

CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES SERIES

From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus

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

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Notes

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

6 Arbitrary borders?**The Bolsheviks drawing boundaries in the South Caucasus**

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

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

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

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

Two-tier approach to the Soviet borders in the Caucasus

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

Allocation tier

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

Soon after the capture of the region the question of the external boundary of the South Caucasus with Turkey was settled by the signing of the Moscow Treaty of March 16, 1921. The Bolshevik leadership could now turn to solving the question of the internal frontiers between the Soviet republics of the South Caucasus. This, however, proved more difficult than anticipated. Initially the organ representing Moscow in the Caucasus – the *Kavburo* – expected that the Bolshevik leaders of the three South Caucasian republics would be able to settle the territorial problems in an amicable manner, and to this end a conference was called in the Georgian capital Tiflis in June 1921 (Kharmandarian 1969: 101). The conference failed spectacularly; the representatives of the three republics quarreled and were unable to agree on boundaries. In the words of the Soviet Armenian leader, Myasnikian, “it seemed that Agaronyan, Topchibashev and Chkhenkeli¹ were [participating] at the last meeting of [the] *Kavburo*” (Galoian and Khudaverdian 1988: 33).

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

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

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

In practical terms this meant that Azerbaijan retained control over the mountainous part of Karabakh but was obliged to grant autonomy to the Armenians living there. Similarly, Georgia retained control over the Ossetian populated territories but was forced to grant them autonomy. Georgia was also promised that Abkhazia, which in the aftermath of the Bolshevik invasion of Georgia was allowed to proclaim itself independent, would “voluntarily” enter into union with Georgia (Tulumdzhian 1957: 26–7; Akhalaia *et al.* 1961: 52). The allocation phase was completed rather quickly with all principal decisions relating to this taken before the end of 1921.⁴

Delimitation tier

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

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

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

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

Economic considerations

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

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

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

Principles used when drawing boundaries

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

South Ossetia

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

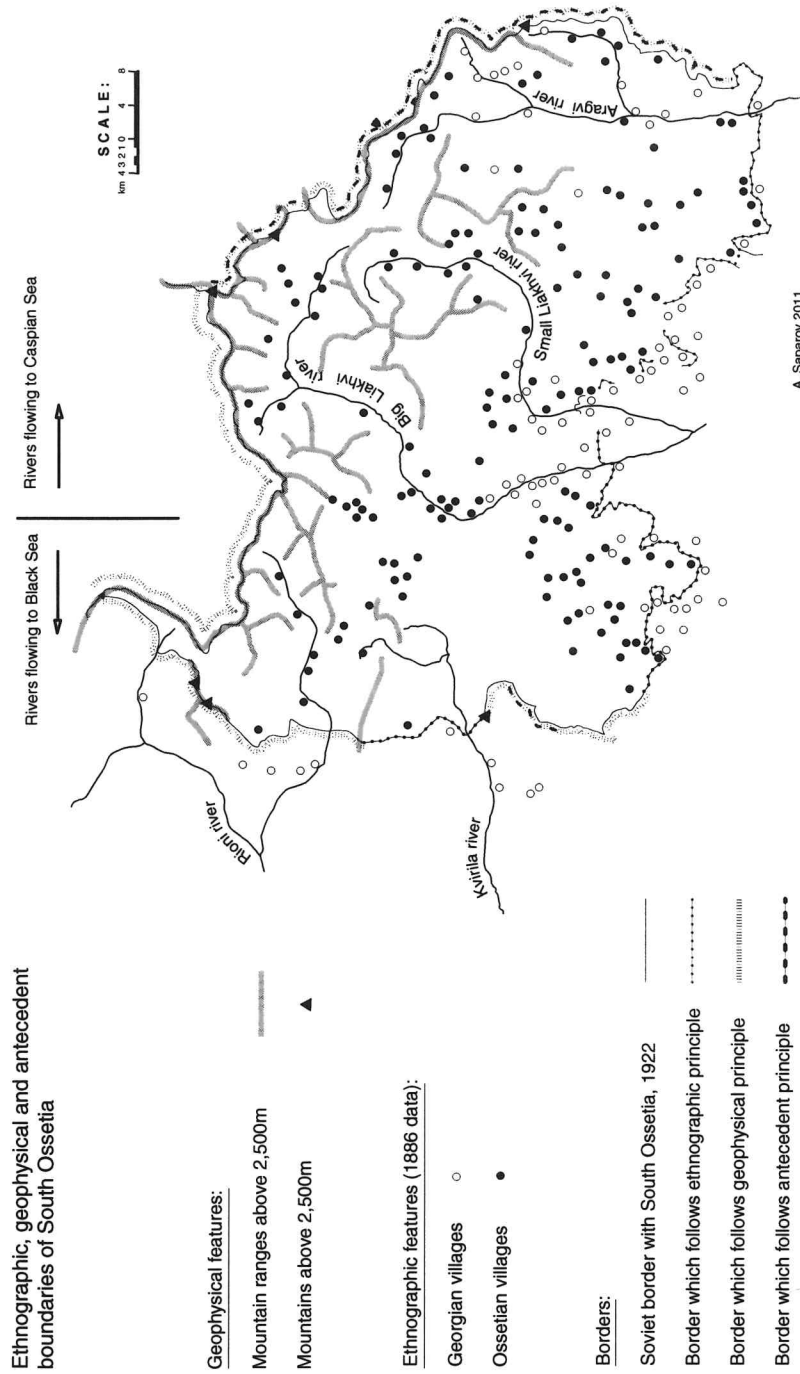


Figure 6.1 Ethnographic, geophysical and antecedent boundaries of South Ossetia.

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

Nagorno Karabakh

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

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

The official declaration of Karabakh autonomy was made in July 1923⁷ – under strong pressure from the *Zakraikom* to implement the decision of July 5, 1921. However, this short declaration contained neither details of the political organization of the autonomy, nor a description of its boundaries. It took another year-and-a-half to settle these issues. In the meantime, several border projects were created and modified after difficult negotiations. Finally, on November 26, 1924, the statute on the “Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh” was published,⁸ which included the legal framework regulating the functioning of the autonomy and a description of its territory. Unlike the description of the South Ossetian boundary, the territory of Nagorno Karabakh was simply described as a list of 201 villages included within the autonomy. There was no formal description of a boundary as such. The following year a new, more detailed, description of the settlements included within the Nagorno Karabakh autonomy appeared (Kocharian 1925: 48–51).⁹ These lists of settlements, as well as the Soviet administrative borders from the late 1970s and the early 1980s, were used together with tsarist military and administrative maps to analyze the principles employed in drawing the frontiers of Nagorno Karabakh.

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

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

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

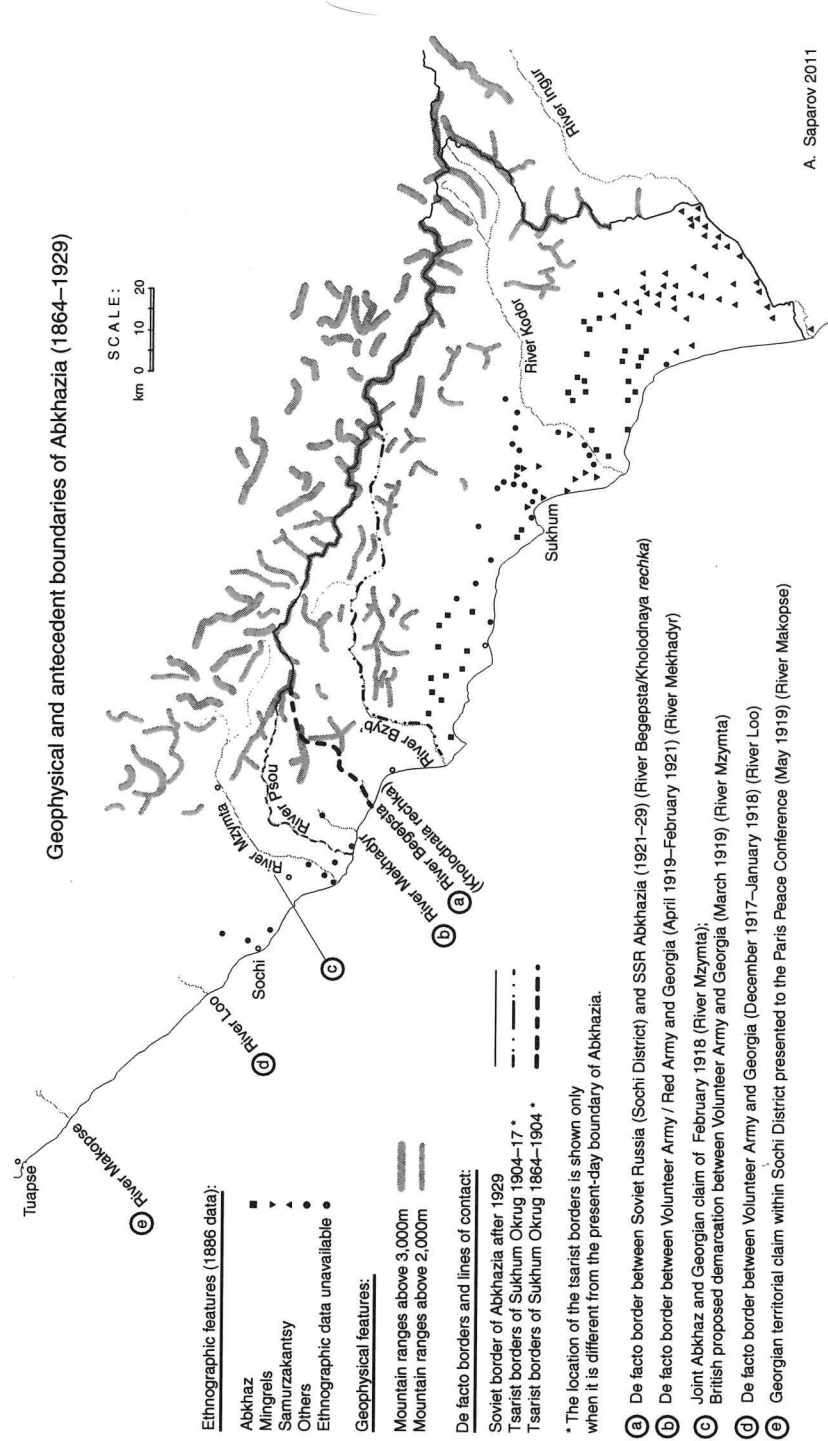
The main principle used to draw the boundaries of Nagorno Karabakh was ethnographic – the border separated two ethnic groups with a history of recent conflict. In the sparsely populated mountainous areas the antecedent frontiers that followed the geophysical features were adopted. As such the borders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

Abkhazia

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

The administrative aspect

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



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

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

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

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

The borders of Abkhazia during the Russian civil war

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

7 From autonomy to conflict (1921–91)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The role of the autonomous institutions in consolidating Ossetian identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Bigulaev 1952: 54)

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

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

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

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

In order to “pacify” the Ossetians, the causes of the revolts had to be removed. And one of the main causes was the claims of the Georgian landowners on the Ossetian peasants and their oppression. Therefore, Machabeli and Eristavi landowners became not the support of the [tsarist] government but an obstacle ... to making the Ossetians obedient.

(Vaneev 1985: 182)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Escalation to war

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

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

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

Despite a history of relatively smooth relations between the two nations, this strong feeling of the illegitimacy of the Ossetian autonomy aggravated the threat of violence. Several facts point to this; the depiction of the South Ossetian territory by some Georgian scholars exclusively as part of the Georgian province of "Shida Kartli" was intended to highlight the artificial – i.e., imposed and therefore illegitimate – nature of the Ossetian autonomy. The Ossetians, in turn, responded to these threats by creating the popular front and requesting the Georgian Supreme Soviet to upgrade Ossetian status to that of an autonomous republic on November 10, 1989.⁷ This request was ignored.

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

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

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

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

Abkhazia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Open letters constituted part of confrontational politics and were a reaction to culturally sensitive events such as the publication of books and articles. Thus, the 1976 publication of a book entitled *Questions of the Ethno-Cultural History of the Abkhazians* (Inal-Ipa 1976) sparked just such a debate when local Abkhaz and Russian newspapers published editorials containing a positive review of the book by scholars of the Oriental Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences on January 4, 1977. A few months later both newspapers, as well as the local Georgian newspaper, once again turned to Inal-Ipa’s work by simultaneously publishing an unsigned editorial article entitled “On the profound scholarly study of the history of Abkhazia” on May 14, 1977.¹⁴ This time the editorial contained harsh

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

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

The early 1970s was a period of growing tension between Moscow and Georgia. The appointment of Eduard Shevardnadze, with his extensive MVD background, signaled Moscow's attempts to combat corruption in Georgia. The anti-corruption campaign, however, was perceived by Georgian society largely as an aspect of Moscow's Russification policies since it allowed Moscow to purge indigenous cadres and replace them with people amenable to Moscow's influence (d'Encausse 1979: 209–13). It should also be noted that the language issue played an unexpectedly important role in the symbolization of nationhood in both the Abkhaz, and especially the Georgian, traditions. As a result, any sign of limitation of the Georgian language, especially in favor of Russian, was perceived as a threat. For instance, the opening of experimental teaching in Russian in one of Zugdidi's schools, and the introduction of some Russian courses and text books in Tbilisi State University, prompted a Georgian writer, Revaz Japaridze, to speak against the policies of Russification in the presence of the Georgian first secretary, Eduard Shevardnadze, during the Eighth Congress of Georgian Writers in April 1976.¹⁵ The publication of VAK's decision that candidate and doctoral dissertations should be submitted in Russian similarly prompted a letter of complaint from 365 Georgian intellectuals to Brezhnev and Shevardnadze.¹⁶

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Escalation to war

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region (1923–88)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 7.2 Ethnic distribution of the population in Nagorno Karabakh

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

Note

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

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

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

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

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

(Aliiev 2002)

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

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

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

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

Escalation to war

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

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

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

This mass mobilization in Armenia produced a backlash in Azerbaijan – in February a large crowd of Azerbaijanis from the town of Agdam, on the border with Karabakh, marched towards Stepanakert. A clash occurred in which two Azerbaijanis died.⁴¹ The deputy soviet public prosecutor, Katusev, speaking on Baku Radio, mentioned the incident and revealed the nationality of the dead men on February 27.⁴² Apparently this announcement sparked a violent anti-Armenian *pogrom* in the industrial town of Sumgait near the Azerbaijani capital; this lasted three days and left 32 people dead, with law enforcement authorities failing to intervene. The significance of the Sumgait *pogrom* was that it marked a point of no return in the conflict. Armenians saw it in the context of the genocide perpetrated against them in the Ottoman Empire, and it thus served to confirm the brutality of Azerbaijani society and the impossibility of Karabakh remaining within Azerbaijan. A non-violent solution likely became impossible after Sumgait.

Moscow's leadership was caught completely unprepared to deal with a vicious nationalist conflict that had already turned violent. Measures adopted by the Soviet leadership revealed just how inadequate their understanding of the depth of the ethnic conflict was. On the one hand, in March 1988, a large economic package was devised for Nagorno Karabakh as a way of defusing the situation, an action that reminds of similar measures implemented following the nationalist manifestations in Abkhazia in 1978.⁴³ On the other hand, the party leadership of Armenia and Azerbaijan were dismissed in May.⁴⁴

During the course of 1988, Moscow's inability to formulate a policy to deal with the problem resulted in the rapid erosion of Communist Party authority – first in Armenia, but then also in Azerbaijan. The grassroots nationalist leaders in both union republics emerged as a serious challenge to the ineffective communist leadership, establishing alternative centers of authority – the Karabakh Committee in Armenia in 1988, and the National Front in Azerbaijan in 1989.⁴⁵ Violent incidents became commonplace with the forcible expulsion of “enemy” minority groups from the republics.

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

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

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

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

The political crisis continued when in March 1991 the Armenian parliament decided to hold an independence vote – scheduled for September 1991 (Sheehy 1991: 21). This came as a direct challenge to Gorbachev, who was attempting to revitalize the USSR based on a new constitution and new union treaty. Another affront to Gorbachev was the confiscation of the property of the Communist Party in Armenia.⁴⁸ Largely as a response to the short-sighted confrontational policies of the Armenian leadership, the Soviet government heaped on pressure by sanctioning the deportation of ethnic Armenians from Karabakh in the so-called “Operation Ring” of May 1991.⁴⁹

The abortive coup of August 1991 was a game changer. The Soviet Union was visibly crumbling – and on August 30 Azerbaijan declared independence. In response Karabakh also declared independence, on September 2.⁵⁰ This was followed by the Armenian referendum on independence later the same month. Finally, on November 26, 1991, the Azerbaijani parliament took the symbolic action of abolishing the Karabakh autonomy and renaming its capital.⁵¹ By the end of December 1991 the USSR ceased to exist and two newly independent states – Armenia and Azerbaijan – were left facing each other off.

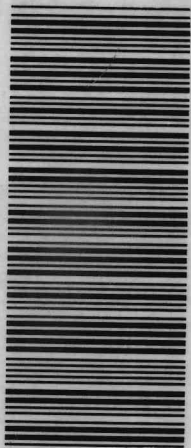
From this moment the conflict escalated into a full-scale war that lasted until 1994 when a fragile ceasefire agreement was signed. The outcome of the conflict left Armenian forces in control of Nagorno Karabakh itself as well as several

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

Notes

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

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



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