



## SOVIET NATIONALITY POLICY: IMPACT ON ETHNIC CONFLICT IN ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to answer two interlinked questions with respect to ethnic conflict in Georgia: (1) Why and how two ethnic groups -the Abkhazians and Ossetians- sought secession in the 1990s rather than accepting unity under a common Georgian roof? (2) what explains the occurrence of ethnic conflicts between the Abkhazians and Georgians and between the South Ossetians and Georgians? The central argument of this paper is that Soviet nationality policy was a foremost driving force in shaping consciousness of being ethnic groups in Georgia and set the stage for the inter-ethnic conflicts of the post-Soviet era. A number of factors explain the particular inter-ethnic conflicts in Georgia among ethnic groups, including a long historical relationship between the Georgian people and the Abkhaz and Ossetian minorities. However, I argue that the foremost factor was the role of Soviet nationality policy that evolved from Lenin to Gorbachev, a policy that granted ethnic groups some level of privileges and fostered a wave of national self-assertion, Soviet nationality policy and the Soviet federal structure created numerous ethnic- and territorial-based autonomous units during the Soviet era. These units shaped their own political institutions, national intelligentsias, and bureaucratic elites, forming the basis for later nationalistic movements and developing a wish for self-determination and full independence. These institutions and beliefs made ethnic conflict in post-Soviet Georgia inevitable.*

**Keywords:** Inter-Ethnic Conflict, Soviet Nationality Policy, Self Determination, Abkhazia, South Ossetia.

## SOVYET MİLLİYET POLİTİKASI: ABHAZYA VE GÜNEY OSETYA'DAKİ ETNİK ÇATIŞMA ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİSİ

### ÖZ

*Bu çalışmanın amacı, Gürcistan'daki etnik çatışmayla ilgili birbiriyle bağlantılı iki soruyu cevaplamaktır. 1990'ların başlarında, Gürcistan'daki iki etnik grup Gürcistan ortak çatısı altında yaşamak yerine, "neden" ve "nasıl" ayrılıkçı siyaset izlemiş ve bunun sonunda merkezi yönetimle kanlı etnik çatışmalara girişerek bağımsızlıklarını tek taraflı ilan etmişlerdir? Bu çalışmanın ana savı, Sovyetlerin milletler sorununu çözmek için geliştirdikleri "Sovyet milliyet politikası"nın Gürcistan'daki etnik grup olma bilinci oluşturan ve buna paralel olarak etnik çatışmaya zemin hazırlayan temel ve başlıca tetikleyici araçlardan biri olduğunu ispatlamaktır. Bu minvalde, Abhazların ve Güney Osetlerin giriştikleri siyasi statü mücadelesi, Lenin yönetimiyle başlayıp Gorbachev yönetimine kadar değişiklik geçirip evrilen Sovyet millet politikası azınlık gruplarına kendi etnik kimliklerini, dillerini ve kültürlerini geliştirecek, daha da önemlisi kendi kendini yönetme ve ulus olma bilinci kazandıracak ayrıcalıklar tanımıştır. Sovyet millet politikası ve Sovyet federal yapısının doğal sonucu olarak birçok etnik ve bölgesel temelli özerk yönetim yapıları oluşturulmuş, Sovyetler zamanı boyunca bu özerk yapılar kendilerine ait siyasi kurumlarını, ulusal aydın sınıflarını ve bürokratik elitlerini oluşturup geliştirmiş, daha sonra bu sınıflar milliyetçi hareketleri şekillendirmiş ve bunun doğal sonucu olarak da kendi kendini yönetme isteği ve tam bağımsızlık arzusu gelişmiştir. Bunların akabinde, Sovyet sonrası dönemde Gürcistan'daki etnik çatışmalar kaçınılmaz olmuştur.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Etnik Gruplar Arası Çatışma, Sovyet Milliyet Politikası, Self-Determinasyon, Abhazya, Güney Osetya.

### Araştırma Makalesi

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## **Introduction**

Ethnic conflict inherited from the Soviet to the Caucasus has become one of the major security dilemmas in the post-cold War period in Caucasus. The breakup of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of fifteen new multi-ethnic states, which in turn inflamed ethnic tensions and conflict. As some minority groups have suffered discrimination and some ethnicities have sought to achieve dominance over others increased tensions have erupted into violence in many of these newly independent states. Georgia is one of the post-Soviet states to have bitterly experienced such ethnic conflict. As John M. Cotter (1999, p. 1) states, the existence of many “nations without states” in a region makes violence between ethnic groups inevitable. In the conflict literature, numerous studies have accounted for variations of conflict and its intensity; their explanations range across a wide scope, from the “ancient hatreds” and old rivalries, to systematic manipulation by contentious elites, to religious and cultural disputes.

The eventual crumbling of the Soviet Union made inevitable ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus not only in the past but also at present. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Soviet legacy in the Caucasus still leads the basis for ethnic conflict between contiguous nations, for instance, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijani in recent years. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the effects of the Soviet nations policy to understand the ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus.

From my perspective, a starting point of inter-ethnic conflict in South Caucasus is the Soviet nationality policy that evolved from Lenin to Gorbachev; this policy set the stage for the inter-ethnic conflicts of the post-Soviet era. Soviet nationality policy and the Soviet federal structure created lots of ethnic and territorial based autonomous units during the Soviet era these units shaped their own political institutions, national intelligentsias, and bureaucratic elites. When the central power of the Bolsheviks came to an end, these national institutions served as the basis for the fifteen newly independent states’ self-determination and independence.

This study aims to explain the causes of ethnic conflict, and how and why autonomous ethnic groups in Georgia (the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) sought secession rather than accepting unity under a common Georgian roof as did many other ethnic groups in Georgia who did not seek secession. I argue that Soviet nationality policy was a main conflict driving apparatus in case of Georgia because it created an opportunity for ethnic groups to shape their own political institutions and nationalistic elites that later shaped nationalist movements and developed a wish for self-determination and full independence.

In this context, the purpose of this study is threefold: The first goal is to develop a historical analysis of the inter-ethnic conflicts in Georgia by means of the examination of two autonomous regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). The second is to explain Soviet nationality policy, and also examine the role of Soviet nationality policy that created a basis for Georgia and at the same time a basis for Abkhazians and South Ossetians to seek their independence. The third goal is to analyze Soviet nationality policy as a conflict trigger among parties by focusing on the nature of Soviet nationality policy that allowed every ethnic group to advance its ethnic, linguistic and cultural characteristics in Caucasus. Focusing on these four components, I aim to understand the interethnic conflict in Georgia in all its aspects and shed light on whether or not there is a causal relationship between ethnic conflicts and Soviet nationality policy.

### **Historical Background of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in Georgia**

Georgia has been home to many ethnic groups who have lived in specific territories within the country and had their own linguistic, cultural, and historical structure. The multi-ethnic structure of Georgia, nonetheless, turned into a curse, as it set the stage for ethnic clashes over territories when nationalistic tendencies started to rise and when the ethnic groups embraced the idea of “the right to self-determination” (Lenin, 1917, p. 30). Abkhazians and South Ossetians, who were minority ethnic groups within the borders of Georgia, first articulated their desires for independence from Georgia when Tsarist Russia was overthrown by the Bolsheviks and Georgia declared its independence. Thus, “the emergence of Georgian nationalism was paralleled by development of counter-nationalist programmes in the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia” (Nodia et al., 2006, p. 9). In the absence of central power, both groups started to show secessionist tendencies and ethnic uprisings against the Georgian majority were erupted, yet after the Bolsheviks annexed Georgia, these ethnic clashes were brutally suppressed and did not reemerge until the 1990s.

By the 1990s, however, when the USSR began to crumble, the ethnic discord in Georgia resurfaced. The political and ideological vacuum left by the failure of Communism was filled by an explosion of ethnonationalism (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 78). To a certain degree the dominant ideology of Communism had helped to bind society and state together until the 1980s; however, after the 1980s it was increasingly discredited. The inability and unwillingness of the Communist Party government to effectively prevent and suppress interethnic disputes within the outlying territories of the former Soviet Union led to the deepening of the ethnopolitical unrests (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 94). This failure likely contributed to the gradual discrediting of local Soviet rulers and to the parallel emergence of nationalist groups, especially in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Well, the Soviets tried with regards to Baku (Sumgait) and Nagorny Karabakh, but seem to have concluded as a result of their inability to solve the problems there (and even before the collapse of 1991) that they had no answer to the welter of nationalist uprisings, or, at a minimum, nationalist demands for independence (Gorbachev tried something in his last months in power—new union treaty of June 1991--, but was de-facto deposed by the GKCHP of Yazov C.S.; and Yeltsin's Ham-Fisted actions toward Chechnya in 1994 and 1995 show that any durable solution might not be through the military route, indeed). Of course, you can annihilate a people, as Putin more or less tried to do in 1999-2000, but then you have no one left at the end. And even Putin has had to bow toward one Chechen faction, led by Kadyrov.

The ethnic groups in Georgia were not all united under a common roof and a single national principle. The autonomous republic of Abkhazia and the semiautonomous region of South Ossetia, which were given their autonomous status by the Soviet Union, were subdivisions of Georgia, but both desired to follow their own destiny of ethnonationalism and sought full independence from Georgia. While the ethnic Georgians believed that they were victims of russification policies during the Soviet era, many Abkhazians and South Ossetians similarly felt that the Georgians had been domineering them. Both ethnic minority groups, which traditionally speak a different language than Georgians and have a unique culture distinct from that of Georgians, “perceived their culture and homeland--their large group identity--as being threatened” (Volkan, 2006, p. 28) by Georgians.

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s desire for autonomy escalated when Georgian Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power in 1991. Gamsakhurdia was one of the most prominent Georgian politicians thanks to his fervent nationalistic rhetoric and his support of Georgian nationalism. As Vamik Volkan (2006, p. 28) puts it, “Gamsakhurdia received popular support by accentuating the ‘we-ness’ of his own ethnic group. Further,

Gamsakhurdia's policy regarding language, declaring the Georgian language as the official language, increased tension among already disaffected groups. Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric and policies increased anxiety about large-group identities throughout the region and tainted relations on every level, accelerating societal regression (Volkan, 2006, p. 28).

In the last years of the Soviet Union, Georgian elites were successful at developing powerful opposition to the Soviet regime, but fostering a single and united nationalist movement helped to create deep cleavages among Georgia's numerous ethnic groups. These cleavages had been suppressed through the Soviet period, but severe strains had alienated ethnic minorities from the idea of single and united Georgia. In the words of Suny (1994, p. 318);

The policy and rhetoric of leaders, the choices and use of potent symbols, would either work to ameliorate these divisions in a unified struggle for independence and democracy or reinforce and exacerbate the interethnic divisions within the republic. Tragically, Georgians made political choices that deepened social and ethnic divisions. Peaceful demonstrations ended in violence, and what began as a movement for greater democracy descended precipitately into ethnic and civil war.

Before the Gorbachev reforms, the Georgian ruling Communist elites were ethnically and personally cohesive as being Georgians. This cohesiveness was able to create the solidarity of the elites that was later "directed upward against Russians and downward against minority nationalities" (Suny, 1994, p. 318), such as Abkhazians and South Ossetians. The "official" nationalism was tolerated in favor of Georgians rather than other minority groups and the neglect other minority groups was encouraged by the Georgian leadership.

Overall, the first emergence of the Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia conflicts can be dated back to the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when such conflicts were instigated by Russia. Relationships between the parties worsened during the short-term independence of Georgia from 1918 to 1921. The Bolsheviks of Russia openly supported Abkhazian secessionists and local Bolsheviks in order to retake breakaway Georgia and establish Socialist rule in Georgia. After the Bolsheviks' annexation of Georgia, ethnic conflict within Georgia was suppressed until the final years of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union started to collapse, many ethno-political conflicts were bound to occur and the ethnic conflict rapidly spread throughout the territories of the former Soviet Union. In the 1980s and 1990s, Abkhazian and South Ossetian demands for secession were openly expressed, and pursued, resulting in bloody clashes with Georgians.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy**

After the Bolsheviks seized power in the 1917 Civil War, one of the first tasks they took up was maintaining the geographic integrity of the multiethnic Russian Empire. The Bolsheviks were well aware of the power of nationalism, which they had successfully exploited against the Tsarist regime. The power of nationalism had already showed its influence in the Caucasus, Georgia having already declared its independence after the collapse of Tsarist Russia—holding together all the nationalistic states of the new Soviet empire was going to be a major problem for the Bolshevik regime. It was seen as a necessity by the Bolsheviks to implement a federal structure in order to protect and maintain control over the USSR's component members (Cornell, 2001, p. 24), but for such a structure to work the problem of nationalistic tendencies in the states under Soviet rule would have to be solved. As Lapidus (1984, p. 555) indicates, the Soviet system was able to solve the impact of ethnic self-assertion, to a certain extent. Thus, as a founding father of the Soviet Union, Lenin was aware of this problem, and in order to solve it the nationalities

policy was implemented. Hence, as Richard Pipes wrote it, “the first modern state to place the national principle at the base of its federal structure” emerged (as cited in Cornell (2001), p. 24).

Between 1925 and 1935 the Soviet Union was able to consolidate its control over the Caucasus. As Zurcher (2007, p. 23) puts it, a new political map was imposed on the region, one based on the “territorialization of ethnicity” that created administrative units out of the old nations and ethnicities now under Soviet rule. As Martin (2001, p. 1) describes, “the Soviet state created not just a dozen large national republics, but tens of thousands of national territories scattered across the entire expanse of the Soviet Union”. Through the Soviet nationality policy, which Martin calls an “affirmative action policy,” “new national elites were trained and promoted to leadership positions in the government, schools, and industrial enterprises of these newly formed territories” (Martin, 2001, p. 1).

Lenin and Stalin agreed that their victory in the Civil War was thanks to the Bolsheviks’ exploitation of nationalism. The first nationalities policy, which was adopted by Lenin and supported by Stalin until the early 1930s (Suny, 1993, p. 263), grew either from Lenin’s fear of Russian chauvinism over other nationalities, or, as Darrell P. Hammer (1997) and Svante E. Cornell (2001, p. 24) put it, the hierarchical-nationality based territorial structure of the Soviet Union. This national-territorial structure was the basis for Soviet federalism. Though at first Lenin opposed it, for practical reasons and by necessity, a federal structure had to be adopted (Bremmer, 1993, p. 3). The outcome of the Russian Civil War and Stalin’s idea of “proletarian self-determination,” as well as the critical need of the Bolshevik regime for support from different nationalities left no choice but to adopt a federal system (Smith, 1996, p. 6).

When the Bolsheviks came to power after the 1917 revolution, they did not yet have a nationality policy that would be inclusive of all nations and nationalities across the former Russian Empire. But they did have “a powerful slogan:” “the right of nations to self-determination” (Martin, 2001, p. 2). In order to understand the nationality policy of the USSR we must be familiar with the perspective of Lenin because, as Terry Martin (2001, p. 2) puts it, “Lenin’s concern over Great Russian chauvinism led to the establishment of a crucial principle of the Soviet nationalities policy”, and it was Lenin who put forward and developed the solution the USSR’s nationalities question. His idea, which was the formulation of national self-determination, could be seen as politically retrogressive and divisive. But Lenin saw that the Communist Party had to work in two phases: first the centralized party must secure socialism, and then its power could be further extended. That is, Socialists think nationalism is bad, but Lenin realized that the Communist Party had to accept nationalism and allow local control to first keep the huge Russian empire and nationalities under control so capitalism and feudalism could be destroyed and socialism secured, and then after socialism was safe nationalism would be a relatively small problem to get rid of and then the central party could take control away from local authorities. Lenin believed that “a nation was trivial compared with securing within the boundaries of the Russian empire the mobilization and unity of the emerging industrial working class against tsarist autocracy, for above all else the nationality problem was viewed as a problem of securing political power” (Smith, 1996, p. 4). It was hence owing to “such a concern with providing the optimal conditions for mobilization against capitalism and other retrogressive forces that his interpretation of national self-determination was developed” (Smith, 1996, p. 4).

In order to deal with the multi-ethnic national structure of the USSR which posed a threat to the establishment of socialism, Lenin adopted a political strategy in order to resolve the national question and preserve the territorial integrity of the former Russian

Empire. This strategy was to recognize the right of nations to self-determination. "By granting Russia's minority nations the right to statehood he was in effect acknowledging national sensibilities for, according to this logic, if nations were not given this right, then, among peoples whose national consciousness was emerging as a political force, it would encourage a combative nationalism which would run counter to the establishment of socialism in Russia" (Smith, 1996, p. 5). One can see the link between the right of nations to self-determination and the right to political secession, but Lenin pointed out that granting the right of nations to secession did not mean that every or any secessionist movement should be supported (Smith, 1996, p. 5). As Lenin wrote biting, "the right of divorce is not an invitation for all wives to leave their husbands" (as cited in Smith, 1996, p. 5). This political strategy passed at the April 1917 conference of the Russian Communist party, which confirmed "the right of all nations forming part of Russia to free separation and the creation of an independent state" (Smith, 1996, p. 5). Furthermore, according to Lenin, even if small nations did get a chance to declare their independence, they were likely to see the benefits of being part of a larger regional unit and would seek reincorporation.

By way of incorporation into the Soviet Federation, Soviet rulers expected that the oppression of the nationalities would be eliminated on the grounds that "they were now acknowledged as free to develop towards fulfillment of their national aspirations" (Smith, 1996, p. 7). The policy of the equality of nations was associated with a conception of nationhood, in which the status of the territorial homeland was a vital principal, "for it was on this basis that the most important national groups were given the most meaningful administrative, constitutional and legal expressions of nationhood in the form of union republic status" (Smith, 1996, p. 7). Indigenous peoples in particular benefited from the new policy of "indigenization", launched in 1923 and meant to achieve "the training and development of native personnel, rather than Russian or Russified elements" (Smith, 1996, p. 7). Support for cultural pluralism in the Soviet Federation was a means to both handle the Russian nationalities problem and suppress Russian nationalism and Russian chauvinism.

Korenizatsiya was not only implemented to affect the formation of regional Communist party organizations but also allowed the ethnic groups to maintain and develop their culture and education in their self-rule territories. Therefore, the policy recognized national differences in the Soviet Union and granted the larger nationalities a limited right to protect and maintain their languages, cultures, and so on. It allowed the publishing of books, newspapers, and journals in native languages and school instruction in native languages, as long as the content of publications and education in schools was in line with Communist ideology.

Through Leninist nationality policy, a particular framework was established--"state structures based on ethnicity, policies of nativization, a pseudofederal policy--in which the future history of non-Russians would be shaped" (Suny, 1993, p. 124). Suny (1993, p. 125) notes that,

Though Moscow's imperial reach often ignored the prerogatives of the republics, rendering their sovereignty a fiction, many nationalities became demographically more consolidated within their homelands, acquired effective and articulate national political and intellectual elites, and developed a shared national consciousness. These more conscious and consolidate nationalities were rooted to specific territories, with abundant privileges for the titular nations and their local Communist elites. The economic and social transformation associated with the brutalities of Stalinism undermined but never eliminated the cultural

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and social gains of non-Russians. Indeed, many older forms of association were preserved, despite the catastrophes of collectivization and the Great Purges.

For Lenin, the Soviet nationality policy was a good apparatus to solve the Soviet nationality question. Therefore, it allowed ethnic groups in every Soviet nation to develop their culture and identity. It led ethnic groups to become more consolidated in their territories that was seen to be the first step of the consciousness of statehood.

The Soviet nationality policy designed to foster native culture slowed and essentially came to a halt in 1934. Stalin found the level of indigenization and minority nationalism occurring in non-Russian nationalities to be problematic as he believed that it would be a threat to the effective implementation of his far-reaching economic policies. Presumably a reflection of Stalin's distrust of non-Russians, in a 1934 speech he said, "survivals of capitalism in the minds of men are much more long-lived in the realm of the national question than in any other area" (as cited in Smith, 1996, p. 7). Stalin deviated from Lenin's nationality policy and adopted the Russification policy, which was a type of cultural assimilation policy that included the replacement of native languages with Russian, regardless of the wishes of local people and authorities. By the late 1930s the Russian language was being adopted in schools and the number of Russian schools all over the federation was being increased.

The slogan, "the right of nations to self-determination", was created to recruit ethnic support for the Bolshevik revolution. It was not designed as a model to govern the multiethnic state after the 1917 revolution. Although in the beginning Lenin and Stalin agreed on the usefulness of "the right of nations to self-determination," in 1922 they came into conflict over its implementation. Before 1932, all non-Russians in the USSR whether they were in the majority or minority, enjoyed a policy of ethnic enhancement, which promoted all national and sub-national cultures equally. However, after 1932 the policy of indigenization was gradually replaced with Russification. After 1938 traditional Russian alphabet was to be used in all Soviet republics, replacing the unique alphabets of native languages. Later, it was ordered that Russian culture alone be promoted all over the USSR with the partial exception that "where indigenous non-Russian nations already possessed ASSRs (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics) within the RSFSR, their cultural institutions continued to be recognized" (Fowkes, 2002, p. 76).

According to Gail W. Lapidus (1989, p. 96), the administration of Stalin marked;

A dramatic shift [was] toward greater centralization, cultural Russification and the repression of non-Russian national elites. The rights of republics and autonomous regions were whittled away, their boundaries arbitrarily redrawn, and the populations of some liquidated or forcibly resettled during World War II [...]. National histories were rewritten to emphasize the progressive character of Russian imperialism, and criticism of Great Russian chauvinism came to an end.

After Lenin's death Soviet Nationality Policy became Stalinist policy, as Hammer (1997, p. 3) wrote it, the Stalinist policy, "however, contained the seeds of its own destruction. On balance, this policy contributed to the development of a stronger sense of ethnic identity in the non-Russian republics". The central Communist government in Moscow suppressed any discourse of political independence, and the Communist party apparatus remained in control in every republic of the Soviet Union, but at the same time territorial nationalism, under the surface, grew among the native peoples of the republics. Once the central government failed to implement this control, "the republics that Stalin had created provided the framework for a nationalism that ultimately led to escalating demands, first for greater autonomy, and then for independence. The cultural autonomy

tolerated by the center grew into territorial nationalism which the regime could not control" (Hammer, 1997, p. 3).

Nonetheless, after 1932 the policy of indigenization was gradually replaced with Russification that enhances Russian language and culture over non-Russian nationalities. However, in counter-effect, Stalinist policy clearly contributed to the development of a stronger sense of ethnic identity among non-Russian republics.

The Russification policy that characterized the USSR's nationality policy during Stalin's administration, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, was reversed after the deaths of Stalin and Beria in 1953. In the post-Stalin period, Moscow adopted political de-Stalinization, a more flexible social order that represented Khrushchev's reaction against the personality cult of Stalin and the crimes of the Stalinist era.

The period of Khrushchev's rule saw a rebirth of nationalism and patriotism; the de-Stalinization policy led to outcomes the Moscow government found undesirable: first and foremost, local national elites gained independent attitudes and started to openly express nationalistic sentiments (Suny, 1994, p. 293). In terms of political perspective, political and economic decentralization under Khrushchev conceded more power to local parties in the national republics; the central party was willing to reduce its control over the nationalist republics, hoping that local parties in the republics would be able find regional sources of support and provide a stable functioning government. Such a policy of indirect rule led to the emergence of nationalistic aspirations among local elites, along with ethnic expression among non-Russian nationalities (Suny, 1994, p. 293).

At the twenty-second Party Congress in 1961, Khrushchev articulated his policy (the official theory of national development) toward the nationalities. Soviet nationalities would continue to evolve through the (*rasvet*) "flourishing" of their ethnic culture, (*sblizhenie*) "drawing together" of these nations until "complete merger" (*sliianie*) was achieved (Suny, 1994, p. 294). Complete merger as a goal seems to contradict your claim that Khrushchev allowed for the re-emergence of national identities within the USSR.

In essence, under Khrushchev's administration, Moscow adopted de-Stalinization with more flexible social order, and also by means of political and economic decentralization, local parties in the national republics were able to gain more power on their territories. However, it inevitably led to the emergence of nationalistic aspiration among local elites.

Before Gorbachev's administration, the Soviet Union had suppressed the nationalistic discourses of non-Russian nations but had not totally resolved the nationalistic problem. In Gorbachev's administration, the pent-up hatreds of distinct nations came to the surface as an unexpected side effect of the policies of perestroika and glasnost. The common consensus has been that Gorbachev did accept the existence of the nationality problem (Lapidus, 1989, p. 5-6) that brought the end of the USSR and later led to the inevitable ethnic conflicts and civil wars inside the post-Soviet nations.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 he inherited many socio-economic problems. Thus, he initiated a period of major reforms in hopes of revitalizing the Soviet Union's tattered economy and society. Melissa Gayan (2004, p. 419) asserts that "his policies of *perestroika* (restructuring), *glasnost* (openness) and *demokratizatsiia* (democratization) made changes to the structure of Soviet government and society, welcomed free and uninhibited communication, and enacted electoral reforms". The purpose of Gorbachev's reforms was to recreate socialist life and achieve the original goals of the Bolsheviks, but in this they failed. On the contrary, his reforms undermined the USSR's authoritarian system of rule and the Soviet citizenry's sense of certainty about and



reliance on their government. Most importantly, his reforms led to an extraordinary expression of anti-government sentiment, which encouraged non-Russian nationalities to demand autonomy and full independence, leading the inevitable disintegration of the Union (Gayan, 2004, p. 419). Gorbachev's policies provided an opportunity for inter-ethnic conflicts that had as their source other social, economic and political problems to come out in the open, and exacerbated them with *glasnost* and *perestroika*, titular nationalities within the Soviet Union were able to express and propagate their ideas and demands for conceptions of statehood that had previously been suppressed. Briefly, Gorbachev's reformist policies created a condition of relative political freedom that allowed various movements and organizations to further galvanized nationalist sentiments in the Soviet Republics and among ethnic groups inside those republics.

The Bolsheviks aimed to eliminate national and ethnic differences within Soviet borders, but at the same time by granting the minority nations of the Soviet Union the right to statehood, the implementation of nationality policy, led to the emergence of national consciousness as a political force, and also the development of a national consciousness among ethnic groups by supporting minorities' cultures and languages. The Soviet nationality policy changed over time as the Soviet leadership and their perspectives changed, and its implementation led to unexpected results in the Caucasus.

#### **Soviet Nationality Policy, Federal Structure and the Formulation of Statehood of Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

Soviet federal structure played a fundamental role in terms of how "ethnicity" was institutionalized. Through the Soviet ethnofederal structure that was "based on territorially defined and ethnicity-based entities" (Cornell, 2001, p. 25), certain ethnically defined groups with particular territories were created and vested in these territories (Zurcher, 2007, p. 54). Many ethnic groups were granted different degrees of status with a certain amount of autonomy and a number of privileges. There were four main levels of autonomy given by the Communist government, Union Republics, autonomous republics, oblasts, and okrugs. After the annexation of the Baltic States in 1939, the Soviet Union consisted of 15 national states, each of which were granted the highest status, that of Union Republic; these were the constituent parts of the Soviet Union. The autonomous republics had autonomy within Union Republics with special treatments. Autonomous Oblasts or regions had a more limited cultural and social autonomy. The last category was that of autonomous Okrugs which had a lesser degree of autonomy. As Zurcher (2007, p. 54) asserts, "these political institutions proved to be a powerful organizational resource that made mobilization easier along predetermined ethnic lines". However, changes in the political status of these administrative units were common, such as in the cases of Abkhazia (an example of the autonomous Republic, such as Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1931), and South Ossetia (an example of Oblast, such as South Ossetian Soviet Autonomous Oblast created within the Georgian SSR in 1922).

The great problems of dealing with discontent among ethnic minorities and appeasing nationalist sentiments led the Bolsheviks to implement the Soviet nationality policy. During the first ten years of the Soviet Union, the nationality policy was embodied in the policy of "korenizatsiya," ("indigenization."). One of the main results of this policy was the "nationalization or nativization" of the state and party structures in non-Russian republics through Communist principles, which placed local nationals in leadership positions in the local Communist Party apparatus and in the governance of local areas. Through appointing local people with Soviet ideals and goals to local administrative apparatus, the Bolsheviks aimed to give republics a sense of self-determination while extending Communist control over these regions. Yet, as Suny (1993, p. 102) wrote, the policy of indigenization "contributed to the consolidation of nationality in three important

ways: by supporting the native language, by creating a national intelligentsia and political elite, and by formally institutionalizing ethnicity in the state apparatus" not only in constituent nations but also in titular nations inside these nations. Moreover, Nilsson and Popjanevski (2009, p. 8) assert that the initiation of perestroika reforms empowered non-Russian nations in the Caucasus to follow an aggressive ethnic nationalism as a principal ideology for statehood. "The overt focus on ethnicity as a determinant of national belonging was in large part a product of Soviet nationality policy, which granted the titular nations of these Soviet Republics exclusive political rights and territory" (Nilsson et. al, 2009, p. 8).

Suny (1993, p. 108) discusses how the contradictory policy of the Soviet government contributed to the development of a stronger sense of ethnic identity in the non-Russian republics: the "contradictory Soviet policies of nativization" along with economic and social transformation had several side effects within nationalities. One is that many nationalities went through internal consolidation and an increase of national consciousness. Another is that some nationalities underwent more extreme "state-enforced Russification" (Suny, 1993, p. 108). While their policies fostered national consciousness, the Soviet central authorities also suppressed brutally any discourse of political independence, including territorial nationalism. But once Moscow's central authority started to lose its grip on the republics of the Soviet Union, they provided the framework for nationalism that led to separatist manifestations, first for greater autonomy, and then for political independence. In the other words, the cultural autonomy granted by the center regime later grew into territorial nationalism which escalated ethnic demands for secession not only on the macro level (republics in Soviet Union) but also on the micro level (territories in republics). The formation of new political classes in the national republics, Bolsheviks first drew local leadership from among the local people but later replaced locals with Russians Cornell (2001, p. 25) relates that ;

Moscow drew boundaries at will with the very aim of dividing and ruling territories that were seen as potential trouble-makers. Hence it was desirable to separate certain peoples from each other, in particular those with common identities such as Turkic or/and Islamic peoples. By isolating ethnic sub-groups from their kin, unified rebellion against the Soviet state was more likely to be prevented.

Through the Russian nationality policy, which Martin calls an "affirmative action policy", "new national elites were trained and promoted to leadership positions in the government, schools, and industrial enterprises of these newly formed territories" (Martin, 2001, p.1). Filling the cadres of the territorial administration apparatus with local peoples, not only developed ethnic nationalist consciousness but also escalated ethnic mobilization among Abkhazians. Cornell (2002, p. 245) emphasizes that "ethnic mobilization" among minority groups in multiethnic countries is a prominent reason for a desire for self-rule (territorial autonomy) or outright separation. This is because, "especially in defined geographical areas where minorities are compactly settled (as in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), the creation of a separate state is a feasible goal and territorial control becomes a chief issue of conflict" (Cornell, 2002, p. 245). Parson (1982, p. 556) suggests that, "nationalities policy has, it seems, merely consolidated Georgia's attachment to its traditions and culture". Further, undoubtedly, the state policy of supporting Georgian language schools and language instruction is also responsible for the consolidation of ethnic identity among Georgians ("75% of all schools teach in Georgian, while both Russian and Armenian schools account for less than 10% of the total number" (Parson, 1982, p. 556). However, it also had a negative impact on minority ethnic groups who felt that Georgians were culturally oppressing them.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy as an Ethnic Conflict Trigger in Abkhazia**

Even if I have shown the Soviet nationality policy to be a core conflict driving apparatus in Georgia, conflict metamorphosis cannot be understood without identifying and analyzing the whole dimension of driving forces and core causes of the conflict which generate and shape a feeling of injustice among the parties to the disputes. Besides the primary causes of the conflict, which date back to the history of relations among ethnic groups, examined in chapter two, in this chapter I examine the relation between the conflicts and the Soviet nationality policy.

The main factor that explains the particularly sharp tensions in relations between Georgia and Abkhazia is the legacy of the Soviet Federal Structure that was based on, according to Zurcher (2007, p. 23), "territorialization of ethnicity." Martin (2001, p. 1) describes how "the Soviet state created not just a dozen large national republics, but tens of thousands of national territories scattered across the entire expanse of the Soviet Union". Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were two of these national territories, enjoyed an autonomy status under Soviet rule. Giving autonomy to territorial minorities set the stage for the ethnic conflicts among non-Russian republics in the future.

During Stalin's administration, especially the period 1931-1953, the political history of Abkhazia was greatly influenced by the policies of Stalin and Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria. Beria was Stalin's close associate and a Mingrelian born in Abkhazia near Sukhumi, who headed the party in Georgia from 1931 to 1938 and chaired the Transcaucasian Communist Party Committee from 1932-1937. The Transcaucasian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic was dissolved in 1937, and Beria became the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs (head of the NKVD, Stalin's secret police) in 1938. This position provided him a great influence over Transcaucasia, having appointed his comrades and satraps. From 1933 and until the death of Stalin in 1953, Beria gradually implemented an anti-Abkhaz policy (Suny, 1994, p. 289). In 1931, the union republic status of Abkhazia was reduced to that of an autonomous republic under the Georgian SSR. Beria initiated a purge against Abkhaz officials, who were accused of planning to assassinate Stalin. Nestor Lakoba, the Abkhaz communist party leader, was charged with nationalist deviation and his friends who were opposed to Stalin and Beria's policies in Abkhazia were executed during the Great Purge between 1936-1938 (Yalçın, 1996, p. 28).

From the late 1930s to Stalin's death in 1953 the Soviet nationality policy in Georgia was one of "Georgianization" that favored Georgians, a policy strongly encouraged by Beria. The policy altered the demographic makeup of Abkhazia by forcing other nationalities, particularly Georgians and Mingrelians, to settle in Abkhaz territory. These policies reduced the share of Abkhazians in the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic to less than 20 % (Table 1).

<b>Year</b>	<b>Abkhaz</b>	<b>Georgians</b>	<b>Russians</b>	<b>Armenians</b>
<b>1926</b>	27.8	33.6	6.2	12.8
<b>1939</b>	18	29.5	19.3	15.9
<b>1959</b>	15.1	39.1	21.4	15.9
<b>1970</b>	15.9	40	19.1	11.4
<b>1979</b>	17.1	43.9	16.4	15.1

**Table 1:** Ethnic Composition of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic in the Soviet Period (%) Source: Slider (1985).

During Stalin’s administration, the impact of the Georgianization policy was intensely felt in the ethnic structure of the Abkhaz Communist Party. The most dramatic decline in the ethnic Abkhaz membership in the party cadres was in 1929-1930, from 28.3 to 18.5 percent, but the decline continued steadily for years, reaching a low of 13.3 percent in 1950. The numbers of ethnic Georgians in the party cadres increased dramatically during the same years, reaching a high of 54,8 in 1955 (Table 2).

<b>Year</b>	<b>Abkhaz</b>	<b>Georgians</b>	<b>Russians</b>	<b>Armenians</b>
1923	10	40,4	35	4,6
1926	25,4	33,3	24,8	6,7
1929	28,3	24,9	24,5	8,8
1931	18,5	25,3	36,8	9,1
1935	17,6	25	35,2	11,4
1936	21,8	26,3	29,1	11,2
1937	19,7	26,8	26,1	11,4
1938	16,9	27,2	28,1	11,8
1939	15,6	36,2	22,1	13,2
1940	16,7	42,7	16,7	15,2
1945	14,8	45,2	17,8	12,7
1950	13,3	51	15,5	14
1955	13,3	54,8	13,7	12,9
1960	14,4	51,3	15,6	12,4
1965	15,5	50,5	15,1	12,4
1970	16,8	50,5	14,4	11,9
1975	17,6	50,3	14,5	11,3
1978	18,2	50,9	14,2	10,5
1979	18,2	51	14,1	10,5
1980	18,5	51,2	13,8	10,3
1981	18,9	51,2	13,8	10,1

**Table 2:** Ethnic distribution of the Abkhaz Communist Party in the Soviet Period (%) Source: Slider (1985).

With the passage of the 1936 USSR Constitution, the Abkhaz region became an autonomous republic within the Georgia SSR. One year later, Moscow issued a decree that the Abkhaz language, which used a Latin alphabet, should be written in the Georgian alphabet. The Abkhaz (along with the South Ossetians) were forced to use the Georgian script until the death of Stalin in 1953 (Yalçın, 1996, p. 28).

The structural legacy of the Soviet nationality policy enacted during the Stalinist era, “with its built-in contradiction between the principle of ethnoterritorial federalism and the actual repression of national aspirations” was an essential contributing factor in the emergence of the Abkhazian national movement (Lapidus, 1998, p. 9). A hierarchy of ethnoterritorial units was created by the Soviet nationality policy, from the union republics down to autonomous regions and oblasts with local concessions that fostered development of national elites and cultures in ethnic-based territories. Especially, by the late era of Stagnation in Chernenko’s administration in 1984-1985, as Lapidus (1998, p. 9) asserts;

The rising aspirations of increasingly educated and capable elites of the titular nationalities had become a source of tension and competition with Russians for key positions not only in the fifteen union republics but also in a number of the autonomous republics, many of whose elites had long pressed for an elevation of their status. As political constraints

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were lifted by the liberalizing impact of perestroika, national loyalties and solidarities displaced communist ideology and become a potent basis for political mobilization around a combination of ethnopolitical and national demands.”

The Abkhazians had fought against Georgian rule in the years of an independent Georgia (1918-1921), but before the annexation by the Bolsheviks of Georgia in 1921, the Abkhaz enjoyed their own political and cultural autonomy. Later under Stalin’s rule, they suffered the loss of their native leaders, forced collectivization of lands, persecution of intellectuals, and indoctrination in the Georgian culture and language. In 1932, the status of Abkhazia was demoted from that of a Soviet Socialist republic to that of an autonomous republic. During the Stalinist era Abkhazian identity was suppressed by the government, but after the end of the Stalinist terror after the Stalin’s death, Abkhazian rulers and elites resumed efforts to promote Abkhazian identity. Abkhazian rulers and elites initiated efforts to make the republic more Abkhaz. In 1956, The Abkhaz language was restored in schools and media, despite some resistance from Georgian authorities. In 1978, Abkhaz rulers on several occasions tried to convince Moscow to annex them to Russia (Suny, 1994).

The struggle over the political status of Abkhazia was triggered by the growing wave of national self-determination throughout the region resulting from the legacy of the Soviet Federal structure and Soviet nationality policy from the administrations of Lenin to Gorbachev. Both historical experiences and the impact of Soviet national policy were able to consolidate and reinforce group identity and solidarity among “titular nationalities” and even inside of titular nationalities, especially in Abkhazia, a solidarity in which identification with growing ethnic Abkhaz identity as separate from Georgian played a fundamental role in the state-building process. Preservation of ethnic Abkhazian identity against cultural pressures from Georgians had served the emergence of the demand regarding continuity of self-determination as a separate unit after collapse of the USSR.

National Abkhaz identity had already been developed over the centuries, but the idea of independent statehood had been gradually developed among Abkhazians during the implementation of Soviet nationality policy. The policies of the Gorbachev era (glasnost and perestroika) opened up a space in which such aspirations for independence for Abkhazians could be powerfully expressed. As Gayan (2004, p. 432) points out that Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika policies not only encouraged a discourse of independence among Georgians but also among Abkhazians.

In the early 1988, when nationalistic consciousness rose throughout the entire Soviet Union, it also escalated in Georgia. In the case of Abkhazia, nationalistic consciousness was transformed into an expression of political dissent. In June of 1988, a letter demanding the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia was signed by fifty-eight members of the Abkhaz ruling elites and intellectual class and sent to the Nineteenth Party Conference in Moscow (Suny, 1994, p. 318).

According to last Soviet census in 1989, ethnic Abkhazians were only 17 percent of the ASSR population, compared to ethnic Georgians, who accounted for 45 percent, Armenians 14 percent, and ethnic Russian 12 percent. After historian Vladislav Ardzinba was elected chair of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet in December of 1990, a new electoral law was adopted and established a sixty-five-seat parliament (Cornell, 2002, p. 144). Ethnic Abkhazians gained the plurality of seats in the Abkhaz parliament as a result of the parliamentary election in fall 1991 (twenty-eight seats for ethnic Abkhaz, twenty-six seats for Georgians, with the remainder held by Armenians, Russians, and Greeks (Cornell, 2002, p. 178). Thus, even if ethnic Abkhaz constituted 17 percent of the whole population,

they controlled 43 percent of the parliament. These election results led to unrest in Tbilisi that are likely to have been a factor in the fall of the nationalist Gamsakhurdia regime in Georgia (Cornell, 2002, p. 179).

A dispute arose over a Moscow- promoted referendum on a proposal to restructure the Soviet Union to avert an end of the Soviet Union. Ethnic Georgians just refused to go to the polls, as they sought the independence, and refused to hold the referendum, but Abkhazians and South Ossetians chose to participate. Ethnic Georgians loyal to Tbilisi boycotted the vote. Furthermore, in order to develop regional relations, the Abkhazians hosted a congress of Mountain People of the Caucasus with the representation of Ossetians and North Caucasus people, including Chechens, which “adopted a document establishing a “Confederative Union of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus” (Cornell, 2002, p. 264). Throughout in the early 1990s, the Abkhazians endeavored to distance themselves from Georgia and build up their own political system and independent relations with ethnic Russians and Armenians. As a response to these Abkhaz actions, the Georgian government sent a high-level delegation to the Abkhazia to discuss the division of powers, but this did not ease tensions. Further, Vladislav Ardzinba, the leader of Abkhaz, articulated that the Abkhazians were strong enough to fight against Georgia, even if they lacked military equipment and training. Eventually, in the summer of 1991, the Abkhazia parliament restored its 1925 constitution that declared Abkhazia to be an independent state (Cornell, 2002, p. 158).

It is clear that, despite the numerical inferiority of the ethnic Abkhaz that they were able to dominate the political life of the autonomous republic thanks to the advantages of Soviet nationality policy that allowed them to assume full control over political institutions. Such developments as the ability of the ethnic Abkhaz to control the plurality of seats in the parliament ethnic Abkhaz occupancy of more than two-thirds of the positions as ministers and local communist party department heads (Slider, 1997), allowed the ethnic Abkhaz to form alliances with Ethnic Russian and Armenian populations in Georgia, and so guarantee their control over the political life and institutions in the region.

Taking control over political life in the region, establishing an independent Abkhazia and achieving a peaceful secession were seen as challenging, especially as the Abkhaz feared a violent Georgian response, like that to Ossetian separatism efforts in 1991-1992. Furthermore, the Abkhaz did not have the resources to contend with either the Tbilisi regime or the many ethnic Georgians who inhabited the Abkhaz region and were loyal to the central government. However, the developments that followed enabled the ethnic Abkhaz to rebel against Tbilisi. In mid-August 1992, irregular Georgian paramilitary forces attacked Abkhazia and took control of Sukhumi. With help from North Caucasian volunteers and air support and heavy weapons from Russia, the Abkhaz counterattacked in early October of 1992. Abkhaz resistance forces recaptured Sukhumi in September 1993, and almost all Georgians living in Abkhazia territory were expelled. A cease-fire agreement was declared in late 1993, though it was broken a number of times in 1994 and in 1998 (Cornell, 2002, p. 162).

A number of factors had influence on ethnic mobilization and the conflict in Abkhazia. These include existing grievances with Georgia springing from Georgian chauvinism, such as Tbilisi’s policies toward minorities and political discourses (an example, “Georgia is for the Georgians.”) Especially in the 1990-1992 period, through the state’s policies and discourses toward ethnic minorities, the Georgian elites tried to build an independent Georgia, but their policies at the same time fostered ethnic mobilization among minorities that destroyed the possibility of a united Georgia. The most important factor, however, was the autonomous structure of Abkhazia and the implementation of the

Soviet nationality policy, which over the decades had enabled ethnic Abkhaz to enhance their cultural and linguistic identity and keep ethnic mobilization alive. These Soviet policies also allowed ethnic Abkhaz to form the political elite that gained control over the administration of the territory of Abkhazia despite Abkhazian numerical inferiority. As Cornell (2002, p. 266) puts it,

Without autonomy, the Abkhaz elite would not have had the necessary institutions—such as the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic—with which to legitimately decide on secession from Georgia. Such institutions also enhanced the Abkhaz elites' ability to win external support. Through the linkages and channels inherited from Soviet Communist Party structures, Abkhaz elites had access to contacts in the former Soviet military forces that were crucial in securing support for the struggle.

It is clear that the Abkhazians had autonomy to have the necessary institutions, and later shaped national consciousness due to the Soviet federal structure and nationality policy.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy as an Ethnic Trigger in South Ossetia**

Due to the Soviet federal structure and nationality policy, South Ossetia enjoyed an ethnically based autonomous Oblast granted limited de facto independent status during the Soviet period. This de facto status, as in Abkhazia, provides South Ossetians with institutions, political infrastructure (Cornell, 2002, p. 162; Nilsson et. al, 2009, p. 9), and a qualified political elite class. Through these South Ossetia was able to resist the nationalizing policies of the central Georgian government in the 1990s and claim its independence along with Abkhazia. This resulted in the outbreak of ethnic clashes. This ethnic conflict remains unresolved and South Ossetia (along with Abkhazia) has gained de facto independence.

The relationship between the Georgians and South Ossetians has been in very poor condition for centuries. As a result of the collapse of Tsarist Russia, the South Ossetians declared their independence from Georgia and announced their desire to become a Soviet Republic, basing their claims on the fact that Ossetia voluntarily joined the Russian Empire in 1774. Georgia saw this as an uprising that challenged the territorial integrity of Georgia and sent its army to suppress the Ossetians; in the fighting about 5,000 Ossetians were killed (13,000 subsequently died from hunger and epidemics that are considered by the South Ossetians to be the first genocide committed by the Georgians) (Sammut et. al, 1996, p. 5). Russia only condemned Georgian intervention due to the power conflict in Russia in that time (Sammut et. al, 1996, p. 13).

During the period of Soviet rule, there was scarcely any conflict between Georgians and South Ossetians. But at the end of the 1980s a law strengthening the position of the Georgian language in South Ossetia stimulated a dispute between the two groups (Cornell, 2002, p. 153). As permitted under the new perestroika policies, in 1988 the South Ossetian Popular Front, also known as Ademon Nykhas, was created. In spring 1989, the leader of the South Ossetian Popular Front, Alan Chochiev, addressed an open letter to the Abkhaz people requesting support for their secessionist policy. After these developments, during the summer of 1989, guerilla attacks in Ossetian territories by both groups were reported. In August, the Georgian government declared the Georgian language the sole official language of public life (Cornell, 2002, p. 153). This policy would have affected South Ossetians severely, as only 14 percent of Ossetians spoke the Georgian language, though this was a higher proportion than Georgian speakers in Abkhazi. This oppression from the government in Tbilisi caused a resurgence of South Ossetian desire for unification with

North Ossetia, their ethnic brethren in the North Caucasus in the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia in Russian Republic. Ademon Nykhas sent a request to Moscow that the two Ossetians be united (Cornell, 2002, p. 153).

As can be seen, the Soviet nationality policy contributed to the revival of a strong sense of ethnic identity in the non-Russian republics and ethnic territories inside these republics, such as South Ossetia. Because, when Georgia was one of the first republics of the Soviet Union to see the opportunity presented by the glasnost policies of Gorbachev to call for total independence, South Ossetia wanted to stay within the framework of the USSR and unite with North Ossetia. By late September, tensions escalated and inter-ethnic clashes erupted. At the same time, the South Ossetian Supreme Soviet demanded its status be upgraded to that of an autonomous republic. When Georgia declared its independence and seceded from the Soviet Union, conflicts in the Ossetian territories grew more intense. The Gamsakhurdia government in Georgia responded by organizing a "March on Tskhinvali."

Analyzing nation-building in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with close attention to the Soviet nationality policy provides an opportunity to reinterpret major turning points in that nation-building process. As a natural consequence of the demolition of the central authority of the Russian Empire after the Bolshevik uprising, Georgians sought to build their own independent state. At the same time, however, the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia saw an opportunity to create their own independent states. Later, Russian annexation of Georgia and implementation of the USSR's nationality policies led both Abkhazians and South Ossetians to gain the status of territorial administrative autonomous units under the Soviet Federal system. This allowed them to create their own cultural and educational institutions that enhanced their self-identity as well as their own bureaucratic elites. The combination of all these later served as the basis for self-determination as an independent unit after the fall of the Soviet Union.

### **Conclusion**

To recapitulate, although the struggles over the political statuses of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were triggered by the growing wave of national self-assertion fostered by the Soviet nationality policy that, from Lenin's administration to Gorbachev's, granted ethnic minorities some level of privileges, they were shaped by a long historical relationship between the Georgian people and the Abkhaz and Ossetian minorities. A number of factors explain the particular inter-ethnic conflicts in Georgia among ethnic groups. I argue that the foremost factor was the role of the Soviet nationality policy in the emergence of Georgian, Abkhazian, and South Ossetian national movements. Due to the Soviet nationality policy, a great number of ethnoterritorial units were created as union republics, autonomous regions, and districts with some corresponding hierarchal privileges largely regarding cultural issues. What Roger Brubaker (1998, p. 6) calls the "institutionalization of nationhood" allowed these units to be defined as the homelands of specific ethnic groups, each with its own constitution, territory, cultural institutions, bureaucratic elites, national intelligentsia, and so on.

Indeed, Soviet rulers unintentionally allowed these units to foster the development of national cultures and elites, but on a limited scale. As Lapidus (1998, p. 9) asserts, "by the late Brezhnev period, the rising aspirations of increasingly educated and capable elites of the titular nationalities had become a source of tension and competition with Russians for key positions not only in the fifteen union republics but also in a number of the autonomous republics, many of whose elites had long pressed for an elevation of their status". The adoption of liberalization policies under Gorbachev lifted political constraints, and a natural consequence was a replacement of Soviet communist ideology with national



loyalties and solidarities, which were an effective basis for political mobilization inside ethnoterritorial units of the Soviet Union at every level.

Historical disputes and experiences among the different ethnic groups and the impact of the Soviet nationality policy all served to consolidate and reinforce group identity and solidarity among Abkhazians and South Ossetians. In the case of the Abkhazians, there was an intense solidarity with a strong consciousness of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic relation to the Circassian nationalities of the northwestern Caucasus. For centuries, the preservation of ethnic group identity was partly the result of the linguistic and religious differences from Georgians as well as the experience of deportation, but was obstructed by the experience of becoming a minority population in their own homeland after the massive deportation and departure of mostly Muslim Abkhazians. Group identity may well have been strengthened by the brutality of Stalin's rule when, as Suny (1994) explains, they suffered the loss of their native leaders, forced collectivization of their lands, persecution of intellectuals, and indoctrination in Georgian culture and language. Abkhazian identity may have declined in Stalin's era, but after the death of Stalin, Abkhazian elites attempted to make the territory more Abkhaz.

In the case of South Ossetia, there was also intense solidarity in which identification and kinship with North Ossetians through their cultural, ethnic, and linguistic characteristics played a significant role. Their ethnic group identity was also preserved due to socio-cultural characteristics. Georgian-South Ossetian antagonism dated back to the years of the establishment of the Democratic Georgian Republic in 1918 and was based on economic conflicts between Georgian aristocrats who were landlords of territories and landless South Ossetian peasants who claimed ownership of those territories. Georgian economic policy that favored the landlords resulted in Ossetian protests in Shida Kartli, to which the Georgian government responded brutally. The demonstrators became rebels, and even the Georgian population was subject to their attacks. Hundreds of South Ossetian civilians were killed when the Georgian government intervened and perpetrated retributive massacres. These events can be seen as the beginning of the ethnic hatred between the Ossetians and Georgians. In 1922, after the Bolsheviks took over Georgia, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast was created as part of the Soviet Nationality Policy. During the 70 years of Soviet hegemony, South Ossetians enjoyed within the framework of the Soviet Federation that provide them with an autonomy they had never had before. Abkhazia had already had autonomy granted by Georgians due to the 1921 constitution, but during the Soviet period, Abkhaz ethnicity and identity were supported by Moscow, except during Stalin's administration. These de facto statuses in the Soviet period provided both Abkhazian and South Ossetians with institutions, political infrastructure and a qualified political elite class. These institutions gave Abkhazia and South Ossetia the ability to resist the nationalizing policies of the central Georgian government in the 1990s and declare their independence. The result was outbreaks of ethnic clashes, which remain unresolved, though both South Ossetia and Abkhazia have gained de facto independence.

To conclude, the Soviet nationality policy, intended to diffuse nationalism's strength by allowing nationalist enthusiasm to run its course until people understood how class was more important than ethnicity, instead had the opposite effect and aided the formation of a national identity among all of the ethnic communities in the Soviet Union. It set the table for nationalist demands for independence toward the end of the Soviet era and had the tragic consequence in Georgia of pitting Georgian nationalists against Abkhazian and South Ossetian nationalists. The only solution to the ethnic conflicts in Georgia seems to be Georgian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent units, and a willingness to forget the past and develop long-term trade and economic relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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