constituted the core of the region's economic activity and served to heighten the level of socioeconomic discontent within the area: this decline therefore hastened the ethnic fragmentation of the region into an array of competing loyalties. Whereas Abkhazia's Georgian population celebrated the revival of Georgian independence, the discontent of the Abkhaz inhabitants further deepened. In the past, as described below, Abkhazians had enjoyed the formal opportunity, when necessary, to approach the central authorities in Moscow – the “honest broker” – in order to advance their complaints and push forward their age-old emancipation agenda with respect to Tbilisi. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, that opportunity seemed to have melted away, both for Abkhazians and South Ossetians. Unlike their Georgian neighbors, the Abkhaz nationalists had little reason for optimism, as they were beginning to realize the true extent of the Georgians' attempts to restore their country's erstwhile territorial integrity: an endeavor that the Abkhazians, given the unfavorable demographic composition of the republic (see below), had little chance of withstanding.

However, in the sphere of daily life, the relationships between the Abkhaz and Georgian communities were still characterized by a considerable degree of integration, one which far exceeded the case with the Karabakh community. Unlike the relatively highly segregated communities of the Azerbaijanis and Armenians, both within and outside the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomy, with their general avoidance of interethnic marriages, Abkhaz-Georgian marriages were quite common, which in turn led to a relatively high degree of ethnocultural homogeneity. Nevertheless, as intimated above, the Abkhazians – known as they were for their strong ethnonationalism – were traditionally considered to be one of the most strident ethnic communities within Georgia when it came to the expression of emancipatory aspirations. As attested to by numerous Georgians, as well as by members of other ethnic communities inhabiting Abkhazia, the Abkhazians' attitude towards Georgians was not devoid of a certain degree of mistrust and anxiety, which usually manifested itself over issues of political-administrative, demographic, or economic dominance over autonomy, while, with regard to ethnically laden symbolic issues, these same Abkhazian suspicions would manifest themselves all the more vehemently.

A situation very similar to that of Abkhazia arose in South Ossetia toward the final years of the U.S.S.R. South Ossetia's landlocked geographical position perhaps provided for the greatest point of distinction by comparison with Abkhazia: with its less fertile soil and much rougher continental climate, South Ossetia had attracted virtually no tourists from across the wider Soviet Union, and considerably lower numbers of internal Georgian immigration. In fact, both groups rather preferred to settle in or travel to Abkhazia, famous as it was for its mild climate and beautiful beaches. The weaker economy of rocky South Ossetia depended, to a considerable degree, on direct subsidies from Tbilisi. Importantly, the level of Georgian-South Ossetian ethnic intermingling was high, even by comparison with Abkhazia; Georgians and South Ossetians belonged to perfectly integrated communities, with South Ossetian nationalism playing a rather marginal role. Consequently, unlike Abkhazians, South Ossetians were on average more hesitant to agitate for secession from Georgia, or to aspire for a higher degree of administrative, economic or ethnocultural autonomy; this might have been partly occasioned by the fact that whereas there were nearly no Ossetian-language high schools in Russia's North Ossetia, such schools formed significant part of South Ossetia's educational system.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Today, if one utters the words *Artsakh*, or *Lernayin Gharabagh* and *Daglıq Qarabağ*, that is, Nagorno-Karabakh,² in Armenian and Azerbaijani respectively, few of the inhabitants of modern Armenia and Azerbaijan would realize that the territorial conflict taking place in that area has roots reaching back only to 1918. On the contrary, several recent generations within both countries have entertained the notion that this mountainous region is some sort of symbol of the climax of an age-old grudge which for millennia has allegedly characterized Armenia's and Azerbaijan's neighborly relations. This notion results from a retrospective epicizing of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with the important qualification that, once having gained Karabakh, militant Armenian revanchism has noticeably softened its stance – only to be supplanted by Azerbaijani revanchism: a phenomenon which is itself all the more bizarre for having come into existence over a relatively short historical period.

When the so-called Armenian-Tatar War broke out in 1905,³ few could have predicted that it would lay the foundation for deep-rooted ethnic tensions throughout the Caucasus – the reverberations of which would not die away even after a hundred years. The original Armenian-Tatar clashes, beginning in Baku, the oil capital of the empire, and spreading more or less spontaneously to areas with joint populations of Armenians and Azerbaijanis all over the South Caucasus, were originally *socioeconomic* (rather than ethnic) in nature. The masses of Azerbaijani poor, provoked by the traditional imperial "divide and rule" policies of their Russian governors, turned upon their Armenian neighbors, wealthy industrialists and merchants, whom they regarded as predatory and unfeeling exploiters.⁴

As has been said in previous chapters, the Russians had traditionally tried to strengthen the position of the Christian, that is, Armenian, element, whom they regarded as being more loyal to the empire and a valuable asset within a potentially explosive Muslim region. On the eve of the first Russian revolution (1905) and shortly afterwards, however, the colonizers began to be worried by the growing activity of Armenian nationalist/revolutionary organizations which had been active in the region ever since the latter decades of the nineteenth century.⁵ The (then still latent) Armenian-Azerbaijani antagonism (which itself had roots extending back to the era of Baku's industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century) originally had a well-defined socioeconomic, if not overtly class-based, character. It was driven by the increasing

dissatisfaction of the Azerbaijani nobility – and of the newly emerging bourgeoisie as well as the intelligentsia – with the dominance of the Armenian element within Baku's economic and public life (similar sentiments also existed in other Azerbaijani cities, although to a lesser extent). There were clashes in various towns which, given the curious neutrality of Russian military units and police that was especially apparent during the first weeks and months after fighting broke out, continued, with weaker intensity, until July of the following year. According to various estimates, this first instance of civil unrest between members of ethnic groups that had previously enjoyed centuries of peaceful coexistence⁶ claimed between 3,000 and 10,000 victims.⁷

These events proved to be a breaking point. Growing Armenian revolutionary nationalism, which had assumed an increasingly apparent anti-Ottoman dimension after the anti-Armenian pogroms of 1894–96, soon evolved to incorporate the collective image of an enemy in the form of the “Azerbaijani Turk,” thereby also assuming a more decidedly anti-Turkic, anti-Islamic character.

The Armenian–Tatar War also served as a powerful impulse for the emergence and solidification of a common Azerbaijani identity at a suprasectarian level – either tribal/clannish, territorial, or confessional. Indeed, as Stuart Kaufman writes:

The blows suffered at the hands of the Dashnakist fighting squads gave a crucial stimulus to the political awakening of the Azerbaijanis. “The Armenian War” generated for the first time a united action for a cause transcending local or sectarian loyalties.⁸

Kaufman's words in connection with the current conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh are doubly applicable with regard to the period just after the Armenian–Tatar War:

Azerbaijani fear of Armenians was further inflated, ironically, by the relative weakness of Azerbaijani identity as compared to the Armenian one. Azerbaijanis recognized their “weak sense of solidarity,” so Karabakh's bid for succession rankled all the more because the Armenians, the national enemy, were so much better organized and because they were attacking Azerbaijani “statehood.” ...⁹

Efforts to better coordinate the activities of commando units deployed in the fight with the Armenians contributed to the fact that the, initially spontaneous, resistance began to be institutionalized: and in the town of

Yelizavetopol (Gāncā, Gyanja), the military/political organization *Difai* (Defense) was founded in 1905.¹⁰ It is of interest that *Difai* itself did *not* view the Armenians – with whom its representatives did not hesitate to cooperate on occasions – as the main culprits of the bloodshed, but rather chiefly accused the Russian colonial administration and military units (army and police) in this respect. The Russians were blamed for initiating the so-called Armenian–Tatar War and, in a broader sense, the Armenian–Azerbaijani excesses as well, and it was Russian colonial officials who became the most frequent target of attacks by *Difai* units.¹¹ Then, in 1911, another, politically stronger, nationalist Muslim Democratic Party, *Mūsavat* (Equality), was formed, with the contribution of significant personalities from the bourgeois intelligentsia – the leading representatives of which seven years later found themselves unexpectedly at the head of the newly independent Azerbaijan.

After the Armenian genocide of 1915–16, tens of thousands of desperate Armenian refugees poured into Russian (that is, eastern Caucasian) Armenia, where hitherto at least a third of the population had consisted of Azerbaijanis, who traditionally controlled the fertile agricultural land.¹² Now, even the very slightest inducement was sufficient to cause the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict to flare up anew: henceforth, the periods of relatively calm relations between the two ethnic groups were periodically interrupted each time the power of the Russian state seemed to be weakened.

World War I shattered the Romanovs' empire at its foundations. In 1917, St. Petersburg saw two revolutions, after which the Bolsheviks seized power over the enormously large and multiethnic Russian Empire and the country descended into a bloody civil war. The war caused the empire to fragment: yet this period of partition quickly turned out to be only temporary. The units of Russia's imperial army had, until then, been fighting against the Turks in the South Caucasus and eastern Anatolia, and now they disbanded, returned home, or took sides with the White or Red Army divisions being formed in Russia. Now, the Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians were to all intents and purposes left to their own fates. After the brief project of a joint Transcaucasian Federation collapsed owing to the diverging interests of the political leaderships of the respective South Caucasian nations, three independent republics were declared in May 1918: the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the Democratic Republic of Armenia, and the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The declaration of independence of the Azerbaijani state, the first democracy in the Muslim Orient, was preceded by bloody clashes in Baku in March 1918.¹³ These clashes were between the united forces

of Armenian nationalists, supported by the Russian Bolsheviks (who had no intention of giving up Baku's oil) and the more numerous, but poorly armed and organized Azerbaijani nationalists. According to varying accounts, the resultant street fighting and ethnically motivated murders cost between 10,000 and 15,000 lives, mostly of Azerbaijani civilians; thus, during the interim years of 1918–20, "bloody March" became yet another powerful trigger for the solidifying of the consciousness of national solidarity on the part of the Azerbaijanis.¹⁴

Nationalists from the Armenian Revolutionary Federation immediately seized power in the Russian Empire's Armenian provinces and soon commenced an extensive campaign against their own Azerbaijani and Turkish populations. This campaign became especially intense during the 1918 war with Turkey and, again, during the months before, and immediately after, the invasion of the Turkish forces under Kazim Karabekir Pasha into Armenia in 1920 – as well as during the intervening period between 1918 and 1920, when there were regular armed clashes with Azerbaijan. As has already been noted, the ethnic cleansing and murders of this period cost tens of thousands of lives, both of Armenian and Turkic civilians (accused of supporting their Turkish and Azerbaijani fellow tribesmen), while tens of thousands more civilians were forced to flee from Armenia.¹⁵

Between the newly created states of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the question arose before long of the delineation of borders. The problem in this respect was particularly acute for several areas near the borders, regions inhabited by both Armenians and Azerbaijanis: Zangezour (Zängäzur in Azerbaijani transliteration, known in Armenia as Syunik), Nakhichevan, and Karabakh were each claimed by both Baku and Yerevan. The failure of diplomatic negotiations to resolve these issues soon led to an armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan during 1919–20, with military superiority alternating between the two sides, especially in the mountainous areas and in the foothills of Karabakh. The local Armenians, traditionally in the majority in these latter regions, rose up against Baku, after having initially been accommodating. Turkey soon joined the conflict on the side of Azerbaijan; while Soviet forces joined the conflict after April 1920, but even they were not able to completely suppress the resistance of the Karabakh Armenians.

The definitive end to this war did not come until after the occupation, in 1920/21, of Azerbaijan by the Eleventh Red Army, and soon thereafter of Armenia as well. In 1921 the central government in Moscow forced the leader of the Azerbaijani Communists, Nariman Narimanov, to recognize the transfer of Nakhichevan, Zangezour, and Karabakh to

Armenia. However, Narimanov soon chose to rescind that transfer, as a consequence of which Moscow then undertook – in accordance with the hastily signed Soviet–Turkish Treaty of Brotherhood and Friendship (the Treaty of Moscow), and in spite of the protests of Armenia's Communists – to give Karabakh and Nakhichevan to Soviet Azerbaijan. The years 1923–24 thus saw the creation of a new territorial entity which had never before existed: the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAR), which consisted of approximately half the territory of historic Karabakh. It is important to note that within this autonomous region of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, Armenians constituted over 90 per cent of the population.¹⁶

Conflict and historiography

The atmosphere of détente at the end of the 1980s ended another period of peaceful coexistence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, in and beyond Karabakh. The official Soviet ideology of the "friendship of peoples" had placed a strict taboo on any public discussion of past violence, even if a certain degree of mutual distrust still persisted. The closeness of the two cultures and traditions further ensured that conflicts arose between them only rarely. This relatively close cultural intermingling is attested to by the relatively high incidence of mixed Armenian–Azerbaijani marriages which took place in the cosmopolitan and multiethnic city of Baku, with its significantly numerous Armenian community.

The years of the U.S.S.R.'s final agony were characterized by the commencement of attempts by the local intelligentsia to create a national identity liberated from the ideological clichés of the Soviet era. Since these attempts took place alongside the escalating ethnic conflict within the region, the desired "regaining of the nation" proceeded side by side with the process of the epicizing of the conflict, and alongside that of the creation of a newly invigorated collective image of an "ages-old enemy," to such an extent that the idea of national revival became related directly to the question of keeping Karabakh for Azerbaijanis, or alternatively of recovering it for Armenians. Thus, it is here that one finds the very roots of *identity* as the basis of the conflict. In practice, the central issue of the supposed post-Soviet "restoration of justice," both for Armenians and Azerbaijanis, became the confirmation of exclusive and irrefutable "historical rights" to Karabakh, and the recognition of supposed "ages-old" ethnopolitical dominance of the given territory by each party to the conflict.

According to Armenian historiographical tradition, the origins of the history of an autochthonous Armenian ethnic community within the Caucasus can be traced as far back as 1000 years BCE; whereas the Azerbaijanis, on the other hand, are regarded as the descendants of "barbaric" Turkic nomads who arrived from "somewhere in the Altai region" in the relatively recent past – and who thus, as "guests," have no entitlement to claim any territory at all within the Caucasus region. For the Armenians, who have borne with grief the memory of the definitive loss of state sovereignty in 1375,¹⁷ the pugilistic Armenian principalities of the upper part of Karabakh – Artsakh in Armenian – appear to be the only area of historical, or so-called Greater Armenia (its tenth province), where "the tradition of national sovereignty survived until the late Middle Ages."¹⁸ Even during the wars of 1919–20, in spite of the great successes of the Azerbaijani (and Turkish) army on the battlefields of Karabakh, the "unconquerable citadel" of Nagorno-Karabakh was never entirely subjugated. Armenians place the very creation of the Azerbaijani Karabakh khanate in the mid-eighteenth century into the overall context of fratricidal feudal treachery between Armenians.

As stated previously, in recent years there have been attempts on the Azerbaijani side to archaize the Turkic presence within the territory of the South Caucasus by extending its supposed lineage from the (generally recognized) eleventh-century period (in accordance with the so-called Seljuq theory) back as far as the sixth or seventh centuries (this being the so-called Khazar theory).¹⁹ According to a further body of theory – dubbed the "Albanian theory" – which is currently a part of the state doctrine of Azerbaijanism, the territory of Karabakh was an integral part of Caucasian Albania: thus, it is argued, the original, Caucasian-speaking population, Turkified and Islamicized as it was with the arrival of Turkic tribes, in fact played a significant part in the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijani ethnic group.²⁰ According to this view, the Karabakh Armenians were originally Caucasian Albanians; however, in the early Middle Ages, they adopted Christianity from the Armenians, and were subsequently Gregorianized and Armenicized. The Azerbaijanis, it is argued, as the descendants of the autochthonous Caucasian Albanians (as well as of the incoming Turkic tribes), therefore have a natural claim to Karabakh. Contemporary Azerbaijani historiographers also argue that, once the area was conquered by Russia during the period 1801–28, St. Petersburg instigated the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Ottoman and Persian Armenians – Christians loyal to the empire – within the territory of the Yerevan and Nakhichevan khanate,²¹

so as to create an "Armenian province." This territory (corresponding to virtually all of the eastern part of present-day Armenia) came to be ruled, over the centuries, by khans and beks from the Azerbaijani majority: the designation Western Azerbaijan has been used to describe this region, in Azerbaijan, during recent years.

It is on the basis of such ideas as these that the myth of Armenians as "treacherous and ungrateful guests" on Azerbaijani soil has been cultivated. The concept of (Pan-) Turkism, which is immensely popular in modern Azerbaijan, as mentioned above, can allow one to regard the significant regional states originally created by local Turkic tribes as being Azerbaijani. This concept relates to the dynasties of the Seljuqs, the Ak Koyunlus, Kara Koyunlus, the Safavids, Afshars, and Qajars. At present, in Azerbaijani historiography we encounter such terms as the "Azerbaijani Qajar state" and so forth.²² The claim that the Karabakh khanate (which was ruled by the shahs from the Turkic dynasty of the Qajars [1785–1925]) was a vassal to the Azerbaijani state of the Qajars, and not to Persia, at the start of the nineteenth century, is taken to justify a claim for the uninterrupted ethnopolitical dominance of Azerbaijanis in and over Karabakh. Armenians, on the contrary, point out the non-existence before 1918 of any Azerbaijani state – that is, a state in the name of which the word Azerbaijan would appear; and also to the "artificial" origin of the very ethnonym Azerbaijani. While they do acknowledge the fact of the (quasi-) vassal status of the Karabakh principalities under Muslim rulers, Armenians also point out the vassal status of the Karabakh khanate itself to Esfahan/Tehran. They generally try to downplay the ethnolinguistic affiliation of the rulers and inhabitants of the Karabakh khanate (as well as of the khanates of Yerevan, Nakhichevan, and certain others) by citing the fact that they constituted an integral part of the Persian Empire; or else they point out that they were Persians, or simply refer to them as Muslims with no specified ethnic origin.

Azerbaijanis, furthermore, cite the fact that, while in 1823 Armenians constituted only 9 per cent of the population of all of Karabakh, and not only of its upper part (the rest consisting of "Muslims": Azerbaijanis and Kurds), by 1880, thanks to the influx of the Armenian population and the ebbing of the Turkic (and Kurdish) population, the Armenians had become the majority (53 per cent).²³ Armenians explain this fact by reference to the displacement to Persia of tens of thousands of Armenians from Karabakh and the territory of modern Armenia, which was ordered by the Persian Shah Abbas I at the start of the seventeenth century.

In general, a viable historical consciousness was much more easily defined amongst the Armenians, as they possessed an established school of ethnohistoriography. In spite of the formal restrictions of the Soviet era, the experience of the events of 1915 served as a strong, permanent, impulse for the maintenance of a consciousness of past wrongs, and it thus helped to shape Armenians' relations not only with the Turks, but also with the Azerbaijanis: the fact that Karabakh (and Nakhichevan) was – illegitimately in the eyes of the Armenians – placed under Baku's control was viewed by many Armenian intellectuals as an historical wrong that was waiting to be redressed. Gorbachov's period of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, which brought about an easing of societal repression, seemed like a moment that should be exploited in the name of attaining historical justice: the first step in this process was supposed to be the "returning" to Armenia of Karabakh – this perhaps to be followed by the "return" of several other territories of the epic Greater Armenia. The further influence of the politically engaged Armenian diaspora, both in Russia and around the world, along with the increasingly clear ties of the Azerbaijani nationalists to Turkey, served to augment the popularity of conspiracy theories connected with the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, and reinforced the feeling of endangerment amongst both ethnic groups. According to Viktor Shnirelman,

the end of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s in the neighboring republics were imbued with diametrically opposed yet mirroring attitudes: in Armenia they were sure of the existence of a worldwide Turanic conspiracy, while Azerbaijanis believed in a worldwide Armenian conspiracy.²⁴

Thomas de Waal summarized the ethnohistoriographic narrative of the conflict surrounding Karabakh as follows:

For Armenians, Karabakh is the last outpost of their Christian civilization and a historic haven of Armenian princes and bishops before the eastern Turkic world begins. Azerbaijanis talk of it as a cradle, nursery, or conservatoire, the birthplace of their musicians and poets. Historically, Armenia is diminished without this enclave and its monasteries and its mountain lords; geographically and economically, Azerbaijan is not fully viable without Nagorny Karabakh.²⁵

Chronology of escalation

Phase A: Mobilization – latent conflict

At the end of the 1980s, the dissatisfaction of Karabakh Armenians with the policy of what they considered the gradual Azerbaijanization of Nagorno-Karabakh was accompanied by concentrated lobbying activity by the Armenian (and pro-Armenian) intelligentsia in Moscow, who had to some extent instigated the dissatisfaction themselves. The intelligentsia, organized within the Karabakh Committee in Armenia, and the Krunk Committee in Nagorno-Karabakh, pushed for a reevaluation of "Stalin's decision" to hand over Karabakh and Nakhichevan to Azerbaijan. As hinted at above and detailed below, throughout the 1970s and 1980s discontent had been on the rise amongst certain circles of Karabakh Armenians regarding what they saw as planned discrimination against the region's Armenian community.

They were unhappy, firstly, with Baku's demographical policy, which sought to increase the proportion of the Azerbaijani population within the autonomous republic's overall demographic composition. According to data from the last census of the U.S.S.R. (1989), the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was 76.9 per cent (145,500), while the share of Azerbaijanis had increased to 21.5 per cent (40,600).²⁶ During the period between 1959 and 1979, the proportion of Azerbaijanis within the republic nearly doubled, whereas that of the Armenians only grew by 12 per cent.²⁷ Curiously, Häydar Äliyev, the third president of post-Soviet Azerbaijan – who had held the position of the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic during the period 1969–82 – approved of this fact in a recent interview, claiming that he had been "trying to increase the number of Azerbaijanis and to reduce the number of Armenians."²⁸

Events within Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan autonomy, which used to be home to a significant Armenian community, raised serious concerns among Armenians in this regard. At the time of the breakup of the U.S.S.R., Azerbaijanis accounted for nearly one hundred percent of the population of Nakhichevan (this as a consequence of the expulsion of Armenians in the 1920s and 1930s). The fears, stoked by Yerevan activists, that the precedent of the Nakhichevan Armenians might be repeated, served as an important motive for the Karabakh Armenians to mobilize.

Secondly – and this argument was similarly predicated on the example of the earlier Nakhichevan experience – Karabakh Armenians pointed to Baku's continuing policy of erasing Armenian cultural heritage from

the Karabakh countryside, in an identical way to that which had been previously done in Nakhichevan, where, according to the Armenians, a number of churches and other architectural monuments bearing testimony to the region's age-old Armenian settlement had either been destroyed completely or else exposed to destructive neglect. Besides this – the Armenian argument went on – only those monuments pertinent to Karabakh's Azerbaijani cultural legacy (dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) were included in tourist guides, or were given financial support by authorities – with much older Armenian sites gradually being allowed to fall into despair. Further to this, Armenian nationalists alleged, important political-administrative positions were increasingly being given to ethnic Azerbaijanis, at the cost of the (still-majority) Karabakh Armenians, who were thus in the process of losing political and economic influence within their own native area. Armenian nationalists also pointed to the fact that the region was receiving fewer subsidies from Baku than were Azerbaijan's other areas: they claimed that the socioeconomic situation of Nagorno-Karabakh was continually deteriorating, and it was only the outstanding diligence and creativity of the local Armenians that still buoyed the autonomy up.

Therefore, according to the Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh's socioeconomic and cultural development was being actively hampered by the Baku authorities, hence, as far as at least some of the Armenian nationalists were concerned, the sole chance for Karabakh Armenians to get the things back on track in socioeconomic terms – let alone to restore historical justice and help preserve Armenian identity – would now be their region's formal unification with Armenia.²⁹ Importantly, at least some of the Karabakh Armenians (as well as Armenians from the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic) had never reconciled themselves with their status within Azerbaijan, and in 1936, 1947, 1963, and 1977 they had appealed to Moscow for the "return" of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. At least twice within that period, in 1963 and 1968, latent conflict had turned violent, leaving casualties, the worst instance being the 1963 riots, where 18 people of Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnicity had been killed.³⁰

Needless to say, at the time of the onset of conflict, Azerbaijanis began to contradict the Armenians' claims, with a set of opposing arguments.³¹ Similarly, some of the Nagorno-Karabakh Azerbaijanis within the autonomous region themselves felt that they were a discriminated minority in their own country since, according to their arguments, most of the well-paid jobs in state administration and the greater share of power and

economic privileges were in the hands of the local Armenians; similar complaints were directed to Baku by the local Azerbaijanis.

A few words should be said about the main champions of the Karabakh Armenians' interests, both within and outside the autonomy. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the most notorious of the two, the Karabakh Committee, was established at the beginning of 1988, with the chief goal of achieving Nagorno-Karabakh's transfer from Baku's jurisdiction to Yerevan's.³² Interestingly enough, this group gathered to itself prominent Armenian intellectuals who had previously been active within earlier Armenian-Azerbaijani debates over the rightful ownership of the area; these history-laden nationalist debates gained momentum throughout the 1980s and contributed to the strengthening of Azerbaijani-Armenian animosity amongst the ranks of intellectuals prior to the actual outbreak of violence in the late 1980s.³³ Yet, questions still remain about whether the Karabakh Committee was the primary instigator of the Armenians' efforts to rally popular support within Armenia. Already in 1987, thousands of signatures had been collected in both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh by various activists enrolled in the Academy of Science of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in order to legitimize Nagorno-Karabakh's transfer.³⁴ In the course of the following year – ably assisted by leading Armenian public figures, such as Igor Muradyan, Silva Kaputikyan, and Zory Balayan – the Karabakh Committee launched a well-organized campaign to gain support for its case in the Kremlin, to which delegations were sent to advance the irredentist agenda. Indeed, a number of leading figures in the Communist establishment did meet with the Armenians' delegations, whose arguments were based on their view of Nagorno-Karabakh's past as part of historical Armenia, and upon the broader notion of democracy (with *glasnost* being a fashionable piece of vocabulary at the time). Importantly, the Armenians' case was bolstered by the participation of a number of influential Moscow Armenians: figures such as Abel Aganbegyan (a leading economist and Mikhail Gorbachev's personal adviser) as well as some pro-reformist Russian intellectuals and dissidents; other prominent figures, such as Galina Starovoytova and Yelena Alikhanova-Bonner, Armenian wife of leading human rights activist Andrei Sakharov and, indeed, Sakharov himself, were for one reason or another favorably disposed to the idea of rendering Karabakh to Armenia – this perhaps being viewed as a practical implementation of Lenin's notion of a given peoples' right of self-determination.³⁵ Notwithstanding Gorbachev's somewhat tardy public statements to the effect that no territorial transfer would take place in the country,³⁶ a feeling of anxiety was on the increase

amongst Azerbaijanis, who began to view Moscow's passivity as a sign of tacit support for the Armenians' cause. Additionally, in an attempt to exert further pressure on Baku, and so increase the likelihood of their success, a number of leading Armenian public figures began to spread rumors that the Russians had already privately expressed support for the Armenians' cause.³⁷ The Azerbaijanis' sense of being plotted against further deepened as, in the downtown streets of both Stepanakert – Karabakh's capital – and Yerevan, well-organized and attended meetings in favor of territorial transfer gradually grew in size. In turn, the Armenians' protests, and subsequent strikes, in both Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, prompted counter-strikes in Azerbaijan; in Baku's central Lenin Square, thousands of Azerbaijanis gathered to protest the possible annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

Within this atmosphere of increasing ethnic polarization, major importance now became attached to such marginal topics as the refusal of Baku to teach Armenian history in Karabakh schools, or the (above-mentioned) plans of Stepanakert to build a recreational facility in the Topkhana Forest. It is, of course, true that "what begins as a dispute of little importance with few specifics has the tendency, because of the painful history of bloody conflict, or being interpreted through the uncompromising and megalomaniacal positions of the quarrelling sides and through total intolerance of the other side."³⁸

Phase B: Radicalization – sporadic violence

Amongst the more direct triggering factors for conflict were clashes which took place in 1988 in the village of Chardakhly (*Çardaqlı*), located in a predominantly Armenian-populated county in Azerbaijan's Shamkhor (currently *Şamkir*) district in the country's northwest, outside the area of historical Karabakh. In Chardakhly, the majority of the local Armenians refused to recognize the appointment of an Azerbaijani as the director of the *sovkhos* (Soviet state farm); thus, initially, this particular conflict had a local context, as it related directly to the leader of the Shamkhor district, M. Āsādoṽ, (whose appointment made local Armenians unhappy). Reports on the clashes which broke out in Chardakhly in September and October of 1987 soon reached Yerevan, where a crowd of thousands – who had originally rallied for an ecological demonstration – immediately changed their slogans to "Unification of Karabakh" or *Miatsum* ("Unification," in Armenian). Subsequently, the number of protesters grew dramatically.³⁹

Soon thereafter, Armenians started to drive Azerbaijanis out of their local areas: the latter, along with some Azerbaijani-speaking Muslim

Kurds, began to be expelled en masse from Armenia and Karabakh, while violence and pillaging were also not uncommon.⁴⁰ The first officially reported bloodshed occurred on February 26, 1988, when two Azerbaijani youths were killed in a clash near Ağdam (Agdam). Over the next three days, in the industrial city of Sumgait near Baku, there were pogroms against local Armenians, apparently inspired by the arrival of infuriated masses of Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as by the presence of murderers and rapists allegedly released early from prisons – all as Soviet Army troops looked on with depraved indifference. The events in Sumgait coincided perfectly with the phantoms of the past, and with the latest ideological constructs created by Armenian nationalists, the vanguard of the Karabakh movement. Then, on April 24 of that year (the day which, since 1965, had been observed as the occasion of the annual commemoration of the Armenian genocide) another taboo was violated at a meeting in Yerevan, when Ottoman Turks began openly to be equated with "Azerbaijani Turks." In the belief that self-help was vital for their physical survival, the Armenians swiftly began establishing armed forces, with the support of the diaspora.

In 1989–90 the conflict escalated further; armed clashes in Karabakh and in surrounding areas grew in intensity, and the number of victims rose. Armed Armenians and Azerbaijanis were now also attacking Soviet Army units or were negotiating with their commanders to obtain weapons and ammunition. On November 28, 1989, Moscow ended the direct rule which had existed within the autonomous region for a year, thereby amply demonstrating its inability to handle the conflict effectively. On December 1, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic unilaterally declared Nagorno-Karabakh to be part of the republic.

The events in Karabakh served as a pretext for mobilizing the Armenian, and later the Azerbaijani, public. The rapid breakup of the Soviet Union now meant that nothing stood in the way of a further escalation of the dangerous conflict. Over the previous several years, the Armenians had managed to build up an army fit for combat, whilst in Baku similar efforts had been prevented by the Communists, who were still clinging to power and were fixated on their long-term conflicts with the nationalists. On August 31, Baku declared Azerbaijan's independence. On September 2, 1991 the Karabakh Armenians also declared independence, confirmed by a quickly organized referendum, in which nearly all Armenians (99 per cent of the voters) voted for full sovereignty.⁴¹ In turn, on November 26, the parliament of Azerbaijan abolished the

autonomy of Karabakh, a ruling that had no practical impact on developments in the region.

Phase C: Armed conflict – civil (international) war

A real war broke out in the winter of 1992. On the night of February 25 the town of Xocalı (Khojali, Khojaly), located on a strategic corridor leading from Stepanakert to Agdam, was occupied. The direct consequence of this was the brutal torture, rape, and execution of 613 of the approximately 8,000 local Azerbaijani residents, most of whom were women, children, and old men.⁴² "Participating in the occupation of Khojaly and the following attacks on Azerbaijani settlements were entire divisions of the 366th regiment of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States, former states in the Soviet Union], the task of which was theoretically to prevent just such large-scale armed clashes."⁴³ This brutality was apparently calculated in advance to serve as a deterrent, and it was to prove of decisive importance for the success of subsequent attempts to secure ethnically "clean" occupied areas.

The reports from Khojaly shook the Azerbaijani public: parliament forced President Mütəllibov to resign, but after a month of de facto anarchy he returned to power, and remained in post until May when, as a consequence of a coup organized by the APFP, he was forced to flee; Äbülfäz Elçibäy then became the president. The stimulus for another change of government in Baku came when Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh forces occupied Shusha, a town mainly inhabited by Azerbaijanis and known as the "heart of Karabakh," being its historical capital, the key for the defense of the area – and a place of deep emotional importance for the nationalist sentiments of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis. At the same time, the Armenians' logistical problems of supply were definitively solved, and the course of the war was significantly influenced by the occupation of the Lachin Corridor – part of the territory of Azerbaijan lying outside Nagorno-Karabakh and connecting the territory of Karabakh with Armenia.

After the repulse of an Azerbaijani attack in northern Karabakh in the summer of 1992, the united Karabakh and Armenian troops now controlled nearly all of Nagorno-Karabakh, and in the spring of the following year they occupied areas of outer Karabakh, where the majority of the inhabitants were Azerbaijani (Füzuli, Fizuli) or Azerbaijani-Kurdish (Kälbäcär, Kelbajar). On April 30, 1993, the UN Security Council's Resolution 822 called on the Armenians to withdraw their troops from Kelbajar, since the occupying of those areas was clearly not motivated by security concerns: however, this resolution came to nothing. Armenia

apparently wanted to strengthen its position for future peace negotiations with Azerbaijan.

In June 1993 there was another coup in Baku (as has already been mentioned) when the rebellious Colonel Sürät Hüseynov ordered his units to advance to the east towards the Azerbaijani capital. After Elçibäy fled to Nakhichevan, his compatriot, Heydär Äliyev, made a return to big-time politics. With the Kremlin's blessing, Äliyev reached an agreement with Hüseynov, by which Hüseynov became the premier and defense minister and Äliyev became the country's de facto leader. Once in office, Äliyev tried to consolidate the nation, to create an army that would be fit for combat, and to improve the country's shaky international standing.

Meanwhile, the Armenians took full advantage of the chaotic domestic politics in Azerbaijan, and faced with half-hearted resistance by the demoralized Azerbaijani forces, successively occupied Agdam, Fizuli, Horadiz (Goradiz), Qubatlı (Kubatly), Cäbrayıl (Jabrail), and Zangelan, eventually reaching the Azerbaijani-Iranian border along the Arax River. Iranian army units then crossed the river northward to announce their presence. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani villagers, frightened by the practices of ethnic cleansing and by the anarchy in the Armenian armed forces, were already fleeing *en masse* before the advancing invaders. Hundreds of civilians died on mountain paths as a result of exhaustion and hypothermia. There followed UN Security Council resolutions 853, 874, and 884, demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied territories – but, again, these resolutions had no effect.

In the winter of 1993–94, the hastily formed Azerbaijani army made an all-out effort to begin an attack along the entire front, but after initial successes, the attack collapsed. Now, neither side had sufficient strength to wage offensive warfare and, on May 12, 1994, a ceasefire was signed in Moscow, one which is still in force today. However, as a consequence of sniper fire, mine explosions, and occasional artillery duels, approximately 200 to 300 soldiers and civilians still lose their lives on the front lines each year.

The war cost as many as 30,000 casualties, of which approximately 7,000 were Armenians; 1.1 million people became refugees, at least 800,000 of whom were Azerbaijanis. Seven districts of Azerbaijan were occupied,⁴⁴ along with the principal part of Nagorno-Karabakh, representing 14 per cent of Azerbaijani territory. Armenia found itself blockaded by Azerbaijan and Turkey, while Nakhichevan was blockaded by Armenia. Both the Azerbaijani and Armenian economies had

been devastated and, by some estimates, the number of Armenians had fallen to between two and two and a half million, as a result of migration.⁴⁵

The conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia

South Ossetia

As was the case with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia conflicts also lack deep historical roots: rather than arising as ethnic conflicts as such, during the initial phase of their escalation, at least, they could have been regarded as conflicts primarily based on socioeconomic factors.⁴⁶

The present conflict between the government in Tbilisi and the South Ossetians has historical roots going back to 1918–21: the period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. During that period, there were three main uprisings (in 1918, 1919, and 1920) by the South Ossetian population of the Shida Kartli region (Interior Georgia). Dissatisfaction was at first mainly directed against the economic policies of the central government, which was, in the opinion of the South Ossetians, unjustly supporting the interests of big landowners, most of whom were ethnic Georgians: this struggle soon developed into an armed uprising.⁴⁷ The conflict played itself out between two ethnically homogenous groups: the South Ossetian peasants, on the one hand, who were generally without land and were striving, under the influence of developments in Russia, to gain greater freedom and the right to own cultivated land; and the local Georgian aristocrats, on the other hand, to whom the land had originally belonged. Thus, before long, the conflict became ethnic in character.

The first armed attack by Georgian troops was turned back by the South Ossetian rebels, who then occupied the region's administrative center, the town of Tskhinvali. The Georgian population, which predominated in Tskhinvali and other towns, then became the target of attacks. Fighting continued, with mastery alternating between the two sides; however, any victories by the Georgian army were accompanied by retributive massacres that cost the lives of hundreds of South Ossetian civilians. Ethnically motivated murders and ethnic cleansing heightened the nationalist feelings of the South Ossetians and intensified their grudge against the Georgians. From 1918 onward, a growing proportion of the South Ossetian population came to believe that it could seek support in the escalating conflict with the Georgian state only from Soviet Russia, which was interested in control over South

Ossetian territory – South Ossetia being a strategically situated region adjoining the North and South Caucasus. To a large extent, the socioeconomic interests of the South Ossetian peasants predetermined their ethnopolitical sympathies and antipathies. The dissatisfaction of the South Ossetians with the policies of the Menshevik government in Tbilisi strengthened their sympathy for the Bolsheviks and, in light of the traditionally warm relations between the Ossetians and the Russians,⁴⁸ and the strategic interest of the Soviets in regaining control over Georgia, this made it possible for the Ossetians to count on the military and political support of Russia. During the uprisings in 1919, and especially during the massive uprising in 1920, the South Ossetian rebels received solid – although covert – material support from the Red Army, and the Ossetian political elite directly proclaimed the goal of being annexed to Soviet Russia – and, indeed, at the end of 1919 this did partially occur.⁴⁹ In the middle of 1920 Moscow distanced itself from its South Ossetian wards in an effort to avoid engagement in an open military conflict with Georgia. The Georgian military soon undertook an extensive counteroffensive against South Ossetian positions.⁵⁰ The eventual liquidation of South Ossetian sovereignty was accompanied by ethnic cleansing, which, cost the lives of between 3,000–7,000 people, mostly civilians, while nearly 20,000 South Ossetian civilians were forced to flee to Soviet Russia before the advancing Georgian armed formations.⁵¹ In retribution, South Ossetian volunteers joined the advancing Red Army, which occupied Georgia in February of the next year, extinguishing independent Georgian statehood. Again, in this instance there were ethnically motivated murders.

In 1922, within the overarching framework of Sovietized Georgia, the South Ossetian Autonomous Region was created: as a concession to the protesting South Ossetian Communists, who had expected their homeland to be joined to North Ossetia and Russia, the administrative borders of the region were expanded to include several communities with a mainly Georgian population.

The period of Soviet rule was characterized by an overall absence of conflicts: the high percentage of interethnic marriages, the closeness of the respective traditions and culture, and the Orthodox religion (common to both nationalities, and still having major ethnosymbolic significance), all played important roles in the maintenance of this period of interethnic peace and stability.⁵² Also contributing to this period of peace was the effective cover-up of the tragic events of the first republic (1918–21) by official Soviet ideology – although among

nationalistically minded South Ossetians and Georgians, and amongst the older inhabitants, memories of the cruelty persisted for some time.

Abkhazia

Events in Abkhazia developed in a broadly similar fashion. In connection with the October Revolution of 1917, the Abkhazian National Assembly announced the formation of an Abkhazian parliament (the Abkhazian National Council), which subsequently adopted a constitution. In May of the following year, Abkhazia was formally declared part of the newly emerging North Caucasian Mountainous Republic, although it was still afflicted with strife between various political splinter groups – pro-Russian Bolsheviks, pro-Turkish aristocrats, and pro-Georgian Socialists (Mensheviks). In the spring of 1918, Sukhumi, the administrative center of Abkhazia, was occupied by pro-Bolshevik Abkhaz militias, but control over the city and region soon returned to Georgian armed forces.

Unlike South Ossetia, Abkhazia had a guaranteed status of autonomy under the constitution of the independent Georgian Republic (1918, 1921).⁵³ Abkhaz–Georgian relations nevertheless worsened again after the failed landing in Sukhumi in June of that year by Ottoman–Abkhaz (Muhajir) troops (an invasion organized by Abkhaz aristocrats and nationalists), and in the wake of an unsuccessful coup attempt by several Georgian officers of Abkhaz origin.⁵⁴ Tbilisi resorted to repression: the autonomous status of Abkhazia was temporarily suspended, and many separatist-minded Abkhaz representatives were jailed.

Several local uprisings soon erupted, the largest of which was the peasant rebellion of 1920, which also involved the neighboring Georgian region of Samegrelo; government troops brutally suppressed that uprising. During the ensuing tension between Russia and Georgia, the Abkhaz received support first from Denikin's Volunteer Army (February 1919), and then two years later, during the occupation of Georgia, from the Red Army.⁵⁵

A month after the occupation of Georgia, the Bolsheviks declared the founding of the Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic: Abkhazia thus gained a status equal to that of Georgia, with which it duly formed a sort of confederation. At the end of 1931, that status was terminated by a decision of the *Kavbyuro* (Committee for the Caucasus),⁵⁶ and the territory of Abkhazia was instead annexed to Georgia, on the basis of the so-called Union Treaty. Ten years later, Abkhazia was directly incorporated into the framework of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, on the principle of autonomy; South Ossetia likewise gained the status of an autonomous

Soviet Socialist Republic. Abkhaz intellectuals again began to call into question Moscow's actions – again describing Abkhazia's status as 'autonomous within the framework of Georgia' as illegitimate: "[T]he formation of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic within the framework of Georgia [in 1931] was the outcome not of the supposed granting of autonomous status to one of Georgia's minorities, as is not infrequently stated, but rather of the forcible convergence of two neighboring states through the incorporation of one of them, Abkhazia, into the other, Georgia." This remains the predominant Abkhaz viewpoint.⁵⁷

Conflict and historiography

The effective vacuum of power and ideology which was brought about by the easing of societal repression during the years of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, created a sudden strengthening of the nationalist ideology which had previously been suppressed. In multiethnic regions of the former Soviet empire, this process was accompanied by the challenging of the established ethnoadministrative hierarchy by representatives of ethnic groups – the status of which, at least in the opinion of some of their elites, did not correspond to the changed political situation, or indeed to the demands for "historical justice." This was especially true of the so-called titular ethnic groups with territorially and politically defined autonomy within the Soviet Republics: in the South Caucasus, besides Ajaria and Nakhichevan, this primarily involved Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.⁵⁸ It can be said that the Soviet policy of "friendship of peoples," with its strict taboo on the public discussion of earlier violence, contributed greatly towards the peaceful coexistence of the Soviet nationalities, but it was far from being the case that everything was forgotten during the 70 years of the existence of the U.S.S.R. Wrongs and grudges that had long been covered up during the Soviet era still survived in latent form, and they began to resurface.

Within this tense situation of societal mobilization, the emancipation efforts of the various ethnic groups inhabiting the periphery of Georgia (and Azerbaijan) were perceived by the majority populations of these regions as an attempt by a "fifth column" (covertly directed by Moscow) to undermine the territorial integrity of their respective homelands – and doing so at an historic moment when the opportunity had finally arrived for each to build an independent nation-state. According to a Georgian author writing about the late Soviet era:

[T]he function of an "internal front" was often delegated to various types of "movements," "forums," and "cultural associations," bringing

together representatives of local minority nationalities, ethnicities and religious minorities. In multiethnic Georgia, striving for independence, with three autonomous units, for the experienced KGB it was not difficult to organize "counter-movements" against the breakup of the Communist empire. In the Abkhazian Autonomous SSR there thus emerged the National Forum of Abkhazia *Aydgylara* (Unity), the Russian society House of the Slavs, the Ossetian group *Alan*, the Armenian movement *Krunk* and others.⁵⁹

In other words, it is nearly axiomatic that "minorities who are not loyal to Georgia are therefore viewed as accomplices of Russia."⁶⁰ During the years of his presidency, Gamsakhurdia summed up the opinions of the Georgian public in a far more radical way. According to him, the Ossetians were "the direct agents of the Kremlin and terrorists," who moreover "have no right to land. They are a new people here."⁶¹

The Georgian school of historiography, which had enjoyed a period of relative prominence during the Soviet era, dated the beginnings of the presence of Ossetians in northern Georgia to approximately the seventeenth century, while others gave the thirteenth century. Masses of Ossetian peasants, pressured by a lack of sufficient fertile land, and by the expansion of Kabarda feudal lords (in the version working with the thirteenth century, which would have been the expansion of steppe raiders from Mongolia), crossed the Greater Caucasus Range at that time, and settled to the south of it. The lands they settled – mainly involving northern districts of present-day South Ossetia, the historical region of Dvaleti – then belonged to the influential Machabeli feudal princely clan, which gave consent for the arrival of the Ossetians.⁶²

An analogous historical narrative is also advanced with regard to the presence of the present-day Abkhazians in the territory which they now claim. Since the 1960s, Georgian historiography has spoken of the gradual arrival of Adyghean (Circassian) tribes, identified with the ancient Apsila and Abazga tribes⁶³ (these being the ancestors of the modern Abkhazians) from the northwest Caucasus, to part of the territory of present-day Abkhazia. Curiously, this view of the ethnogenesis of the Abkhaz people was articulated as early as a century ago by Irakli Tsereteli, one of the co-founders of the Georgian political nation, who states:

Those whom we call Abkhazians are not Abkhazians. The Abkhazians were a Georgian tribe. The present Abkhazian are the descendants of Kabardeys and Balkars who migrated into Georgia in the mid-19th century.⁶⁴

Accordingly, some influential modern representatives of Georgian historiography now cite the fact that historic Abkhazia (*apkhazeti* or *afkhazeti* in Georgian) was settled by a people speaking a West Kartvel dialect (the language of the legendary Kolkhida), said to be close to the modern Megrelian tongue; the original Georgian population of Kolkhida, however, was assimilated over time by the arriving Circassian tribes. In the opinions of many Georgian historians, this thesis is also supported by the autoethnonym of the modern Abkhazians (*Apsua*), and by the toponym, *Apsny*, which have nothing in common with the Georgian root, *abkhaz*.⁶⁵

Just like Karabakh, Abkhazia has also played an important role in Georgian history, although it cannot be regarded as the cradle of Georgian statehood. It is noteworthy that the Abkhazian principality, at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, became a part of the unified Georgian state; it is at that point in the chronicles that we first encounter the name *saqartvelo* (Georgia). Situated on the Black Sea, Abkhazia was originally under the strong influence of Byzantine (Greek) culture, via which Orthodox Christianity was spread throughout the region. The Greek influence was subsequently supplanted by the growing influence of indigenous Georgian culture. The Abkhazian feudal elite were subjected to strong Kartvelization: the Georgian language became part of the local *high culture*, as writing was done using Georgian script, and it was used for religious services – hence, Georgian became the language of the court, while non-literary Abkhazian survived mainly in the countryside.

Although from the end of the sixteenth until the beginning of the nineteenth centuries Abkhazia existed either within the sphere of influence of the Ottoman Empire or was directly a part thereof (such that Abkhazians were subjected to some sort of Islamicization), Georgian authors claim that Abkhazia never ceased being a part of the West Georgian political area.

The presence of numerous ethnic minorities in the peripheral areas of the country, along with the tradition of ethnoterritorially defined statehood, contributed from the 1950s through to the 1970s towards the development of a specific view of South Ossetians and Abkhazians – as well as of Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and members of other ethnic groups – as being mere "guests" on Georgian soil. Since then, that view of ethnic minorities has become an integral part of the Georgian national narrative. The cultivation of the myth of Georgia as the "hospitable mother" has consigned South Ossetians and Abkhazians to the roles of mere guests who – only relatively recently within the context of

the long history of Georgian statehood – have settled on Georgian territory, and from whom respect for the territorial integrity of the “host” country can be rightfully demanded. Seen from this lofty perspective of “historical justice,” the separatist aspirations of these subordinate peoples have, therefore, practically no legitimacy at all. This is the source of the slogans that were commonly heard in the vocabulary of many nationalistically oriented Georgians during the 1980s and 1990s: “If you don’t like things in Georgia, go back to Iran” is what Ossetians heard in reference to their Iranian origin, while it was suggested to Abkhazians that they move back to the North Caucasus, to Russia and their Adygean fellow tribesmen.

The Georgian perception of Abkhazians and South Ossetians is, however, influenced by the relatively strong intermixing of local Kartvel, generally Megrel, families with Abkhazians: today, therefore, many Abkhazian families have Megrel roots.⁶⁶ If, then, we take into consideration the exclusively “ethnogenetic” nature of Georgian nationalism, emphasizing as it does the primacy of “blood” or ethnic origin, it is interesting to note that the Georgians are inclined more favorably towards Abkhazians (and as well, to a lesser degree, to Ossetians) than towards any of the country’s other ethnic groups. Even in spite of the series of excessively violent incidents which have characterized the Georgian–Abkhazian armed conflict, Georgians still tend to regard Abkhazians as a friendly, if not kindred, nationality.⁶⁷ In an effort to excuse ethnic cleansing and murders, some Georgians tend to blame such groups as the North Caucasian volunteers, especially Chechens, who fought in large numbers in the war on the side of the Abkhazians, as well as Armenians and Russians, as the main culprits for the violence against Georgians. Family relations are a truly important matter in the Caucasus, and this can also be seen as the basis of the Georgian integrative view of Abkhazians:

Georgians and Abkhazians are united by blood relations, common families and common children. The unity of Georgians and Abkhazians is determined by life itself. Abkhazians participated actively in the process of the political unification of our common homeland and the creation of a culture common to both of our nationalities. This obligates both of our peoples to protect and deepen, and not to destroy the centuries-old tradition of our common life in peace and understanding, mutual trust and mutual support and the tradition of brotherhood made holy by the blood of ancestors.⁶⁸

It is symptomatic of this that, although the Armenians and Azerbaijanis have incomparably fewer instances of ethnic violence and separatism, the more numerous Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia do not tend to be included in such benign nationalistic tracts.

During the initial stages of the public activity of the resurgent Georgian nationalists, there did also exist an attempt to ideologically unite *all* of the various ethnic groups within the country, in the face of the common “external threat” which was seen to be posed by Moscow. At first, some nationalists advocated *cooperation* with the emancipation movements of the Abkhazians and Ajarians, in the name of a united, independent Georgia: they were also willing to allow these movements sufficient cultural, economic, and possibly even political rights, within the framework of an already-existing autonomous national entity. As Ghia Nodia notes, “[T]he radicals worked hard to change anti-Abkhaz slogans into pro-independence ones.”⁶⁹

The South Ossetians and Abkhazians, however, rejected the Georgian version of history, perhaps with even greater vigor than their Georgian opponents had shown in constructing that history: in accordance with the typical pattern for all ethnopolitical conflicts, historians from both camps accuse the opposite side of politicizing the topic and of a biased approach. The South Ossetians, for example, are concerned with establishing the autochthonous character of the Ossetian population within the territory of present-day South Ossetia. Thus, they emphasize the Scythian (proto-Alan or later Alan) presence in both the South and North Caucasus, and they claim that the Ossetian population has been settled in the present territory of South Ossetia since time immemorial (although this can hardly be documented on the basis of available sources).⁷⁰

Similarly, Abkhazian intellectuals point to the fact that Abkhazian princes from the ruling Shervashidze (Ch’ach’ba) dynasty declared the annexation of Abkhazia to the Russian state in 1810, independently from any Georgian state – that is, nine years after the end of (East-)Georgian statehood.⁷¹ They regard the year 1866 as the key moment, when a mass anti-Russian rebellion broke out in Abkhazia, which was punished by, among other things, the deportation to Turkey of thousands of Muslim Abkhazians who had taken part in the uprising. In this way the proportion of Abkhazians professing Islam, who had previously been predominant in the country, fell to below the number of Orthodox Abkhazians.⁷² Far more important, however, was the fact that the Russian colonial administration soon began resettling members

of other ethnic groups into the depopulated areas – besides Armenians, Ponti Greeks, and Jews, these were, in particular, Georgians, foremost among whom were the Megreles of western Georgia.

This trend then continued during the Soviet era, as a result of which the numerical proportion of Abkhazians in their own land fell to less than one fifth. Abkhazians were the only group in the region that constituted a minority within its only ethnic autonomous region, – and this inevitably increased their fear of assimilation and of demographic domination by Georgians. The mass repression that Abkhazia suffered during the 1930s – along with the rest of the Soviet Union – and which also resulted in the end of Abkhazia's status as a Soviet Socialist Republic and its subsequent annexation to Georgia, acquired a strongly *ethnic* subtext, since Joseph Stalin (Jugashvili), and Lavrenty Beria, the chief of the Soviet secret police (NKVD), were both ethnic Georgians.⁷³

The conviction of being victims of historical injustice is, thus, not alien to Abkhazians or South Ossetians. In the initial phase of the conflict this feeling was (latently) directed against Tbilisi and then subsequently against Georgians as an ethnic community. A related issue is the consciousness of ethnolinguistic, cultural, and historical difference, which is typical for less populous nationalities: and, indeed, just such an awareness has been articulated with increasing emphasis amongst Abkhazians and South Ossetians. The Georgian project of integration, legitimizing as it does the idea of a common Georgian state by means of emphasizing elements of ethnic and cultural affinity, is in implicit conflict with the exclusivist South Ossetian or Abkhazian projects, as exemplified by abkhaz intellectuals:

The Abkhazians speak a language not related at all to Georgian. They have a different culture and history. Abkhazians have never been a part of the Georgian nation, have never regarded themselves as belonging to it and have never been regarded as such by Georgians or by any other nation. With the exception of short interims, they have always had independent statehood or a high degree of political independence.⁷⁴

In the arrangements of ethno-federalism formalized during the Soviet era (from 1931 onward), many Georgians, as well as Abkhazians (and Karabakh Armenians), saw elements of historic discontinuity: hence, the societal developments in the 1980s and 1990s gave them hope that

a different arrangement would now be possible. In the words of one Abkhazian author:

[T]he whole Soviet period was characterized by the constant efforts of Georgia directed at assimilation of Abkhazians and the gradual liquidation of Abkhazian statehood and by an equally determined struggle of Abkhazians for the maintaining of their ethnic identity and for the raising of Abkhazia's status to the level of a Union republic.⁷⁵

During the 70 years of Soviet hegemony, the Abkhazians and South Ossetians were broadly characterized by a favorable orientation towards the center of the Union: Moscow. Moscow was regarded as the power which guaranteed that Tbilisi would act cautiously when face-to-face with the political, administrative, and demographic preponderance of Georgians. The Abkhazians hoped that Moscow would aid the greatest possible strengthening of their autonomy, or even (especially as far as the Abkhazians were concerned) return to them the coveted status of a Union republic. Abkhazians and South Ossetians also have a strong consciousness of their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural relation to the Circassian nationalities of the northwestern Caucasus and to the North Ossetians, respectively.⁷⁶ Within the members of both ethnic groups, there is also a firm consciousness of highlander solidarity – one which connects them with the so-called mountain peoples of the (North) Caucasus; although for the North Ossetians, who have suffered quite serious clashes with the Ingush in the past, that consciousness is more ethnically based than regional.⁷⁷ The attempt to reconnect with their ethnolinguistically related (and, to some extent, also religiously related in the case of the Abkhazians) North Caucasian fellow tribesmen has gone hand in hand with efforts to gain autonomy within the framework of the Russian Federation, however timidly this may have been expressed whilst under Soviet domination. These efforts of the Abkhazians – and to a lesser extent of the South Ossetians as well – accompanied as they are by their common orientation towards the Russian language (members of the ethnic minorities were among the most vocal proponents of use of the Russian language in public life, and especially in the schools), had featured as a constant source of tension between them and the Georgians during the existence of the Soviet Union.⁷⁸ All in all, however the relations between individual Abkhazians, Georgians, and South Ossetians in everyday life in Soviet Abkhazia were characterized by a relative absence of overt conflict.

South Ossetia: chronology of escalation

Phase A: Mobilization – latent conflict

As with the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians' demands, the South Ossetians pointed to the socioeconomic underdevelopment of their autonomy as a compelling grievance; they claimed that their level of economic development only equated to half that of the Georgian average at the time. An enduring source of the South Ossetians' discontent was the republic's inferior administrative status by comparison with that of Ajaria or Abkhazia: whereas these constituted autonomous republics, South Ossetia only had the status of autonomous *oblast* – which only permitted its inhabitants a lower degree of self-government.⁷⁹ In an attempt to remedy this situation, South Ossetians occasionally organized petitions to Moscow, while more militant South Ossetian nationalists were inclined to suggest a more radical approach: that being secession from Georgia and their region's unification with North Ossetia, thereby becoming part of Russia. The most notorious attempt to achieve this had taken place in 1925, when Ossetian Communist elites from Vladikavkaz and Tskhinvali sent a joint petition to Stalin. The South Ossetians expressed discontent with the fact that, in many areas of the republic, the leaders of local administrations were appointed by Tbilisi, and in a majority of cases, these appointees were Georgians, either from within South Ossetia or outside it. This was regarded by the South Ossetians as a sign of an orchestrated policy, on Georgia's part, of weakening South Ossetians in political terms. Symbolic issues also played a role in the South Ossetians' quest for more autonomy, or secession (as had been the case with both the Karabakh Armenians and Abkhazians): South Ossetians advocated more classes in the Ossetian language and history, for example. However, their attempts to introduce history textbooks written in North Ossetian into the South Ossetian educational system ultimately failed.

Tbilisi's supposedly perennial assimilatory policy with respect to the South Ossetians aroused serious concerns on the part of the Ossetians themselves. It is worth noting, in fact, that in 1989 the population of the South Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Oblast was as a whole only one hundred thousand – of which Ossetians constituted about two thirds (66 per cent), while less than a third (29 per cent) were Georgians; and of these, "half of the families were of mixed Georgian–Ossetian origin."⁸⁰ As has already been noted, during the Soviet era this fact had in itself facilitated the conflict-free coexistence of the two ethnic groups

in the area, where there had been ethnically mixed villages, with only very rare instances of ethnic violence. Moreover, as noted above, there was also a high percentage of ethnically mixed South Ossetian–Georgian marriages throughout Georgia, as an additional hundred thousand South Ossetians were distributed across the country.

Of the three cases of ethnopolitical conflict under consideration here, the South Ossetian case seems to have been the most spontaneous. Unlike the Armenian-led case of Nagorno-Karabakh secession, which seems to have been a thoroughly organized initiative (albeit with a certain degree of spontaneity), the creation in 1988 of *Ademon Nykhas* (the National or People's Front) in South Ossetia resembles rather the establishment of similar (trans-national) movements throughout the North Caucasus at the time.⁸¹ The aim of these movements was to gather influential co-ethnics under the umbrella of a centralized institution, so as to foster ethnic solidarity and be capable of effectively advocating for perceived ethnic or regional interests, while at the same time not necessarily seeking secession. Indeed, as detailed below, prior to the escalation of the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict no single statement was made by either the official South Ossetian authorities in Tskhinvali, or by *Ademon Nykhas* members regarding the republic's incorporation into Russia.

Tension in relations between South Ossetians and Georgians began to escalate, however, after Tskhinvali, influenced by developments in Abkhazia, issued a declaration, in the spring of 1989, supporting the separatist demands of the Abkhazians. From August of that year, Tbilisi attempted to formalize Georgian as the sole official language of the country. This would have implied a significant weakening of the position of the Ossetian and Abkhazian languages, as well as of Russian, which served as a lingua franca amongst the South Ossetians (only 14 per cent of whom spoke Georgian as of 1989), the Abkhazians, and members of other ethnic minorities.⁸² Tbilisi's move was regarded as constituting an implicit attack on South Ossetian (and Abkhaz) identity: for the Ossetians and Abkhazians, it signaled that Georgian ethnonationalism, with all of its xenophobic overtones, was in the ascendant. Furthermore, Abkhazians and Ossetians interpreted this move as another step in Tbilisi's ongoing attempts to assimilate the country's ethnic minorities. Accordingly, a few weeks later, Tskhinvali produced a proposal to give Ossetian, Georgian, and Russian, equal status as official languages of the region: however, in the light of intensifying clashes within the autonomous region between South Ossetians and Georgians, this moderate proposal was soon abandoned, and Ossetian was declared

as the sole state language in South Ossetia. At the same time, Ademon Nykhas appealed to Moscow to request the autonomous oblast's unification with North Ossetia. Simultaneously, in November 1989 the South Ossetian authorities unilaterally adopted a law elevating the status of autonomy from that of an oblast, to that of a republic within the borders of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic – that is to say making it equal in status to Abkhazia.

Tbilisi, however, immediately rejected Tskhinvali's action.

Phase B: Radicalization – sporadic violence

Throughout this period, the interethnic situation in South Ossetia had been steadily deteriorating, marked by a series of armed clashes between groups of local village militias; the response of the nationalists in Tbilisi was not long in coming. The Georgian nationalists moved to smother any outbreaks of separatism from their inception. The so-called "March on Tskhinvali," organized by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the parliamentary deputy, Givi Gumbaridze, was held at the end of autumn in 1989; the instigators of this march intended to convene a meeting, on the central square of the South Ossetian capital, calling for the unity of Georgia. Participating in the "march" were up to 10,000 Georgians, mostly pugnacious youths, who were eventually halted in the suburbs of the South Ossetian capital by troops of the Soviet interior ministry and by South Ossetian militias and civilians. Clashes could not be averted entirely, however, since fighters from nearby Georgian villages, began carrying out "punitive" attacks against the local Ossetians: they used firearms and the South Ossetians fought back, which claimed fatalities on both sides.⁸³ By the beginning of the next year, however, it seemed the conflict was over, and that Tskhinvali would no longer try to escape the jurisdiction of Tbilisi, so most of the Georgian formations were withdrawn from the area. The influence of Ademon Nykhas was growing, however, and after the spilling of blood, nationalists and radicals gained more influence within the movement. They likewise began the intensive formation of armed home defense units.

The seeds of mutual mistrust had now been sown, while several further factors soon contributed to a worsening of the situation. In fact, the situation was rapidly deteriorating because of a triangular scheme of confrontation: the Georgians' emancipatory activities, aimed at loosening their dependence on Moscow, would in response bring about negative reactions from the government in Tskhinvali, concerned about the deepening of the security crisis vis-à-vis Georgian nationalists, which

would in turn radicalize Tbilisi. As an example of this, when the Georgian parliament adopted a bill, on May 9, denouncing the Union Treaty of 1922 and outlawing every juridical act since then (thereby paving the way for the formal announcement of independence), the South Ossetian authorities were quick to adopt a series of laws *reconfirming* the applicability of Soviet laws and the Soviet constitution, within the administrative borders of South Ossetia.

Then, in April 1990, the party leadership in Moscow enacted a new law requiring the strengthening of the rights of the autonomous regions and republics. This move was mainly aimed at restraining the emancipation efforts towards autonomy within the union republics, however the outcome was the exact opposite. In Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, each of which was faced with separatist or irredentist campaigns by ethnic minorities, the law was received with distrust and merely served to worsen antagonism towards both the central union authorities and the minorities, who were now regarded as a part of a "big politics," the ultimate goal of which was the undermining of the territorial integrity of the autonomous regions and republics and the strengthening of their dependence on Moscow. These repercussions to the new Soviet law manifested most clearly in Georgia, where after four months the parliament enacted a law banning regional parties from taking part in Georgia-wide elections – thereby eliminating, *de jure*, the ethnic parties of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians from the political life of the republic – even while public support for political autonomy was growing amongst these ethnic groups in direct proportion to the escalation of the conflict with Tbilisi.

In retribution, the government in Tskhinvali decided to adopt an extreme measure: in September 1990 it proclaimed the foundation of the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic and requested that Moscow annex this new republic to the U.S.S.R., with the status of a union republic *entirely independent of Georgia*. That decision, however, was overturned by the Georgian government the very next day. The Georgian public, agitated by the events of the previous April and by the escalating crisis in Abkhazia, interpreted this act as yet another attempt to cast doubt on the country's territorial integrity. Meanwhile, the South Ossetian authorities boycotted the all-Georgian election of the republic's Supreme Council, held in October and won by Zviad Gamsakhurdia's nationalist Round Table.⁸⁴ Intriguingly, one of Gamsakhurdia's first public pronouncements in his newly acquired post included his notorious assertion: "Georgia is for Georgians! Ossetians, get out of Georgia!"

Needless to say, Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric, along with some of his consequent initiatives, further intensified the South Ossetians' anxieties. At the end of the year, Tbilisi not only put South Ossetia under a blockade, but also terminated its autonomous status and declared a state of emergency in the region. Although these actions were soon *formally* negated by the Kremlin, Moscow's decree was obeyed neither in Tbilisi nor in Tskhinvali.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Tbilisi's decision further strengthened the South Ossetians's existing fears that "their language would be in jeopardy if the autonomy were abolished. As a proof, they referred to the anti-*Ossetian* linguistic policy of the Georgian authorities in the 1930s-1950s," writes Anatoly Isaenko.⁸⁶ Moscow then made an agreement with Tbilisi to the effect that "its policy was subordinated to the Soviet policy of Interior, in return for an opportunity to deal with South Ossetia as it saw fit."⁸⁷

Phase C: Armed conflict – civil war

In early January, armed clashes erupted in Tskhinvali and its outskirts, as well as in the Java district in South Ossetia's northwest, following the deployment of around 3,000 troops of the Georgian ministry of the interior. The situation worsened still further late in January of 1991 after Torez Kulumbegov, chairman of the Supreme Council of South Ossetia, was arrested while at talks with the Georgian side and taken to jail in Tbilisi, (while Russian mediators looked passively on); this arrest appears to have been carried out on orders from Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The South Ossetian public, fired by fresh memories of recent interethnic clashes, then actively participated in a union-wide referendum on the new Union Treaty (supposed to delegate greater powers to the union's republics in order to save the disintegrating Soviet state) which was then being promoted by Moscow: according to South Ossetian sources, the treaty was approved by 99 per cent of the votes. At the same time, however, the South Ossetians (like the Abkhazians) ignored the referendum on independence, which was held two weeks later, in March. Under the terms of a Russian-mediated ceasefire, Georgian armed formations had partly departed the region as early as February – even though they still controlled Georgian-populated villages to the north of Tskhinvali, were able to besiege the city, and continued to engage in armed clashes with varying degrees of intensity.

The conflict escalated in this time, as armed groups of Georgians, often members of the Vazha Adamia movement and the Merab Kostava Society, attacked the local South Ossetians they wished to drive out of

the area. The clashes intensified further, as Georgians forced Ossetians out of their homes, and vice versa. During the clashes, there were reports of dozens of deaths and injuries.⁸⁸ From June of 1991, Tskhinvali was subjected to artillery fire by Georgian paramilitary units from nearby hills, and in the autumn it was nearly encircled by Georgian forces. This encirclement took place despite the presence of some 500 Soviet interior ministry troops, who had been deployed in South Ossetia from April 1991.⁸⁹ The massive final attack which was planned on the South Ossetian stronghold was averted only by the outbreak of civil war in Georgia, which resulted in the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia. Eduard Shevardnadze then seized power.⁹⁰

The breakup of the Soviet Union – and the unprecedented weakening of Moscow, formerly the supreme arbiter that might have been able to exert some restraining influence upon Tbilisi's actions – continued to cause South Ossetians increasing degrees of anxiety. In January 1992, a referendum was held in South Ossetia on the proposal of annexation to the Russian Federation, with about 90 per cent of the voters of South Ossetian origin voting in favor.⁹¹ The South Ossetians repeatedly rejected the pleas of the government in Tbilisi, demanding firstly the withdrawal of all Georgian armed forces from the area, and the lifting of the blockade. Fighting eased after an uprising by backers of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the West Georgian Samegrelo (Megrelia) region, which coincided with an attack by Georgian forces in Abkhazia, and the beginning of the Abkhazian war. Georgian artillery, strategically deployed on hilltops near Tskhinvali, opened fire on the South Ossetian capital, taking the lives of dozens of civilians. Thereafter, there was a succession of cease-fires, none of which was respected. An especially outrageous incident, certainly in the eyes of the South and North Ossetian publics, occurred on 20 May, near the Georgian village of Kekhvi, where Georgian commandos attacked a bus full of South Ossetian civilians, who were fleeing the bombardment of Tskhinvali.⁹² This event galvanized Vladikavkaz into action, with a temporary shutoff of the supply of natural gas to Georgia, while behind the scenes in Moscow there was now intensive lobbying on behalf of the South Ossetians. The Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus was also roused into action.⁹³ Its chairman at that time, the Chechen Musa Shanibov, favored the sending of North Caucasian volunteers to the aid of the South Ossetians. This did not, however, take place because of the influence of the pragmatic Askharbek Galazov, president of North Ossetia at the time. He wanted to prevent further escalation of the conflict and its potential spread into surrounding regions. Nonetheless, a number of North Ossetian volunteers did go to South Ossetia through the Daryal

Pass, and did take part in the fighting. Following a series of tragic incidents of ethnic violence:

The relationships between Georgians and South Ossetians worsened insofar that the idea of South Ossetia's secession from Georgia, prior to early 1991 floated only by part of Georgia's South Ossetian community, found support with the overwhelming majority of [the] Ossetian population. From this moment on, those South Ossetian politicians championing the conception of the "Ossetians' organic bond" with Georgia came to lose support.⁹⁴

Abkhazia: chronology of escalation

Phase A: Mobilization – latent conflict

The similarity between the Abkhazians' arguments and those of the Karabakh Armenians and South Ossetian was striking. Firstly, given their small populations of only approximately 100,000 people, alongside what they perceived to be the Georgians' policies (which allegedly dated back to the nineteenth century) of the gradual Kartvelization of Abkhazia, the Abkhaz community had devoted a great deal of effort to the prevention of their possible assimilation into the demographically far stronger Georgian community. According to the last Soviet census (1989), Abkhazia had a population of about half a million people, of whom Georgians accounted for 45.7 per cent of the population; while Abkhazians accounted for just 17.8 per cent, and Russians and Armenians each represented around 14 per cent (3 per cent were Greeks).⁹⁵ This unfavorable ethnodemographic composition of the republic was explained by the Abkhazians as being a result of the expulsion of the majority of (Muslim) Abkhaz families following their anti-Russian rebellion in 1864. From that time onward, the area – known for its paradise-like scenery where mountainous landscapes intermingled with the warm waters of the Black Sea – became a much-sought destination for successive waves of immigrants from all over Russia and, most particularly, as far as the Abkhazians were concerned, from neighboring and remote *Georgian* regions. Indeed, there is some evidence that Abkhazia's Megrel community had been settled in the country's south for centuries; yet, the process of population influx, which began in the aftermath of the tragic year of 1864, and subsequently intensified during the interwar period, is described by Abkhazians as constituting a well-organized invasion by the Georgians, who were deliberately seeking to shift the country's demographical balance in their favor.⁹⁶ By the end of the nineteenth

century, the Abkhazians, with 53 per cent of the population, comprised the majority of Abkhazia's autonomy, whereas the proportion of the Georgian ethnic population ranged between one fifth and one fourth of the entire population.⁹⁷

An additional cause of Abkhaz discontent was their relative degree of economic underdevelopment. Speaking in strictly economic terms, the level of Abkhazia's industrial development was lower in comparison with Georgia's other areas: the autonomy's agricultural sector was significantly larger as compared with the national average in Georgia (33.2 per cent versus 28 per cent of total employment as of 1978), while the employment rate in industry lagged behind (13.7 per cent versus 19.5 per cent of total employment in the same year).⁹⁸ This was partly caused by an uneven distribution of investment in industry and infrastructure on the part of the Tbilisi authorities.⁹⁹ However, what the statistical evidence from the Soviet period failed to register was the share of real income which was accumulated in the autonomy's *shadow* economy. Importantly, Abkhazia's tourist sector provided local inhabitants with substantial amounts of income, upon which they were never taxed: Soviet-period common wisdom had it that the richest people in Georgia – and perhaps in the whole of the South Caucasus – lived on Abkhazia's shores, as they were able to rent out their apartments and dachas for high rates to masses of seasonal tourists from across the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Abkhazians claimed that, owing to Tbilisi's partisan support and to widespread corruption, the most valuable real estate located on the coastline was in fact owned by Georgian "profiteers,"¹⁰⁰ with Abkhazians being gradually displaced and compelled to move up into the mountains. To sum up, according to the Abkhazians' argument, the autonomy's "subjugation" by Georgian authorities was a proven detrimental factor with respect to the prevailing socioeconomic conditions within their own land.

Nonetheless, it appears that by comparison with the cases of Nagorno-Karabakh and (especially) South Ossetia, purely *economic* arguments played a relatively minor role in the Abkhazia case, even though these arguments were, rhetorically, adopted by Abkhaz nationalists to advance their cause. Rather, the identity – or symbolic – dimension seems to have constituted a more important factor in the arousal of Abkhaz fears and demands. In addition to the previously mentioned assimilation argument, many Abkhazians seem never to have completely accepted the 1931 abolition of the republican status of their country by Josef Stalin (another *Georgian*, as the Abkhazians would readily point out), which originally led to the imposition of Tbilisi's formal rule over

their territory. Already, during the years of Soviet rule, Abkhaz intellectuals and party officials had been attempting to raise the status of Abkhazia to the level of a Soviet Socialist Republic, or to have it directly attached to the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. To this end they appealed repeatedly (1957, 1967, and 1978) to the leaders in Moscow, – virtually all these appeals being paralleled by manifestations of public support by local Abkhazians in Sukhumi. Although their principal status-related demands were not met, the central government in Moscow did respond by gradually improving the status of the Abkhaz minority, and of Abkhazia's language and cultural rights (this was especially so in the Brezhnev era). In the autonomous republic itself, where Abkhazians constituted less than one fifth of the total population, Abkhazians nevertheless held important administrative posts and had their own television and radio broadcasts and educational system, more or less independent of Tbilisi. Since the 1960s, the first secretary of the central committee of the local Communist Party was always an Abkhazian – whereas, beforehand, the highest post in the autonomous republic had traditionally been held by a member of the Georgian community. Similarly, Abkhazians were at the head of 8 of the 12 ministries, while the ministry of internal affairs, the prosecutor's office, and the premiership remained in the hands of ethnic Georgians. This was in itself an unprecedented state of affairs in Soviet history given abkhazians' tiny share in the autonomy. For Georgians, the (supposedly privileged) standing of Abkhazians in Abkhazia, at the expense of the status of the near majority of Georgians themselves, was generally connected with Moscow's continuing efforts to weaken and undermine the Georgian state. "In Abkhazia in particular, Georgians were all the more upset by their lack of influence in policy-making and regional institutions as they actually formed a demographic plurality, just short of a majority in the autonomous republic."¹⁰¹ Accordingly, during 1981, a few unprecedentedly large nationalist demonstrations took place in Georgia, at which the issue of this alleged anti-Georgian discrimination in Abkhazia was raised once again, along with issues related to the defense of Georgian cultural heritage – specifically their language and history. Meanwhile, the Abkhaz elites continued to appeal to Moscow.

As in Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia, excesses of interethnic violence were relatively rare in Abkhazia, as the Soviet authorities did their best to prevent ethnic riots from occurring; in terms of daily life, as mentioned above, Georgian–Abkhaz relationships were rather peaceful, although, as with the Nagorno-Karabakh situation, they were marked by a certain degree of mutual mistrust and anxiety.¹⁰² According to

numerous eyewitness reports, there were quite frequent cases of Abkhaz–Georgian marriages being frowned upon by Abkhaz nationalists, which seems never to have been the case in South Ossetia.

As detailed below, Abkhaz elites were at some points in favor of the notion of a broader degree of autonomy – or perhaps attaining the status of a Soviet republic – without necessarily defying the overall principle of Georgia's territorial integrity. Yet their longest-standing – and most preferred – aspiration entailed Abkhazia's complete secession from Georgia, and the establishment of Moscow's direct control over Sukhumi. Over time, and simultaneous with the deepening of Abkhaz–Georgian anxiety, there was a fading of the already half-hearted notion of a federative state in which Abkhazians would coexist with Georgians. As with South Ossetia, Abkhaz nationalists never sought for secession from the Soviet Union, as they regarded Soviet institutions – and subsequently post-Soviet Russia – as the guarantor of their ethnic aspirations (especially in the light of what they considered to be ever-growing Georgian nationalism and aggressiveness). In this respect, the personality of the main herald of Abkhaz sovereignty, the charismatic Vladislav Ardzinba, deserves attention. He was the director of the Sukhumi Institute for the Abkhazian language, history, and literature, during the period 1987–99 – having previously obtained his degrees in history and Middle Eastern civilizations from Sukhumi and Tbilisi Universities, and having spent 18 years in Moscow, where he worked in the Institute for Oriental Studies led by Yevgeny Primakov (who is believed to have had links to Soviet intelligence and security services). An orthodox Communist, and a devoted Abkhaz nationalist who, according to a common Georgian belief, helped to stir up the July 1989 riots (see below), Ardzinba possibly developed close ties to a number of Moscow hardliners. As Ben Fowkes put it, "[Ardzinba's] evident Russian connections have given rise to the suspicions that the movement for Abkhazian secession from Georgia is really a Russian way to make sure that the pleasant seaside resorts of the Black Sea do not fall into Georgian hands."¹⁰³ Already at the time of conflict onset it was obvious that Ardzinba himself, as well as the secessionist movement largely led by him, enjoyed a certain degree of unofficial support among high-ranking Russian politicians, military, and pro-reformist intellectuals.¹⁰⁴ After all, the Georgians' separatist agitation, coupled with Gamsakhurdia's verbal attacks upon the central Soviet authorities, appear to have instigated serious anxieties amongst Soviet Russian elites, which eventually led to Moscow's backing for the consequent Abkhaz war of independence.¹⁰⁵ The widespread Georgian belief that Abkhaz secessionism was a product of the Russian intelligence

and security services attempting to reaffirm their grip over Georgia, is less likely however: in spite of the relatively peaceful coexistence which had previously been the norm between ordinary Georgians and Abkhazians, latent conflict centering upon political and symbolic issues had nevertheless existed during the Soviet period – as exemplified by the Abkhazians' efforts to reverse the republic's status obtaining independence from Tbilisi, and the Georgians' commitment to hamper them at any cost.

In 1988, at the time conflict erupted in Nagorno-Karabakh, a group of Abkhaz intellectuals sent the party leadership in Moscow a letter complaining about pressure from Tbilisi, and requesting the renewal of the Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic which, from the Abkhaz viewpoint, had been terminated illegally. In their opinion,

the economic and cultural programs initiated ten years earlier had failed to meet their goals of Abkhaz cultural revitalization. They blamed Georgian hostility for these failures.¹⁰⁶

A year later the nationalist movement *Aydgylara* was founded in Abkhazia, and in March 1989 it initiated the gathering of 30,000 Abkhaz inhabitants at a holy pagan site near the village of Lykhny. The so-called "Lykhny letter," the signatories to which included important representatives of Abkhazia's public life and persons of minority nationalities (including around 5,000 Armenians, Pontic Greeks and, surprisingly, also some local Georgians), was addressed to the Soviet leadership: it recounted the many years of the struggle of Abkhazians to return to the country's status of 1921 and called attention to the illegality of Sukhumi's continuing subordinate status with respect to Tbilisi.

For the already radicalized Georgian public, the Lykhny Declaration was like a red flag to a bull: mass demonstrations began to be held all over Georgia, organized by nationalist movements, at which there were demands for the appropriate punishment of the "treacherous" Abkhazians. This punishment was to include the termination of their autonomous status, which had in any case, long been a thorn in the flesh of many Georgians.

Phase B: Radicalization – sporadic violence

Abkhazia, too, was not spared the fate of violent conflict. Blood was shed there for the first time in July of 1989: at least 16 (predominantly Georgian) youngsters lost their lives in clashes, and hundreds more were wounded. The factors causing the clashes seemed nonsensical

to outsiders, yet they represented an important symbolic issue in the context of the local mindset, as they were directly related to questions of identity: the Abkhaz youths involved were energetically protesting the proposed establishment of a branch of Tbilisi State University in Sukhumi. Soviet interior ministry troops were deployed to the autonomous region, which succeeded in stopping further bloodshed. In August of the following year, a few months after the adoption of the new Union law which formally permitted autonomies to secede, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet unilaterally declared the founding of the Abkhazian S.S.R. – a move which caused a serious split among Georgian and Abkhaz parliamentarians. Abkhazia did not, however, rule out possible future negotiations with Tbilisi on some sort of a (con-) federative arrangement. At the end of the same year, Ardzinba assumed the leadership of Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet.

The termination of ethnic autonomy, allied to Tbilisi's controversial language policy, together with the rhetorical exercises of the Georgian president and the increasingly dramatic developments in South Ossetia, all served to heighten the security dilemma of the population in Abkhazia, where the active formation of home defense forces had already begun. Georgian–Abkhazian antagonism increased significantly in early 1991, when the Abkhazians (like the South Ossetians) took part in a union-wide referendum on the new Union Treaty, while the Georgians generally boycotted the referendum. In an effort to bolster the standing of the union republics – and to avoid the potential breakup of the U.S.S.R., which would have resulted in their being outnumbered in a Georgian state where there was a growing mood of ultra-nationalism – most Abkhazians and South Ossetians cast their votes in favor of the new Union Treaty. This occurred in spite of the efforts of Tbilisi, where nationalists led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia had seized power, and where the referendum was rejected. On April 9, 1991, Georgia became one of the first Soviet republics to declare its independence: this step was justified as a return to the – illegally interrupted – tradition of sovereign Georgian statehood (as during the period 1918–21).¹⁰⁷

For the time being Abkhazia was spared intensive fighting because Georgian commandos had been more engaged, since the second half of 1991, on the South Ossetian battlefield, as well as in civil war style clashes amongst the Georgians in Tbilisi in late 1991 and early 1992. Ardzinba, on the other hand, being aware of the Abkhazians' asymmetric weakness vis-à-vis the Georgians, made an effort to restrain the threat of concentrated military action; yet in the meantime he began

replacing Georgians in leading administrative and economic posts with fellow Abkhazians. Most importantly, however, Gamsakhurdia accepted, in mid-1991, a concession on the reform of electoral law which granted Abkhazians *over*-representation in their republic's Supreme Soviet: the Abkhazians, who comprised only one sixth of the republic's entire population, were now to obtain roughly one third of all parliamentary seats. In accordance with that agreement, ethnic quota-based elections took place in Abkhazia in September, in which Abkhazians took 28 seats and Georgians 26 seats, while the rest of the autonomy's ethnicities received 11 seats. Simultaneously, Ardzinba was instrumental in establishing the Abkhaz National Guard; units of ethnic militia that would become Abkhazia's main force in the upcoming armed conflict with Georgia. Because of the massive interference by Russian and Moscow-backed military forces in the course of the 1992–93 war in Abkhazia, a further analysis of the conflict is provided in the following chapter in the part dedicated to Russian-Georgian relations.

5

War and Diplomacy: Ethnopolitical Conflicts as a Factor in the Foreign Policies of South Caucasian Countries (1991–94)

During the period 1991–94, the foreign policy of the Republic of Armenia, and to a somewhat lesser extent that of Azerbaijan, can be regarded as generally monothematic, centered on the issue of the evolving armed conflict.¹ The stage was set for an unavoidable Armenian–Azerbaijani–Turkish–Iranian–Russian chess match – enriched, from the mid-1990s onward, by the participation of the United States. Given this uneasy constellation of conflicting powers, the maintenance of state security was a difficult task for governments of both post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Armenia. From the very start of the 1990s, this task was made even more difficult by the efforts of Yerevan and Baku to maintain, or (re-) gain control over Nagorno-Karabakh: the conflict over that Armenian enclave which raged from the very first months of the existence of the independent state greatly deepened the geopolitical isolation of Armenia, contributing towards its nearly exclusive orientation towards Moscow, and causing the relatively early definition of camps of “friends” and “enemies” of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Geographic and political ties have caused Russia to play an increasingly significant role in Georgia's ethnopolitical conflicts, while the roles of the other powers have remained quite limited throughout the years of Soviet collapse and post-Soviet transition.² None of the other countries – whether neighboring or remote – could compete with Russia with regard to the degree of influence over (post-) Soviet Georgia; likewise, no regional power had as many vital interests as Russia in strategically located Georgia, during the first half of the 1990s. The already