



Causes, Actors, and Trajectories of Conflicts in the Caucasus

IREn5019 No War No Peace: Unresolved conflicts in the
Caucasus

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Structure

- The Caucasus:
- The Geographical settings
- Museum of peoples
- The crossroad of religions
- Languages
- Historical overview
- Soviet ethno-federalism
- The causes of the conflict

Historical Overview

The Caucasus: civilizations and regions met, bridge and barrier for communication between north and south.

The Caucasus is the point where Russia, Iran and Turkey meet. For most of the 19th century, the three powers dueled for dominance of the region.

Russia – main force which determined the development in the South Caucasus region for more than two centuries.

Russia's interests

Trade interests

Colonization intentions and
Strategic considerations.

In dealing with the Caucasus people Russia followed these guidelines:

1. Refrain from anything that could weaken their perception of our power.
2. Establish commercial relations so as to generate among them needs that they still do not feel.
3. Maintain continuous state of dissension among their diverse nations and never forget that their unity could be fatal for us.
4. Introduce among them the light of Christianity.
5. Absolutely prevent them from the possibility of links with Turkey and Persia.

Peter the Great - to transform Russia to a great European power.

Historical overview

Georgia under Russian Control:

- Since **1783**, Georgia became a **Russian protectorate** following the Treaty of Georgievsk.
- In **1801**, Russia **annexed Georgia**, formalizing its control over the region.

Russian Expansion:

- Russian conquest continued throughout the early 19th century, including the capture of various

Khanates in 1806-1809.

- **Chechnya** and **Dagestan** were brought under Russian control by **1859** after prolonged resistance.

Key Treaties:

- **Treaty of Gulistan (1813)**: Marked the end of the **Russia-Persian War**, with Persia ceding large parts of the Caucasus to Russia.

- **Treaty of Turkmanchai (1828)**: Further solidified **Russia's control over the Caucasus**, expanding its territory after defeating Persia.

Soviet Period:

- From **1921 to 1991**, the region was under Soviet control, with the establishment of Soviet Socialist Republics and Autonomous Republics in the Caucasus.

Persian Territorial Losses after the Gulistan Treaty of 1813 and the Turkmanchai Treaty of 1828



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Names for first-order administrative divisions (republics and krays) are unofficial provisional names. Names and boundary representation are not necessarily authoritative. 2762 6-94 STATE (MRV002)

Historical overview

- **Soviet Position in the Caucasus:**

- Throughout the **late 19th century** and most of the **Soviet period**, the Soviet Union's position in the Caucasus was shaped by its strategic frontier with **Turkey** and **Persia** (later **Iran**).

- **Transcaucasian Federation:**

- During the **Russian Revolution of 1917**, the **Transcaucasian Federation** was established, composed of:

- **Georgian Mensheviks**
- **Azerbaijani Musavat Party**
- **Armenian Dashnaks**

- **Independence of the South Caucasus:**

- In **1918**, the South Caucasus region **separated from Russia** and declared its independence.

- Three **democratic republics** were formed:

- **Azerbaijan Democratic Republic**
- **Georgian Democratic Republic**
- **Armenian Democratic Republic**

Historical overview

Azerbaijan:

On May 31st, 1920, Azerbaijan was invaded and Sovietized by Russia's 11th Red Army, ending its short-lived independence.

Armenia:

In late 1920, Armenia was invaded by the Kemalist Army of Karabekir Pasa. The country was subsequently partitioned between Turkey and Russia.

Georgia:

The Soviet military launched an invasion of Georgia on February 11th, 1921, completing the Sovietization of the South Caucasus. Soviet Period: For the next 70 years, the entire region remained part of the Soviet Union, incorporated into various Soviet Socialist Republics.

THE CAUCASUS



Leninist nationality policy



Leninist “nationality policy”- hierarchical nationality-based territorial structure
→ ethnic identities through a federal state structure.

After 1917 Civil War in Russia the goal was to maintain integrity in the multiethnic RE.

Between 1925-1935 a new political map „territorialization of ethnicity“: administrative units were created: hierarchical-nationality based territorial structures – „the most important national groups were given the most meaningful administrative, constitutional and legal expressions of nationhood in the form of union republic status.”

Introduction to Ethno-territorial and Secessionist Conflicts

- The Soviet Union's **collapse in 1991** was largely peaceful, except in the **Caucasus** region, where five major conflicts erupted.
- These conflicts included wars in **Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia**, among others.
- **Consequences:** Up to 40,000 deaths and the displacement of over 1.5 million people—10% of the 1989 Transcaucasian population.
- **Key Observation:** These conflicts remain **unresolved** to this day despite ceasefires, peace processes, and continued dialogue.
- **Main Question:** Why did this region see such intense violence, and what are the underlying causes?

Competing Explanations

The Myth of "Ancient Hatreds"

- **Outdated Tropes:** Western policymakers and early commentators resorted to the "ancient hatreds" theory (Yemelianova, 2002).
- **Scholarly Rejection:** Historians and political scientists have discredited this view, emphasizing modern political, social, and historical roots instead (Kaufman, 2001).
- **Alternative Factors:** Ethnic symbols, geopolitical influences, and the legacies of Soviet governance are much more critical in explaining these conflicts.

The Role of Soviet ethno-federal institutions

Autonomy and Conflict in Soviet Structures

Ethno-federal Structures: The Soviet Union's creation of **autonomous regions** for ethnic minorities, such as **Nagorny Karabakh**, laid the groundwork for later conflicts (Cornell, 2002).

• **Legacy of Autonomy:** These institutions empowered ethnic groups, but also trapped them in minority enclaves, making their situation even more precarious post-Soviet collapse (Rezvani, 2015).

• **Post-Soviet State Fragility:** After 1991, the weak new states (e.g., Georgia, Azerbaijan) were unable to resolve disputes between central authorities and autonomous regions.

The Role of Soviet ethno-federal institutions

- **The Communist Party:** The main instrument for ruling and centralizing power in the Soviet Union. **Asymmetrical Federation:** The Soviet Union was structured as an asymmetrical federation with ethno-territorial units, giving some nationalities greater autonomy than others.
- **Right to Self-determination:** Soviet ideology upheld the right of nations to self-determination, but this was often limited in practice by the central authority of the Communist Party.
- **National Group Representation: Union Republics (SSRs):** The most significant national groups, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, were granted the status of Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), the highest form of national autonomy.
- **Autonomous Republics (ASSRs):** Some regions, like South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Ajaria, and Nakhichevan, were designated as Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs).
- **Autonomous Oblasts (AOs):** Smaller regions such as Nagorno-Karabakh were given the status of autonomous oblasts, which had less autonomy. **Autonomous Okrugs:** A lower level of autonomy, often granted to smaller ethnic groups or regions.

The Politics of Indigenization (Korenizatsiya)

- **Korenizatsiya** (1923): A Soviet policy promoting the development of local ethnic culture and the autonomy of non-Russian groups.
- Regional Communist Party organizations were established, empowering local ethnic elites.
- This policy allowed ethnic groups to maintain their own **education, language, and cultural identity** within **self-rule territories**.
- **Impact:**
 - Fostered ethnic pride and promoted the flourishing of ethnic cultures within the Soviet Union.
 - Created **regional autonomous entities** which later became flashpoints for secessionist movements after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

From Korenizatsiya to Russification (Post-1932)

- **Russification** (Post-1932): Reversal of Korenizatsiya, shifting towards **greater centralization** and **cultural Russification** under Stalin.
- **Stalinist policies**: Emphasized the dominance of the **Russian language**, and non-Russian elites were repressed.
- **Consequences**:
 - National elites in ethnic regions were purged, fostering deep resentment.
 - **Cultural assimilation** and repression of ethnic identities led to long-term grievances.

De-stalization and ethnic revival

- **De-Stalinization Policies (Post-1953):**
- **Khrushchev's Era:** Reversal of Stalinist centralization. Greater power was given to **local Communist Party leaders**.
- **Rebirth of nationalism:** Ethnic cultures experienced a “**rasvet**” (flourishing) as they were allowed more freedom.
- **Soviet nationalities** evolved through stages of “**sblizhenie**” (drawing together) and “**sliianie**” (merger) as part of the long-term goal of Soviet unity.
- **Legacy:**
- **Flexibility in social order** fostered a resurgence of ethnic identity, which would later fuel nationalist movements in the **Gorbachev era**.

Gorbachev's Reforms: Perestroika and Glasnost

- **Mikhail Gorbachev (1985)**: Introduced **perestroika** (restructuring) and **glasnost** (openness), which inadvertently encouraged the expression of **anti-government sentiment**.
- Ethnic grievances that had been suppressed for decades resurfaced, leading to demands for greater autonomy and independence.
- **Impact on the Soviet Union:**
- Gorbachev's policies enabled **non-Russian republics** to assert their **national identities** and call for **self-determination**.
- Led to the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Autonomy: solution or source of conflict?

- **Autonomy's Dual Role:**

- **Solution:** Autonomy regimes were designed to balance **conflicting territorial interests** and reduce ethnic tensions in multi-ethnic states.

- **Source of Conflict:** Autonomy can isolate **minority groups**, limiting their participation in **national politics** and encouraging **secessionist tendencies**.

- **Challenges of Autonomy:**

- Autonomy may lead to **protests by other groups**, creating additional sources of conflict.

- **Autonomous regions** often function like **quasi-states**, with their own **executive, legislative, and judicial bodies**, leading to a sense of statehood and encouraging separatism.

Autonomous Regions: Characteristics

- **Features of Autonomous Regions:**

- **State-like structures:** Autonomous regions typically have their own **flags, coats of arms, borders, and internal governance** systems.

- **Group Identity:** Autonomous regions foster a strong sense of **ethnic identity**, with distinct leadership, media outlets, and **external support** from diaspora or foreign states.

- **Examples:**

- **Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia:** These regions developed state-like features which made peaceful reintegration into their parent states difficult.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: Nagorny Karabakh

- **Historical Roots:** First instances of violence between **Armenians and Azerbaijanis** during the **Russian Revolution of 1905** (Swietochowski, 1985).
- **Post-Empire Conflicts:** After the fall of the Russian Empire, unresolved disputes over territories such as **Nagorny Karabakh, Nakhichevan, and Zangezur**.
- **Soviet Involvement:** In 1921, the **Kavburo** (Bolshevik authority) left Nagorny Karabakh under Azerbaijani control but granted autonomy to the Armenian-majority population (Saparov, 2015).
- **Sub-heading:** Conflict Escalation in the 1980s
- **Gorbachev's Reforms:** Perestroika and glasnost allowed suppressed grievances to surface, with Armenians in **Nagorny Karabakh** demanding unification with Armenia (Libaridian, 1988).
- **1988 Pogroms:** Violence erupted in **Sumgait** and other areas, leading to the mutual expulsion of 360,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan and 200,000 Azerbaijanis from Armenia (Yunusov, 1991).
- **Sub-heading:** War and Ceasefire
- **Full-scale War (1992-1994):** After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, full-scale war broke out in **Nagorny Karabakh** with heavy civilian losses, such as the **Khojaly Massacre** (de Waal, 2013).
- **Ceasefire in 1994:** Mediated by Russia, the ceasefire left **Armenian forces in control** of Nagorny Karabakh and surrounding territories, displacing over half a million Azerbaijanis.

The Georgian–South Ossetian and Abkhaz Conflicts

- Pre-Soviet and Soviet-Era Tensions
- **South Ossetia**: Tensions between **Ossetian peasants** and **Georgian nobility** date back to the early 20th century (Saparov, 2015).
- **Soviet Policy**: South Ossetians were granted **autonomous status** under the Soviet system, but these measures often created deep-seated resentment among the Georgian majority.
- **Abkhazia**: Georgianization policies under Stalin (e.g., imposing the **Georgian alphabet**) intensified Abkhaz separatist sentiments (Sagariya, 1992).
- **Sub-heading**: Post-Soviet Independence and Conflict Escalation
- **South Ossetia (1989)**: Rising Georgian nationalism, led by **Zviad Gamsakhurdia**, led to violent clashes in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia's capital (Welt, 2014).
- **Abkhazia (1992-1993)**: Following Georgia's independence, war broke out in **Abkhazia**. Georgian forces initially succeeded but were later repelled by Abkhaz guerrillas supported by external forces (Shesterinina, 2016).
- **Sub-heading**: Resolution Attempts
- **Dagomys Agreement (1992)**: This agreement helped bring an end to large-scale fighting in **South Ossetia** but failed to resolve the underlying tensions (Shevardnadze's involvement).
- **Abkhazia (1993)**: The war ended with the displacement of up to 240,000 ethnic Georgians, solidifying Abkhazia's de facto independence, though it remains internationally unrecognized.

The Russian-Chechen Conflict

- Long History of Resistance and Soviet Deportation
- **Chechen Resistance:** The roots of Chechen opposition to Russian rule date back to the 18th century, with resistance led by figures such as **Sheikh Mansur** and **Imam Shamil** (Galeotti, 2014).
- **1944 Deportation:** Under Stalin, the entire **Chechen population** was deported to Central Asia, fostering deep resentment and fueling future independence movements (Russell, 2007).
- **Sub-heading:** Post-Soviet Chechen Independence Movement
- **Dzhokhar Dudaev:** The Chechen nationalist leader declared independence in 1991, prompting the Russian invasion of Chechnya (Tishkov, 1997).
- **First Chechen War (1994-1996):** A bloody conflict resulting in Russia's defeat and withdrawal, as well as the devastation of Grozny and other cities (Evangelista, 2002).
- **Sub-heading:** Second Chechen War and Russian Victory
- **Second War (1999-2009):** Following renewed conflict, Russia regained control over Chechnya, supported by the **Kadyrov** regime, which crushed the remaining independence movements (Galeotti, 2014).
- **Islamisation and External Influence:** During the second war, foreign jihadist groups, including **Al-Khattab**, became involved, shifting the conflict from nationalism to **Islamic extremism**.

Transnational Salafi and Jihadist Networks

- **Salafism and Jihadism:** Ideological movements advocating the return to the earliest form of Islam (Salafism) and armed struggle (Jihadism) for political or religious objectives.
- **From Local Insurgency to Global Network:** Initially focused on specific territorial disputes, jihadist movements evolved into transnational networks aiming for broader Islamic governance.
- **Historical Context:**
 - Emergence of **Salafi and Jihadist networks** was significantly shaped by global conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya during the 1980s and 1990s.
 - **Chechen Insurgency:** A prominent example of an insurgent movement that transitioned into a network of global jihadism, influenced by foreign fighters and ideologies.
- **The Transition:**
 - From independent insurgencies tied to specific nationalist causes, Salafi movements evolved into broader global networks, connected through ideology rather than geography.

Evolution into leaderless Networks

- **Leaderless Resistance:** Unlike traditional hierarchically structured groups, modern jihadist networks operate through loosely connected cells with decentralized leadership.
- **Digital Connectivity:** The rise of the internet and encrypted communications enabled the spread of jihadist ideologies across borders, creating a leaderless but coordinated global movement.
- **Key Figures:**
 - Influential leaders like **Abu Musab al-Suri** championed the concept of leaderless resistance, advocating for the empowerment of independent cells.
 - These figures promoted the idea that small, autonomous groups could carry out operations without centralized command.
- **Impact on Global Jihadism:**
 - Decentralized operations allowed these networks to evade detection and repression by national governments, making them more resilient and harder to dismantle.

Case Study: The Chechen Insurgency

- **Chechen Conflict:**

- The Chechen conflict transitioned from a nationalistic fight for independence from Russia to a hub for global jihadism, particularly after the death of secular leader **Dzhokhar Dudaev** and the arrival of foreign jihadists.

- **Role of Salafi Networks:**

- Influential foreign fighters like **Abu Omar al-Saif** and **al-Khattab** introduced Salafist ideologies, transforming the Chechen insurgency into a global jihadist cause.

- **Shariatisation and Salafisation:** Chechen leadership embraced **Sharia law** and rejected traditional Chechen Sufi practices as "bid'ah" (unlawful innovation), further aligning the movement with global jihadist goals.

- **Legacy:**

- The Chechen insurgency became a **blueprint for similar conflicts** across the globe, where local grievances morphed into transnational jihadist struggles.

Common themes across the conflicts

- **Soviet Institutional Legacy:** The ethno-federal system created unstable **autonomous regions** that became focal points for conflict after the collapse of central authority (Cornell, 2002).
- **Perestroika and Glasnost:** Gorbachev's reforms inadvertently sparked **ethnic mobilization**, as suppressed grievances erupted into the open (Kaufman, 2001).
- **Economic and State Fragility:** The new states emerging from the Soviet Union lacked the **institutional capacity** to manage these ethnic disputes, leading to violence (Zürcher, 2007).
- **Geopolitical Influences:** The role of Russia and other external actors often exacerbated the conflicts, particularly in the Caucasus (de Waal, 2013).
- **Global Jihadism:** Local conflicts, especially in **Chechnya**, became incubators for **transnational jihadist networks**, which expanded into **leaderless resistance** models (Ratelle, JF).

Conclusions and reflections

- These conflicts resulted from a combination of **historical grievances**, the legacy of **Soviet-era autonomy**, and the **institutional weakness** of post-Soviet states.
- **Historical Memories**: Ethnic elites invoked historical narratives, such as **Chechen resistance** or the **Armenian genocide**, to fuel their claims to sovereignty.
- **Global Impact**: The transition of local conflicts into **transnational jihadist networks** has transformed the nature of modern insurgencies, making them harder to defeat.
- **Future Outlook**: Without strong state institutions and **balanced geopolitical engagement**, these conflicts and the spread of jihadist networks are likely to persist.