

Explaining Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus:  
Mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia

by

Cory D. Welt

B.A. International Relations  
Stanford University, 1995

M.A. Russian and East European Studies  
Stanford University, 1995

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Signature of Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Department of Political Science  
August 6, 2004

Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_

Stephen Van Evera  
Professor of Political Science  
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: \_\_\_\_\_

Stephen Ansolabehere  
Professor of Political Science  
Chairman, Committee for Graduate Students



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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the origins of ethnic conflict in the South Caucasus. It explains the mass mobilization of regional groups in Mountainous (Nagorno) Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia from 1987 to 1989, variation in the goals of these groups (and of other regional groups in the USSR), and the start of the conflict-spirals that ultimately led to ethnic war.

The dissertation examines three aspects of mass mobilization: group motivation, the commitment problem, and perceptions of opportunity. Utilizing historical memories, leadership rhetoric, signals of opponent intentions, and evidence of shifting capabilities, the dissertation assesses four hypotheses for group motivation: fear of violence, cultural extinction, demographic shift, and economic discrimination. It concludes that all three groups were mainly motivated by a fear of future demographic shifts and economic discrimination.

The dissertation argues that the three regional groups also shared a political commitment problem—the absence of a mechanism that guaranteed union republic opponents would protect their demographic and economic interests after they agreed to a compromise. Contemporary signals of intent and historical precedents led groups to believe their opponents were committed to state centralization, not the expansion of regional autonomy. Regarding opportunity, two regional groups believed their demands coincided with Mikhail Gorbachev's commitment to rectify “deviations” from the early Soviet path of state development and could thus persuade the central government to accommodate their demands. The third regional group did not and so pursued a more modest political goal.



The dissertation applies the above findings to cases of regional mobilization (and its absence) elsewhere in the USSR and finds that a focus on opportunity provides the best explanation for the presence or absence of mass mobilization.

Finally, the dissertation argues that conventional state security concerns best explain the start of escalation. Union republic opponents, Azerbaijanis and Georgians, perceived regional mobilization to be manifestations of broader “interstate” conflicts pitting Azerbaijan and Georgia against, respectively, Armenia and Russia. They did not consider the actions of regional groups to be a product of group insecurities. The dissertation concludes by applying the above findings to the practice of conflict resolution.

Thesis Supervisor: Stephen Van Evera  
Title: Professor of Political Science



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Cory Welt is a Fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). In 2003-2004, he was a visiting fellow at CSIS. He received his Ph.D. in political science from MIT in 2004 and received an M.A. in Russian and East European Studies and a B.A. in international relations from Stanford University in 1995. He has received Foreign Language and Area Studies and National Science Foundation fellowships, as well as research and writing grants from the International Research and Exchanges Board, the Social Science Research Council, and the Center for International Studies at MIT. He was also a Raoul Wallenberg Scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1995-1996).





For Tamuna



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This dissertation is the product of years of curiosity regarding the formation of ethnic and national identities, the historical creation of state borders, and the relationship between central governments and regional ethnic groups. It is also the product of a longstanding fascination with the rich ethnic and historical mosaic of post-Soviet Eurasia.

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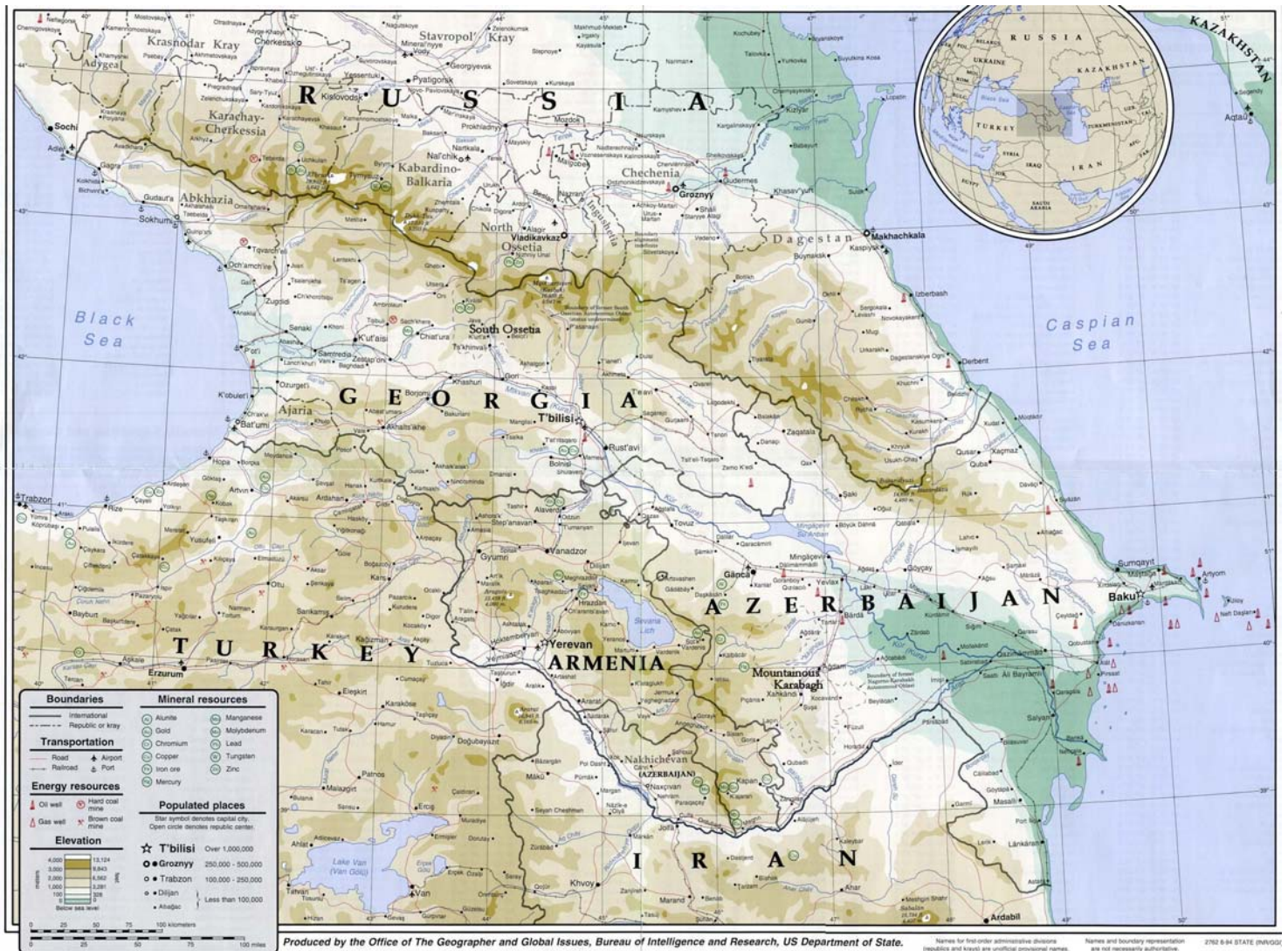
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Although I concluded the dissertation in May 2004, I write these words as, unimaginably, the conflict in South Ossetia has flared up again after more than a decade of inactivity. I do not expect Georgians, Ossetians, Abkhazians, Azerbaijanis, and Armenians to all agree with what I have written. I hope, however, that whoever reads this dissertation will agree that I did my best to communicate the views of all parties concerned, to do so objectively, and with the aim of contributing to a just and proper settlement.



# The South Caucasus



### Map 1

Source: University of Texas Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection (<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/>)/U.S. Department of State  
(Map modified to highlight Mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia)



# Mountainous Karabagh



Map 2

Source: University of Texas Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection (<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/>)/  
U.S. Central Intelligence Agency

# Armenia and Azerbaijan: Nakhichevan, Zangezur, and Mountainous Karabagh



Map 3

Source: ReliefWeb (<http://www.reliefweb.int>)/Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
(Map modified to include Zangezur region)



# Abkhazia

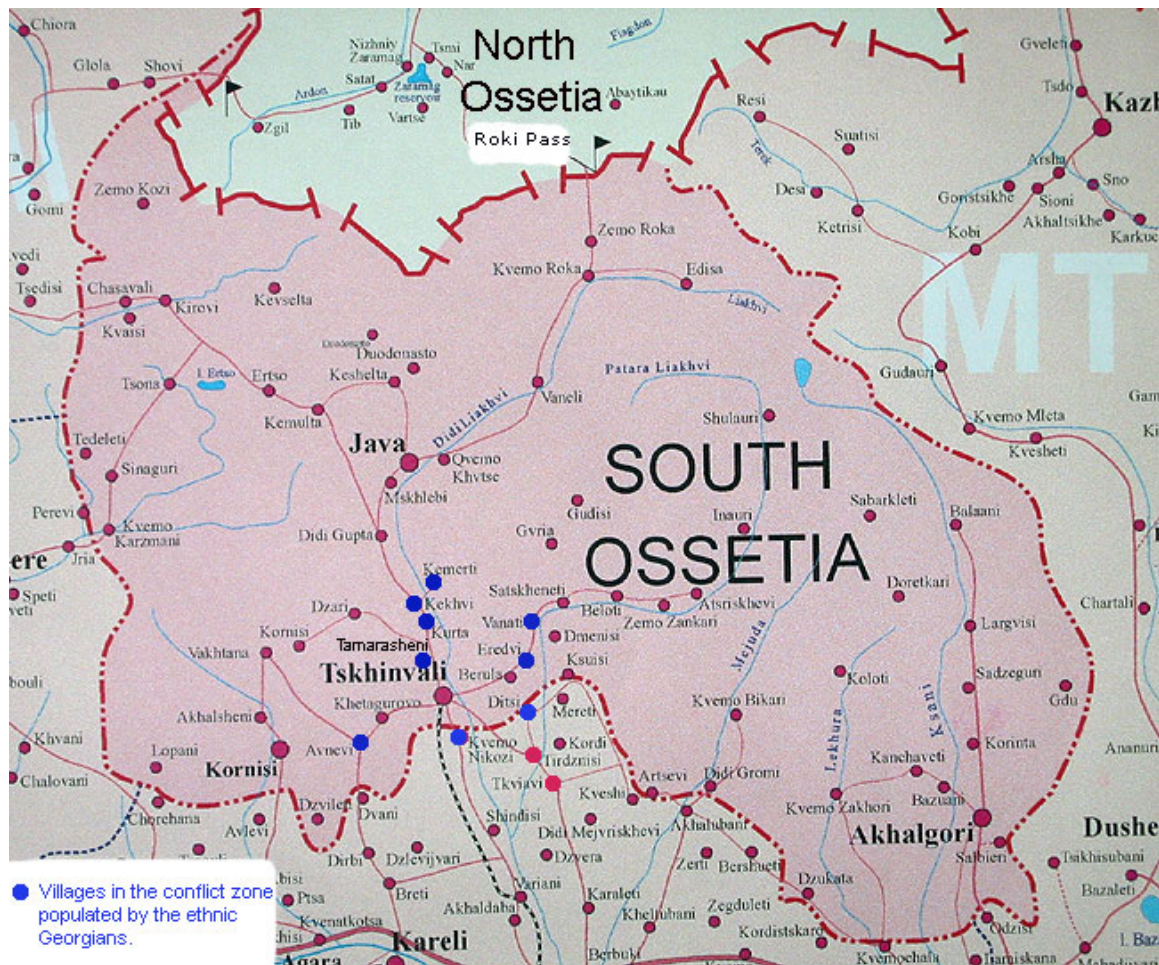


Map 4

Source: <http://www.apsny.org>

Note: Map labels place names by their Abkhazian, not Georgian, variants (i.e., Sukhum=Sukhumi; Gal=Gali)

# South Ossetia



Map 5

Source: Civil Georgia (<http://www.civil.ge>)





*Chapter One*  
**Explaining Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus**

**I. Breaking Up the South Caucasus**

When the USSR disintegrated in 1991, it was not only the state as a whole that collapsed. One region of the country, the Transcaucasus or “South Caucasus,” also fell apart. In this strategically sensitive region, surrounded by Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the Black and Caspian Seas, the Soviet Union gave way to three independent states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In addition, it spawned three non-recognized statelets: the previously “autonomous” territories of Nagorny (Mountainous) Karabagh (formerly an autonomous region of Soviet Azerbaijan), South Ossetia (formerly an autonomous region of Soviet Georgia), and Abkhazia (formerly an autonomous republic of Soviet Georgia). More than a decade after the Soviet Union’s collapse, this jumble of states and statelets at the crossroads of Eurasia persists.

As the Soviet Union declined, what led to this unusually high level of state fragmentation in the South Caucasus? While all fifteen of the USSR’s union republics eventually became independent states, in the twelve states outside the South Caucasus only two cases of further fragmentation—the autonomous republic of Chechnya from Russia (temporarily) and the non-autonomous region of Transnistria from Moldova—ever occurred. Given the large number of autonomous territories in the USSR, not to mention the many other compactly-settled ethnic minorities living throughout the country, such a low number of incidents of state fragmentation outside the South

Caucasus seems unusual. As the Soviet Union fell apart, why was this region in particular filled with so many territorial disputes?

This study provides a number of related answers to this question. First, I examine the *motivations* that prompted members of three autonomous groups in the South Caucasus—Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians—to originally engage in mass mobilization in favor of institutional change (Chapters Three and Four). Contrary to conventional wisdom, I argue that their mass mobilization was not a response to fears of physical or cultural insecurity. Rather, these groups mobilized because they feared demographic shifts in their regions, as well as the economic impact of continued subordination to their Soviet republics. Specifically, all three feared losses of local jobs and resources in competition with representatives of titular majority groups (i.e., Azerbaijanis and Georgians). This was due to a number of concerns regarding the control of local administrative apparatuses: in addition to potential demographic shifts, the likely elimination of informal ethnic quotas and/or prospects of language-based discrimination. The politics of place and power explain the rise of mass mobilization among regional groups in the South Caucasus better than that of violence or culture.

Next, I investigate the *strategic calculations* that led regional groups to prefer institutional change over the pursuit of a compromise with union republics that would have preserved the existing hierarchical arrangements (Chapters Five and Six). The first calculation regards *trust*. To protect the demographic and economic interests of regional groups, union republics were going to have to commit to the decentralization of political power in the regional autonomies. However, the reforms Mikhail Gorbachev planned to institute in the late Soviet period promised to strengthen the powers of the USSR's union

republics, making it difficult to reassure regional groups that union republics would respect autonomous powers of self-government in the future.

This so-called “commitment problem” did not stem from shifting capabilities alone. Prior to mobilizing, all three regional groups received signals from titular groups that suggested an *intent* not to commit to decentralization. While these signals were ambiguous, they mapped onto familiar historical records of centralization that transformed indicators of possible intent to evidence of highly probable outcomes. Together, the signals and historical records led regional groups to calculate that titular groups could not be trusted to abide by the terms of a negotiated solution.

The second calculation regards *opportunity*—specifically, whether or not the Soviet central government could be relied upon to support regional groups’ political goals. The ideology with which Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev dressed his program of reform prior to Soviet collapse offered a unique opportunity for at least two of the groups, Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, to attempt to eliminate the existing state-regional hierarchy. In his calls for reform, Gorbachev promised to rectify “deviations” from the Soviet revolutionary path of state development as set out by Lenin and his Bolshevik followers. For Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, such a promise plausibly extended to their own ethnopolitical institutions, the forms of which had distinctly diverged from the original designs of Soviet founders. By “piggy-backing” on Soviet reform, these groups believed they could pressure the central government to grant them their requests.

By contrast, the ideology of Soviet reform did not grant South Ossetians a similar opportunity. South Ossetians consequently pursued only decentralization within their

union republic, not a complete undoing of their subordination from it. Only in a later context of conflict escalation did they eventually pursue this goal.

In addition to discussing opportunity, Chapter Six also engages in a comparative assessment of the three factors—economic discrimination, distrust, and opportunity—which explain mass mobilization among regional groups in the South Caucasus. In particular, opportunity provides the broadest explanation for why so many regional groups in the USSR did not engage in mass mobilization in favor of radical institutional change or, for that matter, any institutional change at all.

Next, I examine the initial response of titular groups to the mass mobilization efforts of regional groups (Chapter Seven). To explain the outbreak of conflict, we need to explain why titular groups did not accede to regional groups' requests, or at least recognize their concerns and offer to pursue a compromise solution. In the context of a single Soviet state, it should not have mattered if Mountainous Karabagh became part of Armenia, Abkhazia separated from Georgia, or South Ossetia were an autonomous republic rather than an autonomous region. If titular groups had consented to such changes, or at least pursued negotiations, mass mobilization would not have led to conflict.

When titular groups reacted belligerently, however, they confirmed the suspicions of regional groups, initiating a “conflict-spiral” that eventually degenerated into war. Chapter Seven explains this reaction. Even though all groups were housed in a single Soviet state, Azerbaijanis and Georgians perceived regional mobilization to be a manifestation of an external security threat from, respectively, Armenia and Russia. Thanks to this perception, titular groups could not comprehend (or chose not to

acknowledge) the local concerns of regional groups, identifying their actions not as a product of their own insecurities but of external threats against which titular groups had to defend themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, I assess the implications of the origins of conflict in the South Caucasus on prospects for conflict resolution in the region, as well as conflict prevention elsewhere (Chapter Eight). I argue that the conditions that originally led groups to conflict have not disappeared. Regional groups are still concerned about protecting their demographic and economic interests; the “political” commitment problem remains in force; and states retain the same insecurities they had in the past. Altering these conditions is an arduous, multiyear task. If, however, decisive shifts in the balance of power between states and regions occur, speedier resolutions to conflict are possible.<sup>2</sup>

The rest of Chapter One discusses the elements I have briefly outlined above. I first discuss the most basic: the motivations of regional groups.

## **II. Regional Motivations**

When explaining civil conflict, many scholars downplay the study of group motivation. This is because so many groups that have a reason to engage in conflictual activity do not. In her classic work on revolution, for instance, Theda Skocpol

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, I do not address the mechanisms by which “conflict-spirals” led to war and, from there, to state collapse; I leave this for other studies. For an excellent example, see Erik Melander, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited: Was the War Inevitable?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 2 (2001): 48-75. For a description of how conflicts escalated to war in all three cases, also see Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> This dissertation was completed prior to the start of active efforts by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to restore control over South Ossetia in the summer of 2004.

condemned attempts to explain peasant revolutionary action as a “reaction against exploitation,” since “[p]easants always have grounds for rebellion against [those] who exploit them.”<sup>3</sup> Explaining rebellion in medieval Europe, William Brustein and Margaret Levi similarly held that collective “reasons for antagonism to the state” can be found in far more places than there are rebellions.<sup>4</sup> More recently, James Fearon and David Laitin have argued that “ethnic antagonisms, nationalist sentiments, and grievances often motivate rebels and their supporters,” but insist that “such broad factors are too common to distinguish the cases where civil war breaks out.”<sup>5</sup>

Even when motivations do play a role in analysis, it is typically not collective motivations—grievances or threats to the community at large—that attract the attention of scholars but the individual motivations presumed necessary for group members to overcome the temptation to “free ride” on the efforts of others rather than engage in risky or costly forms of behavior themselves.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars who engage in such analysis

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<sup>3</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 114-115.

<sup>4</sup> William Brustein and Margaret Levi, “The Geography of Rebellion: Rulers, Rebels, and Regions, 1500 to 1700,” *Theory and Society* 16 (1987): 471.

<sup>5</sup> This perspective is shared by a large number of scholars. In fact, an entire subfield of sociology, the study of “resource mobilization,” has developed around it. According to J. Craig Jenkins, “[r]esource mobilization theorists have argued that grievances are secondary....[that they] are relatively constant, deriving from structural conflicts of interest built into social institutions....While grievances are necessary for movement formation, they are explained either by changes in power relations...or by structural conflicts of interest.” Some economists who study civil conflict agree; according to World Bank scholar Paul Collier, “the economic theory of conflict... assumes that perceived grievances...are found more or less equally in all societies.” J. Craig Jenkins, “Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 530; Paul Collier, “Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy,” mimeo, Development Research Group (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, 1965). Also see Samuel Popkin, *The*

investigate “selective incentives,” or promises of personal gain, offered exclusively to individuals who participate in a particular action.<sup>7</sup> Others research the selective “disincentives” that are doled out to individuals who refuse to participate in collective action.<sup>8</sup> Still others focus on mechanisms of social interaction like obligation and loyalty.<sup>9</sup>

This focus on opportunity and individual motivations should not preclude an analysis of collective motivations, however. Scholars of social movements have traditionally held collective motivations to be a necessary component of their explanations for action, even if they argue that “variations in their interpretation across individuals, social movement organizations, and time can affect whether and how they are acted upon.”<sup>10</sup> A voluminous amount of research has been devoted to the collective

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*Rational Peasant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 252-259; and Pamela Oliver, “Rewards and Punishments as Selective Incentives for Collective Action: Theoretical Investigations,” *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1980): 1356-75.

<sup>7</sup> Such gains can be material in nature, ranging from payments and social services to the acquisition of loot and plunder. They can also be social, such as the attainment of communal respect and honor. See, for example, Mark Lichbach, “What Makes Rational Peasants Revolutionary?: Dilemma, Paradox, and Irony in Collective Action,” *World Politics* 46 (1994): 383-418; John Mueller, “The Banality of ‘Ethnic War’,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 42-70; and Roger Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> These can be a host of punishments ranging from social ostracism to injury or death. See, for example, David D. Laitin, “National Revivals and Violence,” *Archives européennes de sociologie* 36, no. 1 (1995): 14-18, 21-23; Stathis Kalyvas, “Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria,” *Rationality and Society* 11 (1999): 243-85; Mueller, “The Banality of Ethnic War,” 53-54, 60; and James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003), 80.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 138-53, 250-61; Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion*.

<sup>10</sup> David A. Snow, et al, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 465.

motivations of those who engage in rural rebellion.<sup>11</sup> One exponent of the selective incentives approach, Mark Lichbach, has even argued that it is “absurd” to assume that collective motivations do not contribute to peasant rebellions.<sup>12</sup> Lichbach flatly states that the theory of selective incentives “*does not apply*” to cases where individuals “do not pursue a public good in addition to selective incentives...are not interested in social justice as a complement to personal aggrandizement [or] have no political ambitions but only criminal ones.”<sup>13</sup> Collective motivation, in other words, is still a necessary, if insufficient, factor for explaining conflictual collective action.

Just as scholars have devoted attention to the group motivations underlining rural rebellion, there is little reason to forsake their study when it comes to explaining participation in ethnic mass mobilization. In this study I investigate the collective

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<sup>11</sup> See Arthur Stinchcombe, “Agricultural Enterprise and Rural Class Relations,” *American Journal of Sociology* 67 (1961): 165-76; Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper, 1969); Jeffery M. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1975); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Samuel Popkin, *Rational Peasant*; Theda Skocpol, “What Makes Peasants Revolutionary?” *Comparative Politics* 14 (1982): 351-75; J. Craig Jenkins, “Why Do Peasants Rebel? Structural and Historical Theories of Modern Peasant Rebellions,” *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (1982): 467-514; Jeffery M. Paige, “Social Theory and Peasant Revolution in Vietnam and Guatemala,” *Theory and Society* 12 (1983): 699-737; and Wickham-Crowley, *Guerillas and Revolution in Latin America*.

<sup>12</sup> Lichbach, “What Makes Rational Peasants Revolutionary?”, 390.

<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, Lichbach goes on, rather inexplicably, to argue the precise opposite: “We can now understand an often observed syndrome in peasant struggles: dissident peasants do not formally, explicitly, or consciously pursue a common goal; collective goals, ideologies, and policies are only remotely connected to peasant collective action; peasants take individual actions for personal aggrandizement; peasants are somehow able to overcome these difficulties and alleviate their burdens....Successful collective action thus appears fragile, an unintended consequence of self-interest.” *Ibid.*, 413, 415-16.



motivations that promoted mass mobilization in support of institutional change in Mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.<sup>14</sup>

### III. Discerning Collective Motivations

What sort of collective motivations inspire individuals to engage in mass mobilization? Many scholars of ethnic conflict hold that identifying such motivations is not that important. In an influential work on the strategy of conflict, James Fearon has argued that minority groups that mobilize for secession may be concerned about future “exploitation”, *or* their “political status,” *or* “economic and even physical insecurity.” Rui De Figueiredo and Barry Weingast have similarly noted that “subjugation and, perhaps, even genocide” are fears that could motivate individuals to support separatist activity. Stephen Saideman has offered a detailed discussion of various insecurities that could motivate separatist activity, economic, physical, and political, but treats them all as interchangeable threats.<sup>15</sup>

This assumption of interchangeability, however, may not be the best way to understand the mass mobilization of ethnic groups in favor of institutional change. If

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<sup>14</sup> For one novel approach to the study of group motivations in ethnic conflict, see Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> James D. Fearon, “Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict,” in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, eds. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 108, 116; Rui J. P. de Figueiredo Jr. and Barry R. Weingast, “The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict,” in *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, ed. Jack Snyder and Barbara F. Walter (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 272; Stephen M. Saideman, “Is Pandora’s Box Half Empty or Half Full? The Limited Virulence of Secessionism and the Domestic Sources of Disintegration,” in Lake and Rothchild, *International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, 135-36.

group motivations indeed prove to be randomly distributed, with different kinds of motivations leading consistently to identical outcomes, such an approach may be warranted. In the absence of empirical investigation, however, this is only an assumption.

My study tests this assumption for the three cases of regional mass mobilization in the South Caucasus. I investigate whether the motivations that drove the three movements were similar or diverse. I conclude that they were similar but not in the way many recent studies of ethnic conflict portray them. Group members engaged in mass mobilization more out of fears of demographic shift and relative economic loss than from fears of violence or cultural extinction.

I now present the four hypotheses I test in order to reach this conclusion. These hypotheses reflect common assumptions regarding the sort of motivations that lie behind regional mass mobilization. They relate to, respectively, violence, cultural extinction, population shift, and economic discrimination.

### *Violence*

Writing in the wake of horrific violence in Yugoslavia and central Africa, many scholars of ethnic conflict offered explanations for mass mobilization based on prospective or past acts of violence. Importing the “security dilemma” of international relations to ethnic conflict, Barry Posen held that under conditions of “emerging anarchy”—when a central authority can no longer be relied upon for security—groups must “assume the worst because the worst is possible.”<sup>16</sup> Paraphrasing the work of Barry

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<sup>16</sup> Posen’s argument contains two other necessary conditions: offensive operations must be more effective than defensive ones, and groups must not be able to “distinguish one

Weingast and various collaborators, David Lake and Donald Rothchild similarly noted that “[i]f a group believes...there is even a very small chance that it may become a target of genocidal attack, it may choose conflict over compromise and the risk of future destruction.”<sup>17</sup>

Such fear of violence, moreover, need not be linked to a state of emerging anarchy. Rene Lemarchand has presented the argument that fear of violence can emerge when one ethnic group already controls the levers of state power. Lemarchand argued that fears that a Tutsi-dominated government was going to lead attacks against Hutu led the latter to engage in acts of violence against Tutsi in Burundi in 1988 and 1993.<sup>18</sup> Writing of both groups, Lemarchand remarked that behind the acts of violent

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another’s intentions” on the basis of the kind of weapons they deploy. Barry R. Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 28-33.

<sup>17</sup> David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, “Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict,” in Lake and Rothchild, *International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, 16. The work of Weingast and his collaborators deserves a more thorough treatment than that which I am able to provide here. See Barry R. Weingast, “Constructing Trust: The Political and Economic Roots of Ethnic and Regional Conflict,” in *Institutions and Social Order*, ed. Karol Soltan, Eric M. Uslaner, and Virginia Haufler (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press); Robert H. Bates, Rui J. P. de Figueiredo, Jr., and Barry R. Weingast, “The Politics of Interpretation: Rationality, Culture, and Transition,” *Politics and Society* 26 (1998): 603-42; and de Figueiredo and Weingast, “Rationality of Fear.”

<sup>18</sup> Rene Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1996), xiv, 118, 124, 127. Several scholars have noted that emerging anarchy is hardly a necessary condition for one ethnic group to fear another, given that central governments often side (or appear to side) with one or another group in society. See Beverly Crawford, “The Causes of Cultural Conflict: An Institutional Approach,” in *The Myth of “Ethnic Conflict”: Politics, Economics, and “Cultural” Violence*, ed. Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D. Lipschutz (Berkeley: International and Area Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1998), 14-15; Saideman, “Is Pandora’s Box Half Empty or Half Full?”, 134-35; and Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 10, 20-21.

mobilization lay “the conviction...that unless the other’s crimes are retaliated against by retribution, planned annihilation will inevitably follow.”<sup>19</sup>

This discussion leads to the following proposition:

1. *Regional groups engage in mass mobilization in favor of institutional change to protect themselves against violent attack.*

### *Cultural Extinction*

A second, related category of motivation involves “ethnocide”—the destruction of an ethnic community through linguistic, religious, or other forms of cultural oppression.

In his classic study *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Donald Horowitz offered several examples of politically active groups who feared such “extinction.” While some of these examples related to a fear of actual, physical extermination, others referred to a fear of *cultural* extinction. Sinhalese activists in Sri Lanka complained to Buddhist priests that “if they didn’t do something there would be no more Buddhism and no more Sinhalese—they’d all be Hindu priests, speaking in Tamil.” Karen in Burma “believe[d] that a Burmese-dominated nation [could] mean their gradual extinction as a community,” while in Cambodia “Khmers fear[ed] they may lose their identity as a people, ‘like the Cham,’ a people...absorbed centuries ago by the Vietnamese.”<sup>20</sup>

Scholars of post-Cold War conflict have similarly identified cultural concerns as a potential source of mass mobilization. Stephen Van Evera has suggested that a lack of

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<sup>19</sup> Lemarchand, *Burundi*, xii.

<sup>20</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 176-177.

respect for “minority rights” can promote secessionist or irredentist movements.<sup>21</sup> Michael Brown held that “cultural discrimination against minorities,” including “legal and political constraints on the use and teaching of minority languages, and constraints on religious freedom,” may be a source of conflict. Lake and Rothchild have noted that, in addition to a fear of violence, a “particularly salient” fear in the “contemporary world” is the fear of “assimilation into a dominant culture and hegemonic state.” They argued that “[t]his fear drives the politics of multiculturalism today—and underlies much of the ethnic politics found in developing countries.”<sup>22</sup> From this discussion stems our second hypothesis:

*2. Regional groups engage in mass mobilization in favor of institutional change to protect themselves against cultural extinction.*

### *Population Shift*

A third collective motivation involves demography. In this case, the concern is not about physical or cultural extinction but a dwindling presence, relative to other groups, in the region they live in.

Such a concern can be motivated by two causes. First, members of a group might fear or resent an influx of immigrants. Horowitz discussed the fact that fears of “extinction” often “reflect demographic insecurity,” citing cases in the Philippines, India,

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security* 18, no. 4 (1994), reprinted in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Michael E. Brown et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 34-35.

<sup>22</sup> Lake and Rothchild are, however, quick to note that conflict over culture does not necessarily translate into *violent* conflict: “Because of the dominant culture and state...assimilationist conflicts are unlikely to become violent, as the fearful minority is weak in relation to the majority almost by definition.” Lake and Rothchild, “Spreading Fear,” 7-8.

Fiji, and elsewhere of groups who complained of large numbers of immigrants in their midst. He also discussed cases of groups who feared being “swamped” by new waves of immigrants to their regions.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, members of a group might fear or resent an outflow of their own co-ethnics from the homeland.

As usual, a hypothesis follows:

*3: Regional groups engage in mass mobilization in favor of institutional change to protect themselves from a negative population shift.*

### *The Difficulty with Demography*

Unlike motivations rooted in violence and culture, propositions concerning population shift beg a larger question: why should group members be that concerned about population shift? Concerns about violence require little explanation. Concerns about cultural extinction, given individuals’ prior valuation of ethnic belonging, are also straightforward. Concerns about population shift, on the other hand, are by no means given. As long as group members are alive, in good health, and able to preserve their culture, does it really make a difference how many immigrants arrive in their territory or how many of their coethnics depart?

One answer is that relative shifts in demography may be accompanied by violence and cultural extinction, so that demographic concerns are proxies for these more “fundamental” concerns. A sudden, forcible eviction of members of an ethnic group from their homes can obviously lead to poverty, disease, injury, or death. Alternatively, a massive influx of immigrants can result in assimilationist pressures or policies, thereby

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<sup>23</sup> Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 177-178.

making demographic concerns shorthand for cultural ones. In the words of Stuart Kaufman, “[d]emographic threats may...motivate ethnic fears,” as groups come to “think of themselves as potential minorities in danger of ethnic extinction.”<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, demographic concerns do not have to be related to violence or assimilation at all. In a classic study of migration and ethnic conflict in India, Myron Weiner argued that it was the *economic* consequences of population shift that prompted certain ethnic groups to engage in conflictual action. Weiner argued that “the ‘protection’ of space and the economic opportunities that exist within it are often central objectives” of local ethnic groups.<sup>25</sup> Members of these groups either resent the advanced economic positions of immigrants, and seek to overturn them, or fear that immigrants will come to occupy such positions, and seek to prevent that from occurring.

If we determine that population shift was a motivation for mass mobilization, then, we must still determine whether it was as a proxy for fears of violence or cultural extinction or for other kinds of concerns.

### *Economic Discrimination*

The potential link between migration and economic motivation can be subsumed into a broader economic hypothesis for mass mobilization. One research program regards the impact of relative levels of regional development on separatist mobilization. The question driving this research is whether groups are more likely to engage in separatism if their regions are relatively underdeveloped (i.e., more agrarian, less industrial, generally

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<sup>24</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 31-32.

<sup>25</sup> Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 3.

poorer relative to a political center) or overdeveloped (less agrarian, more industrial, generally richer than a political center).<sup>26</sup> While scholars have debated this issue, most are united by the assumption that as long as groups have a source of comparison with which they unfavorably contrast their region's present or anticipated economic development—be it the region's previous economic growth or potential, that of other areas of the state they belong to, or that of neighboring states—they might mobilize for secession or other institutional change. What matters is not the precise reference point but whether or not group members believe that affiliation with a state center restrains (or will restrain) their region's economic development at levels lower than they could otherwise attain.<sup>27</sup>

Alternatively, in the tradition of Weiner and other “modernization” theorists, we can hypothesize that groups may be concerned about the relative economic status of their members as compared to that of members of titular ethnic groups with whom they compete for wealth-generating positions in education, business, and, as is so often the case in developing countries, state administration. According to this hypothesis, prospects

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<sup>26</sup> See Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Donald L. Horowitz, “Patterns of Ethnic Separatism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (1981): 165-95; Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 229-265; Ronald Rogowski, “Causes and Varieties of Nationalism: A Rationalist Account,” in *New Nationalisms of the Developed West: Toward Explanation*, eds. Edward Tiryakian and Ronald Rogowski (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 87-108; Daniel Treisman, “Russia's ‘Ethnic Revival’: The Separatist Activism of Regional Leaders in a Postcommunist Order,” *World Politics* 49 (1997): 212-249; Henry E. Hale, “Statehood at Stake: Democratization, Secession and the Collapse of the USSR” (Ph.D. diss, Harvard University, 1998), 13-22, 124-138; Henry E. Hale, “The Parade of Sovereignities: Testing Theories of Secession in the Soviet Setting,” *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (2000): 33-34, 44-45, 48.

<sup>27</sup> For a clear synthesis of this approach, see Peter Alexis Gourevitch, “The Reemergence of ‘Peripheral Nationalisms’: Some Comparative Speculations on the Spatial Distribution of Political Leadership and Economic Growth,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 21 (1979): 303-322.



of policies that provide preferential treatment to members of the titular ethnic group can lead group members to engage in mass mobilization.<sup>28</sup>

Taken together, our economic propositions are as follows:

4: *Regional groups engage in mass mobilization because they are afraid they or their region will be economically disadvantaged if they do not.*

#### **IV. Assessing Motivations**

How can we uncover the interests that motivate individuals to participate in acts of mass mobilization? One way might be to ask them. Even if the passage of time distorts memory, participant recollections could still provide insight into their original motivations for action.

Acts of violence or war, however, pose a particularly vexing problem of distortion. Not only can such acts distort memories regarding pre-conflict mobilization, they can also transform the way in which informants justify action to outsiders. Self-defense, a common justification for violent action, often becomes the default explanation for pre-conflict activity as well, regardless of group members' earlier motivations.

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<sup>28</sup> Weiner, Robert Bates, and Crawford have demonstrated such processes at work in, respectively, India, Africa, and Yugoslavia. Horowitz, on the other hand, has noted that for various reasons ethnic groups often do not compete for the same positions. Instead, an "ethnic division of labor" is established that is not conducive to conflict. Weiner, *Sons of the Soil*; Robert H. Bates, "Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa," *Comparative Political Studies* 6 (1974): 457-484; Crawford, "Causes of Cultural Conflict," 31-32, 218-235; Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 108-113. Also see Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communalism: A Theoretical Perspective," *American Political Science Review* 64 (1970): 1112-30.

This phenomenon poses a special problem for the cases I investigate. In all three cases, not only did peaceful acts of mass mobilization eventually lead to war, these acts provoked violence almost immediately: days in the case of Mountainous Karabagh, weeks in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (see Chapter Seven). This violence rapidly transformed local understandings of conflict or, at least, the ways in which group members justified collective action to outsiders. Henceforth characterized as struggles for safety, new acts of mass mobilization made the context in which regional campaigns originated either forgotten or irrelevant.

If we use evidence (like interviews) from post-conflict settings, therefore, we run the risk of mistakenly employing arguments that emerged after conflict as evidence for why conflicts began. Because of this, I refrain from using evidence from the postwar environment to infer motivations dating from before the outbreak of violence.

Instead, I reach my conclusions using other techniques. The first is by examining the historical record for precedents. In order for group members to assess whether they face a violent, cultural, demographic, or economic threat, I consider that they may draw upon historical memories that offer clues regarding the intentions and capabilities of their opponents. As one scholar of historical memory has noted, for ethnic groups specifically:

“Widely held notions of the past [can] shape the parameters within which interethnic relations are defined, anchored, or challenged....Interacting groups...do not emerge the day the conflict begins. Each group carries a ‘baggage’ of memories that shape its strategies. Each group thereby faces the task

of reconciling the pressure of such ‘lessons’ of history and forward-looking concerns.”<sup>29</sup>

A number of scholarly works have argued that fears of violence, in particular, stem not only from current distributions of power within the state or changes therein, as discussed above, but by histories of past violence. Posen has argued that groups employ memories of “how...other groups behave[d] the last time they were unconstrained” when calculating the likelihood that another group will attack them.<sup>30</sup> Lemarchand has also emphasized memories of an earlier round of mass killing of Hutus, noting that in 1988 (and again in 1993) “memories of 1972...conjured up apocalyptic visions of another carnage.”<sup>31</sup> Many other scholars have noted a wide range of “problematic group histories” that pose “underlying problems or permissive conditions” that can allow hostilities to escalate.<sup>32</sup>

Just as scholars hold that histories of past violence can be an element shaping group motivations, I consider that memories of past efforts at cultural extinction, demographic shift, or economic discrimination might similarly affect group motivations.

Second, I examine the rhetoric of regional activists themselves. Admittedly, there are some problems with using organizers’ explanations for action as a proxy for the motivations of their followers. Organizers of mass mobilization campaigns frequently

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<sup>29</sup> Badredine Arfi, “Ethnic Fear: The Social Construction of Insecurity,” *Security Studies* 8, no. 1 (1998): 165.

<sup>30</sup> Posen, “Security Dilemma,” 30.

<sup>31</sup> Lemarchand, *Burundi*, 127 (also xiv and 118).

<sup>32</sup> Michael E. Brown, “The Causes of Internal Conflict: An Overview,” in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Michael E. Brown et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 3, 4, 20. Also see Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security* 18, no. 4 (1994), reprinted in Brown, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, 44-45, 49-50; Crawford, “Causes of Cultural Conflict,” 12; Lake and Rothchild, “Spreading Fear,” 4, 23; Arfi, “Ethnic Fear”; and Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*.

“frame” their argument to audiences in a way they believe is likely to garner support.<sup>33</sup> Just because an audience subsequently mobilizes does not mean this framing was successful. Separatist organizers may have presented a relevant and compelling explanation for action, or they may not have. Without determining if followers were actually swayed by the words of their organizers, we cannot know if the latter’s rhetoric accurately reflects the motivations of their followers. Followers might have acted for their own reasons, regardless of what organizers told them.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, organizers of mass mobilization campaigns speak to many audiences. “Rebel movements need good public international relations,” one observer of civil conflict has noted.<sup>35</sup> Their words are directed not only at potential supporters within their own group but also at “outsiders”—diaspora members or other potential sympathizers, journalists, or (as in our cases) their own central governments. Organizers will frame their arguments to these outsiders in ways that, they expect, will get the latter to sympathize with their cause. Such a framing thus might not only disguise organizers’ own motivations for actions, it might not even reflect those of their followers.

Despite these considerations, the rhetoric of organizers is nonetheless one of several sources of evidence we can use to test the hypotheses of Chapter One.

In addition to considering the historical record and organizers’ rhetoric, I assess contemporary conditions that can provide clues regarding opponents’ intentions and capabilities. Shifting relative capabilities and ambiguous signals on the part of opponents

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<sup>33</sup> On “framing” as an element of mobilization, see Snow, “Frame Alignment Processes”; and Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 7.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Frederic Schaffer for assisting me with this point.

<sup>35</sup> Collier, “Economic Causes of Civil Conflict,” 3.

can endow historical threats and the rhetoric of activists with immediate significance.<sup>36</sup> I hold that groups are less likely to mobilize on the basis of the past or of activist exhortation if their opponents do not engage in behavior at the time of mobilization that could be construed as threatening or if groups are confident an opponent is unable to carry out feared actions in the future.

## **V. Findings on Motivation**

Part Two of this study tests the above sets of hypotheses for the three cases of regional mass mobilization in the South Caucasus. Making use of the historical record (drawing upon the Soviet and post-Soviet historiography of all parties to conflict); regional activists' own explanations for action; opponents' actions; and shifting structural conditions, I conclude that group members were motivated to engage in mass mobilization less by fears of violence or cultural extinction than by fears of demographic shift and economic discrimination.

This finding provides a much needed refinement to the kind of explanations usually offered to explain regional mass mobilization in the South Caucasus. To take a typical example, Russian analyst Alexei Zverev has noted that

“[t]he essence of Armenian discontent [in Mountainous Karabagh] lay in the fact that the Azerbaijani authorities deliberately...pursued a policy of cultural

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<sup>36</sup> On a theoretical treatment of the role historical ideas can play in assessments of probable outcomes, see Bates, Figuerido, and Weingast, “Politics of Interpretation,” 633-34.

de-Armenization in the region, of planned Azeri settlement, squeezing the Armenian population out of the NKAO and neglecting its economic needs....”<sup>37</sup>

According to this account, an unspecified blend of cultural, demographic, and economic sources of discontent motivated Karabagh Armenians to engage in mass mobilization. Other accounts of their campaign, as well as those of Abkhazian and South Ossetian campaigns, contain this kind of non-critical “lumping together” of various motivations to account for regional mass mobilization. My findings simplify these needlessly complex laundry lists of motivations.

They also stand in contrast to the literature in international relations that has dominated the discussion of regional conflict in recent years. As I mentioned above, the dominant trend in post-Cold War international relations has been to argue that such conflicts stem from a fear of violence or cultural extinction. By demonstrating the irrelevance of such concerns in the origins of three of the conflicts this literature purports to explain, the study suggests a need to re-evaluate the latter.

In particular, my findings provide a striking contrast with those found in the most thorough comparative treatment of these cases to date, that of Stuart Kaufman in his book *Modern Hatreds*.<sup>38</sup> In this detailed and well-researched study, Kaufman argues: “[a] fundamental factor causing ethnic conflicts to escalate to war is that first one side, then eventually both sides, come to fear that the existence of their group is at stake.”<sup>39</sup> According to Kaufman, Karabagh Armenians were driven by “fears of genocide....and saw [Azerbaijani] aspirations as constituting a threat of group extinction.” Similarly,

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<sup>37</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994,” in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppietiers (Brussels: VUB Press, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> For bibliographic information, see n. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 31.

Abkhazians believed that “[p]olicies of Georgianization...could create a mortal threat to their communal existence.”<sup>40</sup> Somewhat inconsistently, Kaufman also argues that South Ossetians lacked fears of group extinction, instead mobilizing merely because of “chauvinistic” Georgian policies that “Ossetians found...threatening.”<sup>41</sup>

In this study, I demonstrate that the fears of group extinction which Kaufman emphasizes (and, in the case of South Ossetia, ignores) did not necessarily motivate groups to engage in mass mobilization. Fears of group extinction may have contributed to an escalation of conflict once conflicts turned violent. With (ironically) the possible exception of South Ossetia, they did not originally produce mass mobilization.

Instead, my findings on collective motivation reinforce conclusions made by earlier generations of development theorists on the role of demography and economic interest in promoting ethnic conflict. While organizers of mass mobilization in Mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia partially dressed their campaigns in the language of violence and cultural extinction, I conclude that such expressions of discontent were mainly red herrings. More prosaic concerns regarding demographic change and economic discrimination prodded Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians to initially pursue institutional change.

## **VI. Explaining the Failure to Negotiate: Distrust and Opportunity**

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 49, 96.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 125.

To argue that regional groups engaged in mass mobilization solely because of demographic and economic threats is, admittedly, insufficient. We should also determine why they did not try to first negotiate a settlement with their opponents that would have adequately guaranteed their demographic and economic interests within existing institutional frameworks. Republican administrations could have offered to guarantee regional groups' demographic and economic interests by acceding to decentralizing reforms that would invest the latter with real power to design and enforce laws of migration, non-discrimination, and affirmative action themselves. Such solutions were not inconceivable; all three of these groups already possessed formal institutions of self-rule, as so-called "autonomous regions" and "autonomous republics."<sup>42</sup> The fact that Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians pushed to transform these institutions rather than invest them with the necessary powers to address their demographic and economic concerns requires explanation.

### ***Distrust***

Scholars of the "commitment problem" might argue that this failure to negotiate stemmed from a fear that the balance of power between regional groups and republican governments was changing for the worse, thanks to Gorbachev's decentralizing reforms (see Chapter Two). Because of the prospective devolution of sovereignty to union republics, regional groups would not be able to rely on republican governments to abide

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the formal distinctions between autonomous regions, autonomous republics, and other Soviet federal institutions, see Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 31-32.



by the terms of an agreement on decentralization; if they changed their mind in the future, the Soviet central government might lack the power or will to stop them.<sup>43</sup>

Shifting power calculations alone, however, did not shape group assessments regarding the prospects that republican governments would later break their word. While Gorbachev's reforms did threaten to increase the power of union republics over autonomies, regional groups already had substantial reason to believe their opponents were actually planning to use this power to limit their self-rule. Each received a signal from their opponents shortly before mobilizing that indicated their unwillingness to compromise. Moreover, as with our discussion of motivation, each regional group could refer to a familiar historical record regarding efforts at state centralization. Such histories could lead them to consider signals of state centralization not as indicators of possible intent but as evidence of highly probable outcomes. This, I argue, explains why regional groups so rapidly adopted uncompromising stances. In all three instances, historical records of state centralization and signals of intent combined to make group members believe there was little hope a negotiated settlement on decentralization would actually stick.

### ***Opportunity***

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<sup>43</sup> On the commitment problem and shifting power capabilities (or "windows"), see James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49 (1995): 381, 401-409; Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict," 107-126; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 4; and Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

At the same time, regional groups only pursued goals they believed they had an opportunity to attain.<sup>44</sup> Studies that examine the opportunity structure for mobilization in the late USSR typically assume it was the democratization Mikhail Gorbachev promised which gave groups the confidence needed to lobby for political change.<sup>45</sup> Democratization, however, provides only part of the answer. There was another element to Soviet reform that scholars generally overlook when deciphering the opportunity structures for pursuing political change in the USSR. This was Gorbachev's stated intention to rejuvenate the state by discussing "mistakes" of the past and rectifying "deviations" from the USSR's original revolutionary course. For minority groups in union republics, this intention was of particular import. If they could demonstrate that existing political institutions had deviated from original Soviet institutions, they believed they could convince the central government to undo their subordinate status.<sup>46</sup>

A significant variation in outcome among our three cases supports the claim that calculations regarding such perceptions of opportunity mattered. Two of the groups, Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, were able to make strong cases that their

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<sup>44</sup> For general theoretical discussions of opportunity and mobilization, see Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978), chap. 4; William Gamson and David Meyer, "The Framing of Political Opportunity," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 275-90; and Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, chap. 5.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 73-76; Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 32; and Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chap. 2.

<sup>46</sup> As well, it might be argued that regional groups perceived a *fleeting* opportunity to push for change. Not only did the successful implementation of reforms threaten regional groups, as discussed above, if hardliners were to halt Gorbachev's reforms, regional groups might also no longer have an opportunity to push for political change. I do not know, however, whether group members actually interpreted their situation in this way. On such fleeting "windows of opportunity," see Van Evera, *Causes of War*, chap. 4.

subordination to state authorities deviated from the original designs of Soviet founders. South Ossetians, on the other hand, could not—Soviet founders had always arranged for their region to be a part of Soviet Georgia. As a result, the campaigns of both Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians culminated in requests to undo the existing state-regional hierarchy. The South Ossetian campaign, while aiming for this same goal, at first came up short, only asking to upgrade the region’s autonomous status, not undo the system of autonomous subordination altogether. The South Ossetian campaign turned into a campaign for separation only in a new context of conflict escalation. Varying perceptions of opportunity explain why Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians immediately pursued more radical goals than South Ossetians.

They also explain why so many other regional groups in the USSR did not engage in mass mobilization in favor of radical institutional change or, for that matter, any institutional change at all. As Chapter Six discusses, a lack of motivation or the absence of a strong political commitment problem may in some cases explain a lack of regional mass mobilization. I find, however, that an absence of opportunity—as defined in Chapter Six—best explains why so many regional groups in the USSR either did not engage in mass mobilization, mobilized in favor of lesser forms of institutional change, or mobilized so late.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> An alternative way to frame the central question of this study, then, would be why were Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians—not South Ossetians or any other group—the first regional groups to mobilize in favor of undoing their subordinate status? With this phrasing, I acknowledge Mark Beissinger’s contention that late incidents of mass mobilization can have different (i.e., “event-driven”) causes than early ones (for which structural preconditions play a greater role). See Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, Chapter 1.

This conclusion contributes to an ongoing discussion regarding the role of autonomous institutions in promoting regional mobilization.<sup>48</sup> If we hold that autonomous institutions promote mobilization, we are still unable to explain why South Ossetians initially pursued a lesser extent of institutional change than their two “autonomous” peers (especially Karabagh Armenians, who possessed the same, lower level of autonomy that South Ossetians did). Moreover, we cannot explain why so many groups that had autonomy in the USSR did not support mass mobilization in favor of institutional change.

My argument suggests that autonomy may be epiphenomenal with regards to the question of regional mass mobilization. Those groups in the South Caucasus that had autonomy and engaged in mass mobilization in favor of undoing their subordinate status (the Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians) were also those who had been promised different institutional forms in the Soviet past. By contrast, as Chapter Six will discuss, regional groups in the USSR that had autonomy and did not engage in such mobilization—plus virtually all groups in the USSR that did not have autonomy—had not been promised greater institutional forms in the past. The former groups believed they

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Ghia Nodia, “Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia,” in Bruno Coppetiers, ed., *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: VUB Press, 1996) (accessed at <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/>); Treisman, “Russia’s ‘Ethnic Revival’”; and Svante E. Cornell, “Autonomy as a Source of Conflict: Caucasian Conflicts in Theoretical Perspective,” *World Politics* 54 (2002): 245-76. On the broader claim that ethnofederal institutions encouraged political mobilization in the late USSR, see Philip G. Roeder, “Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization,” *World Politics* 43 (1991): 196-232; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

had an opportunity to push for political change. The latter groups—regardless of whether or not they had autonomy—did not.

## **VII. The Escalation of Conflict**

“Conflict” is a broad dependent variable. When we say we wish to explain conflict, we tend to imply that we want to explain war. But conflict and war are not the same. Groups can conflict, i.e. engage in a public, bitter, protracted, and even violent dispute, before the breakout of war or in its absence entirely. This study purports to explain *not* the ethnic wars of the South Caucasus but the conflicts that gave rise to war. My task is to identify and explain the initial set of moves that brought groups out of a state of real or apparent harmony and into conflict.<sup>49</sup>

While Chapters Three through Six provide an explanation for the *initiation* of conflict, here defined as the initiation of regional mass mobilization, Chapter Seven examines the *escalation* of conflict: namely, the belligerent responses of titular groups (i.e., Azerbaijanis and Georgians) to this mobilization. Whether or not regional groups were correct to assume that titular groups would refuse to negotiate a compromise solution, when they engaged in mass mobilization the response of state actors was undeniably belligerent. The Azerbaijani reaction to the Karabagh Armenian campaign culminated in an organized mob attack that left at least twenty-six Armenians dead. The Georgian response to the Abkhazian campaign resulted in clashes that left at least five Abkhazians—and nine Georgians—dead. The Georgian response to the South Ossetian

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<sup>49</sup> One model for such analysis is Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

campaign—a mass march to the region and the mobilization of armed irregulars—also produced considerable tension, as well as a handful of deaths.

Why did titular groups react so belligerently to the regional campaigns? In Chapter Seven, I argue that we can best explain Azerbaijani and Georgian escalation by reference to conventional state security concerns, even if in unconventional environments. Despite the fact that regional campaigns were occurring within the context of a single state—the USSR—Azerbaijanis and Georgians perceived these campaigns to be manifestations of broader interstate conflicts pitting Azerbaijan and Georgia against, respectively, Armenia and Russia. Azerbaijanis believed that Armenians were intent on annexing Azerbaijani territory and cleansing it of its Azerbaijani inhabitants. Georgians considered Moscow an imperial actor, prepared to do anything to prevent Georgia from achieving greater sovereignty, including sponsoring attacks against them and carving up their territory.

These perceptions of insecurity vis-à-vis third actors overwhelmed consideration of the potentially negative impact their own policies had, or threatened to have, on regional actors. Azerbaijanis and Georgians did not perceive themselves as secure actors that could afford to investigate, and seek to accommodate, minority concerns. Perceiving themselves as potential victims, they considered negotiations with regional populations to amount to a policy of appeasement that would do nothing to avert the aggression of outside actors. As a consequence, Azerbaijanis and Georgians instead took action to

defend their territory and their people. Out of this response—a classic outcome of the so-called “security dilemma”—violence occurred.<sup>50</sup>

When applying an interstate security dilemma model to ethnic conflict, however, it is customary to consider that opponents have similar insecurities, each taking aggressively defensive moves that the other, in turn, reacts against. The works of Barry Posen and Stuart Kaufman are based on just such an understanding of the ethnic security dilemma.<sup>51</sup> What Chapter Seven argues, however, is that “ethnic” conflict can be the outcome of two fundamentally different concerns: regional groups’ concerns about the demographic and economic effects of state domination and titular groups’ concerns about territorial integrity and physical safety. Following the initial escalation, insights from the interstate security dilemma model may be applied more symmetrically to explain the

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<sup>50</sup> On the security dilemma, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 3. Logically, the next step would be to determine the *sources* of external threat perceptions, be they historical memories, national myths, or opponents’ perceived actions and capabilities. This is not something, however, I have set out to do in this study. Instead, I simply identify the linkages titular group perceived between regional movements and external threats.

I should note that my argument suggests the inverse of Stephen Van Evera’s argument regarding the origins of “conflict-spirals.” Van Evera hypothesizes that because states or ethnic groups harbor certain myths that make them “oblivious” of the fact their “past conduct had...provoked others’ hostility,” they misinterpret the hostility of others as a product of unwarranted “malice” or “innate and boundless aggressiveness.” I suggest, on the other hand, that a *prior* threat perception—regarding an outside actor—helps *produce* the myths that make titular groups forget (or encourages them to ignore) how their past or present conduct may provoke the hostility of regional groups. See Stephen Van Evera, “Primed for Peace: Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 3 (1990/91), reprinted in *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace*, expanded ed., eds. Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 210; and Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism,” 47, 49, 50 (n. 49).

<sup>51</sup> See Posen, “Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict”; Stuart J. Kaufman, “An ‘International’ Theory of Inter-ethnic War,” *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996): 149-171; and Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*.

eventual transformation of conflict into war. Chapter Seven suggests, however, that it is in these initially disparate understandings of conflict that ethnic wars take root.

### **VIII. Implications for Conflict Resolution and Prevention**

Chapter Eight assesses the implications of my findings for conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, more than fifteen years after conflict broke out. Understandably, guaranteeing the physical security of regional and titular groups in the aftermath of armed conflict is vital. However, conflict resolution practitioners must also juggle three additional considerations: regional groups are still concerned about demographic and economic threats; the “political” commitment problem remains in force; and states retain the same insecurities regarding external threats they had before. In short, the conditions that originally led groups to conflict have not disappeared. War and its aftermath have only made them worse.

As of this writing, these conflicts are deadlocked. Neither regional groups (with their external patrons) nor states (with the backing of international law) have been forced to surrender their bargaining positions. While external actors have encouraged opposing sides to reach mutually acceptable solutions, regional groups and states have only been willing to accept compromise if it provides a clear commitment to the protection of the interests that launched them on the path to conflict in the first place. As long as both sides have room to negotiate, they can be expected to seek solutions that provide far greater guarantees of their original interests than their opponents are prepared to offer.



The key to resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus is breaking this deadlock. Either regional groups must come to accept that autonomy is the highest form of self-rule they will ever formally attain, or states must come to accept the impossibility of getting regional groups to accept anything less than inclusion in a federal or confederal state.

For either of these outcomes to occur, a shift in the balance of power towards states or regions must occur. Military and economic power must shift sufficiently to states that regional groups will no longer perceive it possible (or worthwhile) to avoid autonomous solutions, or power must shift sufficiently to regional groups that states will no longer perceive it possible to compel or persuade regional groups to accept autonomy. Such shifts will not occur in a vacuum. The interests and capabilities of the regions' patrons, Armenia and Russia, and those of the states, mainly the United States, will largely determine which way, and how soon, they occur.

This study ends with a note of caution. What may be useful for conflict resolution in one case is not necessarily judicious for conflict prevention in another. Supporting regional demands for autonomy is a minimum condition for peaceful conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. Similarly, in other cases where regional groups have prior reason to distrust the central state and perceive the opportunity to impose institutions of local self-rule—in postwar Congo or Iraq, for example—solutions based on autonomy or even more horizontal ethno-federal solutions might be required.

Before practitioners of conflict prevention promote autonomy as a way to mitigate the prospects of conflict elsewhere, however, they would do well to consider three questions: whether it is possible for states and regional groups to strike compromises short of autonomy; whether states will perceive external efforts to promote regional

autonomy as a security threat; and whether regional groups will interpret such efforts as an opportunity to demand even greater institutional change. If so, the pursuit of autonomy could increase prospects for conflict, not diminish them. In pursuing measures to prevent conflict, practitioners of conflict prevention must be careful not to promote the very conflict-spirals they wish to avoid.

Before explaining the origins of the conflict-spirals in the South Caucasus, I first discuss the context and course of the three mass mobilization campaigns with which they began.

## *Chapter Two* **Three Campaigns**

### **I. Introduction**

To understand why the three regional campaigns of the South Caucasus occurred, one must first understand their context—Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts to reform the Soviet system. After Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he called on Soviet citizens to take a more active role in the political life of their country. Presuming public-spiritedness would help animate the country's laggard economy and unresponsive state institutions, Gorbachev unexpectedly unleashed a torrent of ethnic activism in the myriad of republics and autonomous units of the USSR.

Some of the most prominent of these movements were in the South Caucasus. Even before Armenians and Georgians began pushing for greater sovereignty from the Soviet center themselves, Karabagh Armenians lobbied to transfer the "autonomous region" of Mountainous Karabagh from Soviet Azerbaijan to Armenia. As Georgians mobilized, Abkhazians also began mobilizing to make their "autonomous republic" a full Soviet republic, not subordinated to Soviet Georgia. South Ossetians subsequently mobilized to upgrade their autonomous region as well. Unlike Karabagh Armenians or Abkhazians, however, the South Ossetians pursued a campaign neither of unification (to North Ossetia, an autonomous republic of Soviet Russia) or of transformation to full republican status. Instead, they initially sought only to turn their autonomous region into

an autonomous republic of Soviet Georgia. Only after their conflict escalated did they assert full republican status.

This chapter introduces the “triggering” context of Gorbachev’s reforms and discusses the three campaigns and the variation in their initial goals. Chapters Three and Four examine the group motivations that encouraged mobilization, while Chapter Five assesses the “commitment problem” that prompted all three groups to choose mobilization over negotiation. Chapter Six then returns to the context of Gorbachev’s reforms in order to account for variation in the original goals of regional movements. It explains how group perceptions regarding the possibility of institutional change were based not only on Gorbachev’s calls for civic involvement but also on the fit between regional claims and Gorbachev’s assertion that he sought to restore the Soviet system to its revolutionary foundations.

## **II. The Gorbachev Era**

Appointed First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in March 1985, Gorbachev took power with a promise to stir up the Soviet Union’s stagnant political and economic institutions. Three months before his appointment, Gorbachev declared his reformist intentions, calling for “profound transformations...in the economy and in the entire system of social relations.”<sup>1</sup> In this December 1984 speech, the aspiring First Secretary warned that such a task could only succeed if it were accompanied by political reform. In conventional Soviet-speak, he insisted that it was necessary to “ensure

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation is from Robert G. Kaiser, *Why Gorbachev Happened: His Triumphs, His Failure, and His Fall* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1992), 76.

the strict implementation of the constitutional principles of accountability of all executive organs” as well as “real, practical participation by an increasingly large mass of working people in management, and in the elaboration, discussion, adoption and implementation of socioeconomic decisions.”<sup>2</sup>

Gorbachev’s words were not just the Soviet version of a campaign stump. Once in power, Gorbachev reiterated his call for economic and political reform. In February 1986, Gorbachev urged the Communist Party to implement a “radical reform” of the economic system. Later that year, his words were more astonishing, condemning the efforts of “people who occupy leading positions...to preserve the old, obsolete ways, to preserve their own privileges....” Gorbachev sought to establish a system that would “allow each person to feel himself to be *the master of his country*” (emphasis mine). In January 1987, he offered his Party comrades “a simple and lucid” thought:

“A house can be put in order only by a person who feels that he owns the house....We need democracy like air. If we fail to realize this, or if we do realize it but take no serious steps to...draw the country’s working people into the process of *perestroika* [restructuring], our policy will get choked, and *perestroika* will fade away....”<sup>3</sup>

Gorbachev intended his calls for mass political involvement to facilitate plans for economic reform. They had a more obvious (if unexpected) impact, however, on ethnic politics. In December 1986, students in the Soviet republic of Kazakhstan demonstrated ownership of their “house” by protesting the appointment of an ethnic Russian from outside Kazakhstan as First Secretary of the republic. From 1987 on, intellectuals

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 122, 136, 154-55, 177.

representing practically every major national group in the Union began forming organizations to promote ethnic and national interests. Ukrainians, Latvians, Estonians, Belorussians, Moldovans, and others spoke out in favor of promoting the teaching and use of local languages in the union republics in addition to, or instead of, Russian. In the summer of 1987, ethnic demands moved beyond linguistic issues. Latvians and Estonians condemned the violence and deportations associated with their countries' annexation to the Soviet Union in 1941 while Crimean Tatars publicly demanded the right to return to the homeland they had been deported from in 1944. Later that year, Estonians issued a call for turning their union republic into a "self-managing economic zone," while Latvians gathered to commemorate the anniversary of their country's 1918 declaration of independence.<sup>4</sup>

It was in this context of budding ethnic assertion that the first regional campaign in the South Caucasus, that of the Karabagh Armenians, began.

### **III. Mountainous Karabagh**

Supported by a crowd of thousands, local branches of official trade unions and Young Communists, and four of five district assemblies, Mountainous Karabagh's regional assembly voted on February 20, 1988 to approve a petition to separate Mountainous Karabagh from Azerbaijan and join it to neighboring Armenia. 110 of 140

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<sup>4</sup> Details of ethnic assertion in 1986 and 1987 can be found in Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion: A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 249-282.

deputies—the assembly’s entire Armenian representation—supported it.<sup>5</sup> The following day the petition was printed in the region’s official newspaper *Soviet Karabakh*. It indicated that the regional assembly, “welcoming the wishes of the workers” of Mountainous Karabagh, resolved to ask the Supreme Soviets of the Azerbaijani and Armenian Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) to “demonstrate a feeling of deep understanding for the aspirations of the Armenian population of Mountainous Karabagh and to resolve the issue of the transfer of [Mountainous Karabagh] from the Azerbaijani SSR to the Armenian SSR [and] at the same time to petition the Supreme Soviet of the USSR for a positive decision” on the matter.<sup>6</sup> After the resolution was passed, demonstrations continued for more than a week, as the public awaited the government’s response.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The thirty ethnic Azerbaijani members of the assembly either voted against the resolution or abstained from voting. Mark Malkasian indicates that several deputies voted against the resolution. Thomas de Waal reports that while “[s]everal published accounts” state that seventeen deputies voted against the resolution, the official notice of the proceedings indicated that the petition passed unanimously. Multiple informants also told him that all Azerbaijani deputies had abstained from voting. Mark Malkasian, “*Gha-ra-bagh!*”: *The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 31; Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 12, 299 (n. 6).

<sup>6</sup> The petition was published in *Sovietskii Karabakh* (Stepanakert), 21 February 1988, reprinted in V. A. Atajanian, ed., *Pravda o Nagornom Karabakhe* (The truth about Mountainous Karabagh) (Stepanakert: Izdatels’vo “Artsakh,” 1989), 61. English translations are available in Gerard J. Libaridian, ed., *The Karabagh File: Documents and Facts on the Region of Mountainous Karabagh (1918-1988)* (Cambridge, MA: The Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), doc. 51; Malkasian, “*Gha-ra-bagh!*”, 31-32; and de Waal, *Black Garden*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Early accounts of the petition campaign can be found in V. B. Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe: Khronika Chast’ I (Fevral’ 1988 g.-Ianvar’ 1989 g.)* (Events in Mountainous Karabagh: A chronicle, vol. 1, February 1988-January 1989) (Erevan: Izdatel’svo AN ArmSSR, 1990), 32-39; “A Chronicle of Events 1920-1988 in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Information Bulletin Glasnost*, January 1989 (excerpt. and trans. from *Glasnost* [Moscow], May 1988, no. 17), 12-16; Igor Muradyan, “Glasnost and Nagorno-Karabakh: The Public Speaks,” *Information Bulletin Glasnost*, January 1989, 19-20; and

The regional assembly session of February 20 was the capstone of an organized campaign that began months before. In 1986, Karabagh Armenians were already writing letters to government media organs appealing for the transfer of Mountainous Karabagh to the Armenian SSR.<sup>8</sup> An organized campaign for unification was launched in 1987, as locals cooperated with activists from Armenia to collect signatures for a petition asking the Soviet government to effect the transfer. Within Mountainous Karabagh, some 30,000 signatures were affixed to the petition, a number representing approximately twenty-five percent of the region's Armenian population.<sup>9</sup> Of the one hundred and ten Armenian deputies in the regional assembly, more than one-third signed the petition.<sup>10</sup> Groups of

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Yuri Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, trans. Elizabeth Rogers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 10-15. Also see Malkasian, "*Gha-ra-bagh!*" 5-6, 28-32; and de Waal, *Black Garden*, 10-12, 15-22.

<sup>8</sup> It is unclear when such letters first appeared. Arutiunian and Malkasian indicate that Karabagh Armenians started collecting signatures for the petition in 1986. Another observer, Robert Arakelyan, also notes that flyers calling for unification appeared in the region in 1986 "from time to time." Muradyan, however, reports that the letter campaign began in 1985. Gorbachev himself noted in March 1988 that "[t]he Central Committee received five hundred letters in the last three years on the question of Nagorny Karabakh." Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 32; Malkasian, "*Gha-ra-bagh!*", 28; Robert Arakelov, *Karabakhskaia tetrad'* (Karabagh Notebook) (Baku: Azerbaidzhanskoe gosudarstvennoe isdatel'stvo, 1995), 89; Muradyan, "Glasnost and Nagorno-Karabakh," 19; and de Waal, *Black Garden*, 16, quoting a transcript from a Politburo session published in *Soyuz Mozhno Bylo Sokhranit': Belaya Kniga* (It was possible to preserve the union: A white book) (Moscow: Aprel'-85, 1995), 22.

<sup>9</sup> According to organizers, approximately 80,000 signatures, including tens of thousands gathered in Armenia proper, were appended to the petition. One leading organizer, Zori Balayan, erroneously reported once that "almost 100,000 people in Karabagh" signed the petition. He earlier remarked, however, that "if about 100,000 signatures have been sent, of these approximately 45,000 are from Karabagh." See Muradyan, "Glasnost and Nagorno-Karabakh," 19; Atajanian, *Pravda o Nagornom Karabakhe*, 7; *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* (Boston), 6 February 1988, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 44; and *Hye Gyank* (Los Angeles), 25 December 1987-19 February 1988, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 43.

<sup>10</sup> Malkasian, "*Gha-ra-bagh!*", 29.



workers in “nearly all of the enterprises, associations, kolkhozes, and sovkhozes in the region” passed resolutions to submit to Soviet authorities.<sup>11</sup>

This mass campaign was followed by the dispatch of three delegations to Moscow in the winter of 1987-1988. At the end of November, an initial delegation from Mountainous Karabagh presented Soviet officials with a petition signed by a representative sample of some one hundred local residents. A second delegation traveled to Moscow in January 1988 to deliver the complete petition—ten bound volumes of signatures, names, and addresses entitled *The Unification of Karabakh with Armenia*—to the Soviet government. A third delegation went to Moscow in the second week of February to further plead the Karabagh Armenians’ case.<sup>12</sup>

A series of mass demonstrations began in Mountainous Karabagh that same week. These demonstrations involved thousands of striking workers, schoolchildren and college students, and other residents of the region who gathered in the regional capital of Stepanakert and district centers to persuade district assemblies and, ultimately, the regional assembly to formally approve the petition for Mountainous Karabagh’s transfer to Armenia. The demonstrations had their first victory in Mountainous Karabagh’s southernmost district, Hadrut, where local residents held an overnight vigil to get their district assembly to approve the petition. Over the next few days, three of the remaining four district assemblies in the region and the Stepanakert city council affixed their official

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<sup>11</sup> G. A. Galoian and K. S. Khudaverdian, *Nagorni Karabakh: Istoricheskaia spravka* (Mountainous Karabagh: The historical record) (Erevan: Izdatel’svo AN Armianskoi SSR, 1988), 59. Also see Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, 10; and Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Muradyan, “Glasnost and Nagorno-Karabakh,” 20; Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 32; Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, 12.

stamps to the petition.<sup>13</sup> It was on the heels of this cascading “movement from below” that the regional assembly held its extraordinary session.

#### **IV. Abkhazia**

Four months later, a more “top-down” mobilizing effort began in Abkhazia. Sixty of the republic’s leading party and intellectual elites delivered a letter to the Soviet government asking it to consider transforming the autonomous republic into a full Soviet republic. Attached to the letter was an extensive document (in reprint, nearly seventy pages long) offering numerous justifications for this request.<sup>14</sup>

Receiving no response, eleven of the signatories of the “Abkhazian Letter” (as it came to be known) organized an association to lobby for their goal. In November 1988, they held a meeting to discuss the establishment of a People’s Forum of Abkhazia, *Aidgylara* (Unity), and subsequently requested permission from the authorities of Abkhazia’s capital city, Sukhumi, to hold its first congress the following month.<sup>15</sup> The city council quickly enthused that since the “higher party and Soviet organs” of the republic had agreed to the establishment of such an association, the initiators of the request could “consider it sanctioned.” At their December congress, participants

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<sup>13</sup> The only holdout was the district assembly of Shusha, a predominantly ethnic Azerbaijani region. See “A Chronicle of Events,” 12-13; Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 33-36; and Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> See M. Yu. Chumalov, ed., *Abkhazskii uzal: Dokumenty i materialy po etnicheskomy konfliktu v Abkhazii (vypusk vtoroi: Narodnii forum Abkhazii “Aidgylara” i ego soyuzniki 1989-1990 gg.)* (The Abkhazian knot: Documents and materials about the ethnic conflict in Abkhazia (2<sup>nd</sup> series: the Popular Forum of Abkhazia ‘Aidgilara’ and its allies, 1989-1990) (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniiu mezhnatsional’nykh otnoshenii IEA RAN, 1995), 35-103.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-120.

established *Aidgylara*'s charter, which declared that the association's commitment to the entire range of reforms proposed by the CPSU as well as the reformulation of "national relations."<sup>16</sup>

Three months later, *Aidgylara* demonstrated a spectacular ability to mobilize the republic's Abkhazian population. In mid-March, the association requested permission from authorities of the northwestern Gudauta district to convene a mass meeting on the "historical field" of Lykhnashta (near the village of Lykhny) to discuss a project concerning "the question of the autonomous republic's political status."<sup>17</sup> The association estimated that the meeting would be attended by thirty thousand people, or nearly a third of the republic's total ethnic Abkhazian population. In its response, district authorities agreed that the issue was both important and pressing and, since the meeting did not contravene the laws of the USSR or the Georgian SSR, "in either form or content," granted its permission.<sup>18</sup>

The March 18 meeting attracted as many individuals as *Aidgylara* had anticipated. In front of a crowd of tens of thousands, the entire corps of the republic's leading Abkhazian party and governmental elite (forty in all) affixed their signatures to a petition addressed to the Soviet government. Lamenting that the July 1988 Abkhazian Letter "to this day remains unaddressed," the petition requested that the government grant Abkhazia "the status of [a] Soviet Socialist Republic."<sup>19</sup>

Immediately after the Lykhny demonstration, a signature drive was initiated to gather signatures to affix to the petition. On March 24, the petition was published in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 120, 122-123.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 153.

republic's official media organ *Soviet Abkhazia*. By the end of the month, activists had acquired 32,000 signatures, gathered them into fourteen volumes, and appended them to the petition. They subsequently delivered the entire package to Soviet authorities.<sup>20</sup>

## V. South Ossetia

The South Ossetian campaign began shortly thereafter, on the editorial page of an Abkhazian newspaper. On April 4, 1989, the Gudauta district newspaper *Bzyb* (the platform for the Abkhazian Letter) published a letter by the docent of the history department of South Ossetia's Pedagogical Institute, Alan Chochiev.<sup>21</sup> In the letter, Chochiev expressed his support, along with that of a hitherto unknown organization *Adamon Nykhas*<sup>22</sup>, for the Abkhazians' effort to elevate their autonomous republic to full republican status. Praising "the courage, unity, and commitment of the Abkhazian people," Chochiev expressed hope that a "fair and final" resolution of the "Abkhazian question" would pave the way for an overall restructuring of the USSR's federal system, granting all republics and autonomous units equal status.

At first, the South Ossetian regional assembly responded negatively to the publication of Chochiev's letter. In an official statement, the assembly conveyed a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 105. The memorandum was originally published in *Sovietskaya Abkhazia* (Sukhumi), 24 March 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>21</sup> *Bzyb* (Gudauta), 4 April 1989, published in Georgian translation in *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* (Tbilisi), 5 May 1989.

<sup>22</sup> According to one Ossetian commentator, *Adamon Nykhas* was founded at the start of 1988 and was responsible for the strikes that spring which led to the firing of the regional First Secretary Feliks Sanakoev (see Chapter Four). Soltan Dzarasov, "Anatomia konflikta (Anatomy of the conflict)," in *Yuzhnaia Osetia: I krov', i pepel* (South Ossetia:

“profound disturbance with the contents and conclusions that were made” in the letter as well as Chochiev’s attempt “to ascribe his own, purely subjective views to the entire Ossetian people.” The next day the official regional newspaper *Soviet Ossetia* issued an editorial to “clarify” the situation, reasserting that the letter was the work of Chochiev alone and claiming that even the rest of the leadership of *Adamon Nykhas* (“an unregistered, informal organization”) had been unaware of its publication. *Bzyb* was, the editorial said, at fault for mistakenly “representing (the letter) as the opinion of the Ossetian people.”<sup>23</sup>

Be that as it may, considerable South Ossetian discontent did accompany the newly-announced Georgian holiday of May 26, commemorating the brief “restoration” of the Georgian state in 1918 (after the collapse of the Russian Empire). When Georgian villagers in South Ossetia mounted flags of independent Georgia, the official regional newspaper *Soviet Ossetia* reported that “a group of young people, presumably residents of Tskhinvali” ripped up the flags and, at least in one such incident, “walked through the village screaming...insults” at villagers.<sup>24</sup> According to two senior members of the Ossetian intellectual elite, Ludvig Chibirov (future South Ossetian president) and Giorgi Togoshvili, “....Ossetian society was definitely not prepared for this holiday....[F]or the majority of the Ossetian population the significance of the act of May 26, 1918 remained obscure.”<sup>25</sup>

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Blood and ashes) (Vladikavkaz: Assotsiatsia tvorcheskoi i nauchnoi intelligentsia ‘Ir,’ 1991), 26.

<sup>23</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia* (Tskhinvali), 11, 12 May 1989.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 May 1989. One source reports that they wiped their shoes with the flags and threw rocks at buses filled with Georgian passengers. See *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*, 7 July 1989, cited in Elizabeth Fuller, “The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification,” *RFE/RL Report on the USSR* 550/89 (26 November 1989).

<sup>25</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 31 May 1989.

In the summer, the regional press reported on the efforts of *Adamon Nykhas* to mobilize the South Ossetian population. In June, a member of the local intelligentsia remarked that “there are certainly people in Ossetia who support...Chochiev’s address” (although, he demurred, “few have actually read [it]”).<sup>26</sup> *Adamon Nykhas*’ official charter was published in the official regional newspaper *Soviet Ossetia* in July, accompanied by the minutes of a Young Communist meeting Chochiev had attended. At the meeting, Chochiev reiterated that all national groups in the USSR “must receive real equality” and that “we must speak about needed reforms [and] create a true parliamentary federation.”<sup>27</sup> A few days later, the organization held a demonstration in the South Ossetian town of Kvaisi. A letter published in the Georgian-language version of *Soviet Ossetia* reported that Chochiev there declared to an audience of two hundred that *Adamon Nykhas* “will attempt the separation of South Ossetia from Georgia and its unification with the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic” (located across the border in the Russian Federative republic).<sup>28</sup> By the end of July, *Adamon Nykhas* began to gain quite a following: the Ossetian authors of an “open letter” called upon Chochiev to cooperate with government organs and not turn *Adamon Nykhas* into a “parallel authority” standing between local officials and the people.<sup>29</sup>

By the start of September, however, *Adamon Nykhas* had done just that. The group, cooperating with the workers’ collectives of several local factories, announced a strike campaign that overwhelmed the region over the next several weeks. In a petition to Soviet authorities, the “workers of Ossetia and *Adamon Nykhas*” outlined the goals of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 17 June 1989. The commentary itself is dated 2 June.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 11 July 1989.

<sup>28</sup> *Sabchota Oseti* (Tskhinvali), 2 August 1989.

<sup>29</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 27 July 1989.

their campaign. These included the establishment of Ossetian as the official language of South Ossetia, a reform to establish the equal subordination of all federal units to the Soviet government, and a constitutional amendment granting autonomous units the right to separate from union republics. The petition's main request was to "discuss and resolve the problem of South and North Ossetia's unification," although petitioners allowed that given "the country's present-day political situation," the "first step" towards unification would be to upgrade South Ossetia to autonomous republican status within Georgia.<sup>30</sup> By the end of the month, the South Ossetian regional assembly agreed to meet just one of the demonstrators' demands, issuing a request for a constitutional amendment that would make Ossetian the sole official language in the region.<sup>31</sup>

This did not satisfy demonstrators, however, and protests continued unabated. After several more weeks of pressure, the assembly agreed to convene and address the demonstrators' demands. The assembly met on November 10 and, "taking into consideration the demands of strike committees,...*Adamon Nykhas*," and a host of various social groups, voted to make Ossetian South Ossetia's sole state language and to ask the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR and the Supreme Soviet of the USSR "to examine and resolve the issue of granting the South Ossetian autonomous region the status of autonomous republic." Subsequently, the strike committee directed workers to "temporarily suspend" their strike.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The petition was published in Georgian translation in *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*, 20 October 1989. The document itself is undated. Reports on the start of the campaign are in *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 6, 8, 9, and 10 September 1989.

<sup>31</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 28 September 1989.

<sup>32</sup> The regional assembly's declaration and the strike committee's response were both published in *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 13 November 1989.

## **VI. Conclusion**

That the three regional movements in the South Caucasus attracted mass followings is not in doubt. What the above descriptions do not offer, however, is an explanation for why they attracted these followings in the first place. The actions of mass publics in Mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia went far beyond what Gorbachev had intended when promoting greater public involvement in the country's political affairs. Other than Gorbachev's exhortation to get involved politically, what compelled thousands of individuals to sign petitions, go on strike, hold overnight vigils, and demonstrate in city squares and historical fields to pressure the powers that be to transform existing federal structures in their favor?

Part Two of this study offers a partial answer to this question. It discusses the collective motivations that mobilized supporters. It argues that group members were not motivated mainly to protect themselves against violence or cultural extinction, as observers often assume, but against demographic change and economic discrimination.



*Chapter Three*  
**Violence and Cultural Extinction: Red Herrings of Regional Mobilization?**

**I. Introduction**

In the world of post-Cold War conflict studies, it is common to explain the origins of ethnic conflict on the basis of fear—of armed attack, mass slaughter, ethnic cleansing, and/or cultural extinction. However, while the eventual outbreak of war in places like central Africa, Yugoslavia, and the ex-USSR may be explained by such basic anxieties, it is another question altogether whether such concerns motivated groups to organize for their political goals in the first place, before violence ever erupted.

In this chapter, I investigate this question with regards to regional mobilization in Mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Using the parameters I outlined in Chapter One—historical memories, leadership rhetoric, signals of opponent intentions, and opponent capabilities—I conclude that fear of violence did not motivate mass mobilization in Abkhazia, was at best a secondary motivation in Mountainous Karabagh, and possibly prompted mass mobilization only in South Ossetia. Two groups—Karabagh Armenians and South Ossetians—had a clear history of past violence that may have caused group members to be wary of remaining within their union republics. In all three cases, however, the organizers of regional movements hardly employed the rhetoric of fear in their justifications for action. As mobilization began, moreover, only South Ossetians actually feared an imminent attack. All three groups had some reason to fear

future attacks when their campaigns began, thanks to either their opponents' signals of intent or shifting capabilities, but for Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, the risk of such violence was at the time not very high. Intriguingly, only South Ossetians, the group that mobilized the latest (and for the least radical political change), may have mobilized initially from fear of violence.

For none of the three groups do I find that fears of cultural extinction played a role in mobilization. All three groups had experienced discriminatory cultural policies in the past. Cultural concerns were, however, only a significant part of Abkhazian rhetoric, and did not seriously figure into the claims of Karabagh Armenians or South Ossetians. At the time of mobilization, moreover, only Karabagh Armenians were actually threatened by cultural policies. These threats, however, were remediable within the existing institutional context and did not require mobilizing for political change. For their part, Abkhazians and South Ossetians had explicit opportunities to address their cultural concerns *without* pursuing political change—opportunities of which they took prompt advantage (for a weighing of the evidence in summary form, see Table 3.1 at the end of the chapter).

I now investigate the evidence for the claim that fear of violence prompted mass mobilization among Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians.

## **II. The Evidence for Violence: Mountainous Karabagh**

It is practically a truism that the Karabagh Armenian movement was a response to fears of anti-Armenian violence. To be sure, such fears had a lengthy pedigree. In 1967, a

number of Karabagh Armenians wrote a collective letter to Soviet authorities outlining a number of local grievances. Pleading for “salvation,” the letter’s authors accused Azerbaijani authorities of engaging in a series of reprisals for an earlier petition to unify Mountainous Karabagh to Armenia. These included job firings, imprisonment, and expulsion. In particular, letter writers accused authorities of failing to pursue the killers of a number of local Armenians (the letter lists six such murders).<sup>1</sup> In one case, local Armenians apprehended the killers of a ten-year-old boy who were subsequently sentenced to only five years in prison. When locals angrily protested the sentence, police reportedly beat them back with “sewage water” and opened fire, killing the father of the victim as well as eleven others.<sup>2</sup>

Reports of these killings pale in comparison to the more substantial wave of violence that occurred in Mountainous Karabagh in years past. In 1918-1920, during the brief period of Azerbaijani independence, innocent villagers and urban residents got caught in the crossfire of a war between state authorities and local rebels who sought to unify the region to neighboring Armenia.<sup>3</sup> During a battle that occurred as state troops

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<sup>1</sup> Asbarez (Fresno), 19 September 1967, excerpted in Gerard J. Libaridian, ed., *The Karabagh File: Documents and Facts on the Region of Mountainous Karabagh (1918-1988)* (Cambridge, MA: The Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), doc. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. The writers report that the crowd, “boiling with anger,” subsequently attacked and killed the criminals themselves, burning their bodies.

<sup>3</sup> Azerbaijan, together with Georgia and Armenia, declared independence from Russia and united as the Transcaucasus Federation in April 1918, six months after the Bolshevik Revolution. The Federation dissolved into three independent states the following month. Independent Azerbaijan and Armenia surrendered to Soviet troops in, respectively, April and November 1920. Georgia was able to hold out until February 1921. For English-language histories of this period, see Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia (1917-1921)* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951); Richard Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); and Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vols. 1-4 (Berkeley: University of

prepared to occupy Shusha, Mountainous Karabagh's urban center, some fifty Armenians working in the town's Azerbaijani sector were reported to have disappeared, presumably murdered.<sup>4</sup> On a greater scale, Kurdish bands (and, allegedly, Azerbaijani troops) led by the brother of the Azerbaijani-appointed regional administrator fell on the neighboring village of Khaibalikend and massacred its residents, killing an estimated 500 of 600 residents. At the time, three other villages were also destroyed.<sup>5</sup>

Violence erupted again in February 1920, when Azerbaijani troops reportedly mistook an unidentified corpse as that of a missing soldier and responded by attacking local Armenians indiscriminately, an act that had parallels in other areas. Armenians claimed that several hundred people died in this round of violence.<sup>6</sup>

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California Press, 1971, 1982, 1996, 1996); Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), chap. 9; and Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 2004), chaps. 5-6. Hovannissian's work, unparalleled in its level of detail, addresses the entire South Caucasus, not just Armenia.

<sup>4</sup>On the Armenian disappearances, see V. A. Mikayelian, ed., *Nagornyi Karabakh v 1918-1923 gg. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Mountainous Karabagh, 1918-1923: A collection of documents and materials) (Yerevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armenii, 1992), doc. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, docs. 155, 171, 180.

<sup>6</sup> While the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister admitted that killings had occurred, he indicated that only four Armenians had died in the first incident, three more had been killed in Agdam, and six had been murdered in an isolated incident by bandits. See Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, docs. 256-257, 261, 274-275, 277, 297; and Hovannissian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 3, *From London to Sevres, February-August 1920*, 142-143. In general, Karabagh Armenians accused the Azerbaijani government of indifference to violent crimes committed against them around this time. In April 1919, Karabagh Armenians claimed that "brigandage, pillage, massacres, and armed attacks on main highways constitute ordinary means by which Azerbaijan wants to realize its goals." In March 1920, they asserted that "[n]ever has the Armenian population...been victimized by so many murders....Assassins and noted bandits kill and rob in full daylight the peaceful inhabitants without the government taking any countermeasures, without criminals begin bothered." Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, docs. 10, 15; also Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, docs. 105, 257.

Finally, and most tragically, an ill-advised uprising by rebels affiliated with the Dashnaktsiutun, the Armenian nationalist movement and, at the time, ruling party, resulted in an assault of Shusha's Armenian sector by Azerbaijani troops and local residents. Most Armenian buildings and residences were burnt to the ground. Out of a population of approximately 20,000, at least several hundred were killed; the rest were forced to flee. In the fighting that followed, several nearby villages were also razed.<sup>7</sup>

This violence, moreover, stood against the backdrop of the much greater violence inflicted upon the Armenians of Ottoman Turkey just five years before. In 1915, the Armenian population of Eastern Anatolia had been decimated through mass killing and internal deportation. Given the close cooperation between the Azerbaijani and Turkish governments at the time (not to mention the ethnic affiliation of Azerbaijanis to Turks), Karabagh Armenians closely identified Azerbaijanis with the Turkish enemy. By 1919, Karabagh Armenians had already begun to castigate Azerbaijan for being "an accomplice and ally...of all the cruelties committed by the Turks against Armenians in general and against Karabagh Armenians in particular."<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, there is no denying this history of violence, nor the suspicion and bitterness to which they gave rise. Still, it is uncertain to what degree fear of violence really affected the decision-making of Karabagh Armenians in the late 1980s. Organizers of regional movements made surprisingly few references to violence in their calls to action. Only one of the eight activist sources I surveyed in the Karabagh Armenian case mentioned violence. Scientist and activist Suren Ayyvazian, the author of a March 1987

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<sup>7</sup> One Russian journalist has noted the persistence of "memories of the massacre of Armenians in Shusha" among Karabagh Armenians in the late 1980s. Yuri Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, trans. Elizabeth Rogers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 10; Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, doc. 105.

petition to Mikhail Gorbachev, referred to the string of unpunished murders from the 1960s. Updating this claim, he insisted (without citing any evidence) that “[p]eople are being attacked” in Mountainous Karabagh and that “the list of Armenians killed by Azerbaijanis is getting longer.”<sup>9</sup>

What’s more, when the Karabagh Armenian campaign began, Azerbaijan was hardly a fount of radical nationalism. While Estonians, Latvians, Armenians, Ukrainians, and even Belorussians had, by the fall of 1987, begun to seek changes to decentralize local political, economic, and cultural life, Azerbaijanis remained silent.<sup>10</sup> They were not pursuing policies that would give Azerbaijanis any amount of increased sovereignty within Azerbaijan, let alone policies that could conceivably threaten Karabagh Armenians’ physical welfare. At the time of Karabagh Armenians’ regional campaign, anti-Armenian violence in the town of Sumgait (February 1988), rallies of the newly-formed Azerbaijani Popular Front and associated anti-Armenian violence (November 1988), and attacks against Armenians in Azerbaijan’s capital city of Baku (January 1990) had all yet to occur.

Moreover, the anticipated scale of reform in the Soviet Union in 1987 was hardly so great that Karabagh Armenians could have imagined that Azerbaijanis would be able to flaunt Soviet security guarantees at will, even if they had wanted to. Later, when Soviet power did decline, we might hypothesize that Karabagh Armenians began to worry about guaranteeing their physical security. In 1987, however, the power of the

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<sup>9</sup> *Haratch* (Paris), 3-14 December 1987, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 46. Libaridian dates the memorandum from 5 March 1987.

<sup>10</sup> For details of nationalist activity in the USSR in 1987, see Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion: A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR* (New York: Free Press, 1990), chap. 16.

Soviet government was still eminently present. The notion of the region as one of “emerging anarchy,” in which Karabagh Armenians felt the need to take security into their own hands, is anachronistic.

Intriguingly, Karabagh Armenians appear to have conceded this point even after war with Azerbaijan. One journalist who traveled to Mountainous Karabagh in the mid-1990s wondered “[w]hether the Karabakh Armenians faced a real danger in 1988.” He noted that his many local informants “could not point to one” and that “prior to the events in 1988, no one suggested their lives were in danger.”<sup>11</sup>

Still, observers might point to two developments that occurred after the regional campaign began, but before it reached its climax, to support the contention that violence-related concerns played at least some role in helping mobilize Karabagh Armenians. The first of these occurred in the village of Chardakhlu in the fall of 1987, several months after the petition campaign had begun. Chardakhlu, birthplace of famed Soviet Armenian military commander Marshal Bagramyan, was not in the autonomous region proper, but Armenians considered it to be part of Mountainous Karabagh historically and geographically. In September, district authorities brought criminal charges against a long-standing and locally respected Armenian and removed him from his post as state farm director. Denouncing the decision, the local population refused to accept a replacement. After unsuccessfully trying to get villagers to convene for a mass meeting to discuss the issue, the regional administration surrounded the village with police, threatened residents with deportation, cut off energy and communications, and permitted police to beat the

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<sup>11</sup> Yo'av Karny, *Highlanders: A Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 390.

local population. A few weeks later, a similar incident occurred.<sup>12</sup> Such scenes could easily have brought back memories of earlier waves of violence as well as reminded members of the Karabagh Armenian public otherwise reluctant to mobilize that, as in the 1960s, the existence of Soviet central power was not necessarily sufficient to guarantee Armenian security if Mountainous Karabagh remained in Azerbaijan.

The second development took place in Mountainous Karabagh proper, during the week of demonstrations leading up to the regional assembly's petition. In addition to trying to peacefully persuade activists to cease their campaign, local and republican officials threatened the population with violence if they did not desist. After the Hadrut district assembly first approved the mass petition, its members were summoned to a dressing-down session at which republican officials accused them of disloyalty and threatened to cut off gas and other supplies to the district if they failed to get the crowds in line. According to two separate accounts of the meeting, officials asked Hadrut party members if they knew what would happen "if Azerbaijanis from the neighboring district arrive in your villages," mentioned that the district's population had to "pass through [the Azerbaijani districts of] Fizuli and Jebrail" in order to reach Armenia, and asked who was "going to answer for the consequences then, you know you live in a dead-end...."<sup>13</sup> A

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<sup>12</sup> *Sel'skaya zhizn* (Moscow), 24 December 1987; Igor Muradyan, "Glasnost and Nagorno-Karabakh: The Public Speaks," *Information Bulletin Glasnost*, January 1989, 20, 22 (excerpt. and trans. from *Glasnost* [Moscow], May 1988, no. 17); and G. A. Martirosian, *Moi telegrammi Gorbachevu o tragedii legendarnogo sela Chardakhli, Nagornogo Karabakha, Getashena...* (My telegrams to Gorbachev about the tragedy of the legendary villages of Chardakhlu, Mountainous Karabagh, Getashen...) (Ryazan: Ryazanskoe Armianskoe Kul'turnoe obshchestvo "Araks," 1995), 33-38, 64-69.

<sup>13</sup> V. B. Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe: Khronika Chast' I (Fevral' 1988 g.-Ianvar' 1989 g.)* (Events in Mountainous Karabagh: A chronicle, vol. 1 [February 1988-January 1989]) (Erevan: Izdatel'stvo AN ArmSSR, 1990), 35; Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, 14.



number of sources note that local officials subsequently threatened to set thousands of armed Azerbaijanis against the region if they persisted in their campaign.<sup>14</sup> As with Chardakhlu, these threats could have been interpreted by any remaining holdouts among the Karabagh Armenian population that Azerbaijanis were intent on doing them physical harm and that Soviet power would not protect them. So while the evidence does not suggest that fears of violence explain the initial mobilization of Karabagh Armenians, such fears could perhaps be invoked to explain its growing strength from the fall of 1987 on.

### **III. The Evidence for Violence: Abkhazia**

It is more difficult to establish a link between violence-related concerns and regional mobilization among Abkhazians. Modern Abkhazian-Georgian relations contain little history of intergroup violence. It is a standard cliché of Abkhazian historiography, for example, that forces of the independent Georgian state of 1918-1921 occupied Abkhazia “by fire and sword.” At the time, Abkhazian Bolsheviks and their families were the target of repression; many were arrested, evicted, or subjected to the confiscation of

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<sup>14</sup> See Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 36; “A Chronicle of Events 1920-1988 in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Information Bulletin Glasnost*, 13; “Tucha v gorakh,” *Avrora*, No. 10, 1988, reprinted in V. A. Atajanian, ed., *Pravda o Nagornom Karabakhe* (The truth about Mountainous Karabagh) (Stepanakert: Izdatel'stvo “Artsakh,” 1989), 73; and A. Sabirov, “NKAO: Gor'kie plodyi zastoia (Mountainous Karabagh: The bitter fruits of stagnation),” *Izvestia* (Moscow), 13 July 1988, reprinted in Atajanian, *Pravda o Nagornom Karabakhe*, 66.

property or the destruction of homes.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, in an overzealous response to the unauthorized landing of ethnic Abkhazian soldiers from Turkey, a number of innocent peasants were arrested and the houses of “unreliable” villagers destroyed. A detachment of Cossacks, temporarily deployed as members of the Georgian army, plundered homes and reportedly raped local women.<sup>16</sup> Still, such violence was nowhere near the scale of that which occurred in Mountainous Karabagh; Abkhazian sources do not record any significant instance of non-combatant deaths during this period.

During the Stalinist era, Abkhazians may have suffered in greater proportion to their total numbers than did Georgians or other ethnic groups of the USSR. They were fortunate not to have suffered collective deportation, as did other small ethnic groups nearby in the North Caucasus.<sup>17</sup> Still, for a population as small as the Abkhazians (56,000 by the 1939 census), the total number of repressed during the entire Stalinist period was undoubtedly devastating. One 1988 newspaper article noted that during Stalin’s “great

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, G. Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii, 1910-1921* (Sketches on the history of Abkhazia, 1910-1921) (Tbilisi: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo 'Sabchota Sakartvelo,' 1963), 201-204.

<sup>16</sup> Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 208-211. Also see Jemal Gamakharia and Badri Gogia, eds., *Abkhazia—istoricheskaiia oblast' Gruzii: istoriografiia, dokumenti i materialy, kommentarii (s drevneishykh vremen do 30-x godov XX veka)* (Abkhazia—a historical region of Georgia: Historiography, documents and materials, commentary [from ancient times until the 1930s]) (Tbilisi: Aghdoma, 1997), 83-84, docs. 232 (n. 3), 233 (and n. 2), 234 (n. 2).

<sup>17</sup> The “punished peoples” included the Karachai, Balkars, Chechens, and Ingush of the North Caucasus, the Kalmyks, the Volga Germans, the Crimean Tatars, and the Meskhetians of Georgia, not to mention large percentages of Balts, Ukrainians, and others. Under Khrushchev, the North Caucasian peoples and the Kalmyks were allowed to return to their homelands; the Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, and Meskhetians were not. See Nahaylo and Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion*, 80, 96-99, 125-26. Also see Robert Conquest, *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* (London: Macmillan, 1970); and A. M. Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples: The Deportation and Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War*, trans. George Saunders (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978).

purge” of the USSR’s political and intellectual elite in 1937-38 alone, 2,186 Abkhazians were arrested and 794 shot.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike in Mountainous Karabagh, there are no reports of anti-Abkhazian violence after the Stalinist period, however. Mass protests against Georgian policies were held in Abkhazia three times during the Soviet period (in 1957, 1967 and 1978). As well, Soviet Abkhazian political life was marked by a regular stream of petitions, ranging from a few signatories to as many as 130, registering various complaints regarding Georgian rule. None of these ever resulted in violent suppression.

That said, the two sources of rhetoric I use for the case of Abkhazia—the Abkhazian Letter of 1988 and the memorandum of March 1989 (see Chapter Two)—each contained two somewhat lengthier references to violence than any made by Karabagh Armenian activists. Both alluded to military actions against Abkhazians by the armed forces of independent Georgia. The Abkhazian Letter noted that the ruling Social Democratic (or “Menshevik”) party at the time engaged in “savage terror and repressions” in Abkhazia. The March memorandum also asserted that Menshevik-ruled Georgia engaged in a “policy of terror” in Abkhazia.<sup>19</sup>

Both the Abkhazian Letter and the memorandum also detailed the later effects of Stalin’s “great terror” in Abkhazia, personalized by Stalin’s commissar in the Caucasus

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<sup>18</sup> Bzyb (Gudauta), 23 June 1988, cited in I. Marykhuba, ed., *Abkhazskie pis'ma (1947-1989): Sbornik dokumentov. Tom 1* (Abkhazian letters [1947-1989]: A collection of documents, vol. 1) (Sukhum [Sukhumi]: Izdatel'skii tsentr' El'-fa, 1994), 66.

<sup>19</sup> M. Yu. Chumalov, ed., *Abkhazskii uzal: Dokumenty i materialy po etnicheskomy konfliktu v Abkhazii (vypusk vtoroi: Narodnii forum Abkhazii "Aidgilara" i ego soyuzniki 1989-1990 gg.)* (The Abkhazian knot: Documents and materials about the ethnic conflict in Abkhazia (2<sup>nd</sup> series: the Popular Forum of Abkhazia 'Aidgilara' and its allies, 1989-1990) (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniiu mezhnatsional'nykh otnoshenii IEA RAN, 1995), 40, 110. The memorandum was originally published in *Sovietskaya Abkhazia* (Sukhumi), 24 March 1989.

from 1931 to 1938, the Georgian (specifically, Mingrelian<sup>20</sup>) Lavrentii Beria. The Letter accused Beria of establishing “a blatant terrorist dictatorship” in Abkhazia and of orchestrating the “physical destruction of the Abkhazian intelligentsia.” It even claimed that Abkhazians suffered “genocide” during Beria’s tenure.<sup>21</sup> The memorandum concurred, blaming Beria for engaging in “violent” policies in Abkhazia. It noted how

“hundreds of peasants were taken away from Abkhazian villages in literally one night [with] fantastic accusations leveled against them. Writers, scholars, engineers, doctors, teachers—practically the entire newborn Abkhazian intelligentsia was torn up by the roots. Notable governmental and social figures of Abkhazia were destroyed. For such a small people like the Abkhazians, these were unbearable losses.”

To underline its point that the repressions against Abkhazians were particularly burdensome, the memorandum noted that eighty percent of the total number of repressed in Abkhazia were ethnic Abkhazians, at a time when the latter made up only 18% of the republic’s total population.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the possibility of new violence, however, Abkhazian activists made no mention. In the spring of 1988, before the Abkhazian Letter was sent to Soviet authorities, some Georgian dissident nationalists had begun to seek greater powers for their republic. By the time of the mass Abkhazian demonstration in March 1989, these

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<sup>20</sup> The Mingrelians are an ethnic Georgian subgroup from Mingrelia, a region in western Georgia that borders on Abkhazia.

<sup>21</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 62, 70.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

dissidents had organized two large protest marches in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi; the second of these, in November 1988, attracted an estimated 100,000 participants.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, by the end of 1988, Abkhazians had been able to witness instances of anti-minority violence in Azerbaijan (as well as less-publicized instances of anti-Azerbaijani violence in Armenia). Abkhazians thus faced the prospects of a strengthening republican power at the same time that they faced the prospects of a weakening security guarantee. For them, the concept of “emerging anarchy” began to have meaning.

Still, the shifting relative capabilities that Georgian mobilization and a weakening of Soviet power implied, however, does not mean that Abkhazians necessarily feared Georgian-propagated violence. Any implicit comparison between the threat of violence posed by the new Georgian nationalist movement and that of past regimes was simply not very potent. Independent Georgia, which the nationalist movement sought to emulate, had after all not inflicted any great amount of violence against Abkhazians. The Stalinist period might have provided some basis for fears of Georgian-instigated violence—Stalin and Beria were, after all, both Georgians—but Georgian nationalists were not saying or doing anything that would suggest they planned to emulate these icons of Soviet totalitarian rule, icons they themselves vigorously opposed. Generally, by the time the Abkhazians issued their petition to upgrade their political status in March 1989, Georgians had not engaged in any acts of violence against Abkhazians or issued any threats of violence. Georgian nationalist rhetoric may have been crude and insensitive at times, raising other concerns among Abkhazians (see Chapter Four). It was not, however, a rhetoric of violent oppression.

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<sup>23</sup> See Elizabeth Fuller, “Independent Political Groupings in Georgia,” *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin* 527/88 (25 November 1988).

#### IV. The Evidence for Violence: South Ossetia

Ironically, of our three cases, a link between violence and mobilization is easiest to construct in the case of South Ossetia—where regional mobilization came latest and was the most restrained. The violence of the pre-Soviet period in South Ossetia was on the level of that which had occurred in Mountainous Karabagh. During a March 1918 uprising inspired by local Bolsheviks, the Georgian official in charge of restoring order in the region threatened to shoot “ten or one hundred” Ossetian peasants if they did not surrender.<sup>24</sup> During and after the rebellion, members of the Transcaucasus National Guard (mainly composed of, and run by, Georgians) were accused of pillaging homes and beating and arresting peasants who were not involved in the rebellion.<sup>25</sup> Following a subsequent rebellion in June 1920, in which the Bolsheviks managed to occupy the entire region, the National Guard responded with indiscriminate force. Not only were thirteen of the leading rebels executed, scores of villages were burned to the ground and thousands pressured to flee.<sup>26</sup> Out of a pre-conflict population of over seventy thousand, at least ten

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<sup>24</sup> I. N. Tskhovrebov, ed., *Bor'ba trudyashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii za Sovetskuyu vlast' (Dokumenty i materialy)* (The struggle of the working masses of South Ossetia for Soviet power [Documents and materials], 2nd ed.) (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]: Gosizdat Yugo-Osetii Tskhovrebov, 1960), doc. 10; B. Z. Pliev, *Bor'ba trudyashchikhsya Yuzhnoi Osetii za Sovetskuyu vlast' v 1917-1921 gg.* (The struggle of the working masses of South Ossetia for Soviet power, 1917-1921) (Tskhinvali: Izdatel'stvo Iriston, 1977), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Tskhovrebov, *Bor'ba trudyashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 14; I. D. Nikonov, *Krest'yanskie vosstaniia v Yugo-Osetii v 1917-1920 gg.* (The peasant uprisings in South Ossetia, 1917-1920) (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]: Stalinirskaia tipografia Gruzglavizdata, 1956), 27-28, 34; Pliev, *Bor'ba trudyashchikhsya*, 78, 88; V. D. Tskhovrebov and M. P. Sanakoev, *Yuzhnaya Osetia v period tryokh revoliutsii (1900-1921 gg.)* (South Ossetia in the period of three revolutions [1900-1921]) (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1981), 192, 196.

<sup>26</sup> Nikonov, *Krest'yanskie vosstaniia*, 61; Pliev, *Bor'ba trudyashchikhsya*, 240, 242.

thousand crossed over to the North Caucasus and another fifteen thousand took refuge in the mountains.<sup>27</sup> Approximately five thousand perished as a result of the conflict, including refugees who died of starvation and illness. This constituted six to seven percent of the total South Ossetian population at the time.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For population estimates, see Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya*, 230; Nikonov, *Krest'yanskii vosstaniia*, 102; and Tskhovrebov, *Bor'ba trudyashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, docs. 23, 160; and V. Abaev, *Ekonomicheskoe razvitie Yugo-Osetii v period kapitalizma (1864-1917-1921 gg.)* (The economic development of South Ossetia in the period of capitalism [1864-1917-1921]) (Tbilisi: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk GSSR, 1956), 102.

Refugee estimates come from Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya*, 247. At the start of July 1920, South Ossetian Bolsheviks noted that “tens of thousands of refugees” had crossed over the Caucasus and that “over fifteen thousand are hiding out” in the mountains. In September 1920, they indicated that the refugees in the North Caucasus numbered “more than twenty thousand.” Additional sources report that up to twenty thousand refugees fled across the border and another twenty thousand took refuge in the mountains. See Tskhovrebov, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, docs. 94, 96, 118; Nikonov, *Krest'yanskii vosstaniia*, 65; and Tskhovrebov and Sanakoev, *Yuzhnaya Osetia*, 210.

Georgian scholars do not dispute these numbers. Avtandil Menteshashvili quotes, without dispute, a South Ossetian telegram to Lenin and Chicherin reporting that 24 villages were burned down and that twenty thousand Ossetians had fled to the North Caucasus, while a 1995 work defending the Georgian position takes issue with exaggerated numbers of refugees, albeit quoting with approval a South Ossetian source which claims that there were twenty thousand refugees in all. Avtandil Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki sovremennogo separatizma v Gruzii* (Historical roots of modern separatism in Georgia) (Tbilisi: Tipografia Tbilisskogo universiteta, 1998), 269; Giorgi Jorjoliani et al., eds., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. V. Amiranishvili (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1995), 8.

<sup>28</sup> According to a 1928 report, more than four thousand of the dead perished of hunger, cold, and disease; more than six hundred were killed outright. See Nikonov, *Krest'yanskii vosstaniia*, 62; Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya*, 251; Tskhovrebov, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 172; and Abaev, *Ekonomicheskoe razvitie Yugo-Osetii*, 114.

As with the number of refugees, Georgian scholars do not dispute the number of Ossetian deaths in this incident. Jorjoliani cites an Ossetian source which notes that six thousand people died “in battle and especially from epidemic,” while denying exaggerated claims that more than five thousand were killed and another thirteen thousand died of hunger, cold, and disease. Jorjoliani et al., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects*, 8-9.

Despite such a potent history of violence, the Soviet period itself was not marked by any instance of anti-Ossetian violence. Moreover, of the several sources I surveyed for the South Ossetian case, only two contained brief references to violence. The manifesto of the nationalist organization *Adamon Nykhas* claimed that the region bore “heavy physical, economic, and moral losses” during the Menshevik “epoch of terror.”<sup>29</sup> Updating this concern, a speaker at a June 1989 rally in the town of Kvaisi claimed that there was a “real threat” Georgians would attempt armed attacks against South Ossetians.<sup>30</sup>

Buttressing this claim was the fact that when South Ossetians finally initiated their campaign in mid-1989, the Georgian nationalist movement had already begun to openly represent itself as the successor to the independent Georgian regime. Similar to nationalist Croatians waving the flag of the Nazi-allied Ustashe regime, the appropriation of the symbols of the independent Georgian state by nationalist Georgians was sure to trouble South Ossetians. Independent Georgia had committed a great crime against them; to model a nationalist movement after that state without acknowledging this act, let alone apologizing for it, constituted a massive affront to the South Ossetians at best and a sinister threat at worst.<sup>31</sup> When South Ossetians responded negatively to the introduction of a May 26 holiday commemorating the 1918 “restoration of the Georgian state” (see

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<sup>29</sup> *Leninskoe Znamya* (Tbilisi), 24 October 1989, reprinted in *Sovietskaya Osetia* (Tskhinvali), 14 November 1989.

<sup>30</sup> *Sabchota Oseti* (Tskhinvali), 2 August 1989.

<sup>31</sup> South Ossetian historiography assiduously recorded this affair throughout the Soviet period. As one Ossetian observer later put it, “[t]he tragedy of 1920 is recalled in every Ossetian home, even children know about it.” Igor Dzantiev, “Svobodu naroda zadushit’ nevozmozhno (The freedom of the people is impossible to strangle),” in *Yuzhnaia Osetia: I krov’, i pepel* (South Ossetia: Blood and ashes) (Vladikavkaz: Assotsiatsia tvorcheskoi i nauchnoi intelligentsia ‘Ir,’ 1991), 47.



Chapter Two), two senior members of the Ossetian intellectual elite, Ludvig Chibirov and Giorgi Togoshvili, sought to explain the “unfortunate misperceptions and excesses” of the day, noting that people in the region believed that the celebration of the holiday in South Ossetia amounted to an “idealization of the repressions against Ossetians in 1919-1920.”<sup>32</sup> As well, when the regional Party committee held a meeting two days before the holiday to discuss South Ossetia’s participation in celebrations, “speakers remarked that it is not possible for attitudes regarding [the 1918 establishment of the Georgian state] to be of one mind” and “expressed a desire [to engage in] a realistic assessment...of this event.” Participants of an official forum convened to positively commemorate the Georgian holiday ended up alluding to the anti-Ossetian violence associated with the day. “Our task as historians,” one participant said, “is to clarify the progressive significance of this event, though the government was against the people and cruelly dealt with the red partisans not only in different regions of Georgia but in South Ossetia as well.”<sup>33</sup>

Subsequently, fears of anti-Ossetian violence increased. In the summertime, rumors that armed Georgians were planning to attack South Ossetia were not only spread at isolated protest demonstrations. A joint appeal of Ossetians and Georgians in July 1989 denounced rumors that armed groups of Georgians were planning to “fall on” population

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<sup>32</sup> They even provided a brief description of the event: “Since repressions did not break the resistance of Ossetians, the government decided to eliminate the Ossetian population of South Ossetia....As a result of the government forces’ punitive operations, 5,500 Ossetians were killed, tens of settlements were burned and destroyed. Of the population which fled to North Ossetia thousands perished from hunger, cold, and disease.” *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 31 May 1989.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 May 1989, 29 May 1989.

centers in South Ossetia and warned that the popular mood in the region “bordered on psychosis.”<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the situation in Georgia at the start of the South Ossetian campaign most closely resembled a state of “emerging anarchy.” By the summer of 1989, the Georgian nationalist movement had consolidated around the goal of independence. As well, the Soviet central government had by then clearly demonstrated its inability or unwillingness to prevent interethnic violence: in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and even, with fatal clashes in July, in Abkhazia itself (see Chapter Seven). South Ossetians could thus have easily feared they were in the process of losing the central security guarantee represented by the Soviet state. More than Abkhazians or even Karabagh Armenians, therefore, South Ossetians had a plausible motivation for action based on the fear of violence.

If fear of violence did encourage South Ossetians to mobilize, this would support the claim (discussed in Chapter One) that different motivations can propel groups to similar actions. Depending on the purpose one has for studying conflict, the conclusion reached would be either that it is unnecessary to focus on collective motivations to explain separatist mobilization—as the outcome is the same regardless of the motivation—or that a more nuanced approach to conflict must be adopted—as a “one size fits all” approach leads to improper prescriptions for conflict prevention and resolution in a given case.

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<sup>34</sup> *Zarya Vostoka* (Tbilisi), 23 July 1989. The translation of the Russian phrase *myi stoim na grani psykhoza* is from Elizabeth Fuller, “The South Ossetian Campaign for Unification,” *RFE/RL Report on the USSR* 550/89 (26 November 1989), 18.

Before determining whether the motivations for all three cases were “more similar” or “more different,” however, we must examine three more hypothesized motivations. The next is the fear of cultural extinction.

## **V. The Evidence for Cultural Extinction: Mountainous Karabagh**

In their rhetoric, the organizers of the Karabagh Armenian campaign made more references to cultural threats than they did to violence. Ayvazian claimed that Armenian historical monuments were being destroyed or appropriated as Azerbaijani relics and that references to Armenian monuments had been expunged from Azerbaijani guidebooks. He also noted that Armenian “writers, scientists, and cultural workers” who traveled to Mountainous Karabagh from the Armenian republic were “labeled as dispute promoters and pursued overtly or covertly.” Finally, he indicated that republican authorities “try, as rapidly as possible, to Azerbaijanize this ‘foreign’ region, to eliminate its Armenian spirit, and the atmosphere is characterized by pressure and harassment.”<sup>35</sup> In an interview with a diaspora newspaper, the well-known Soviet correspondent Zori Balayan (a transplanted Karabagh Armenian living in Armenia) complained that schools in Mountainous Karabagh were administered by the Azerbaijani republic’s Ministry of Education, “in which there isn’t a single inspector or a single person who knows Armenian.”<sup>36</sup>

According to various sources, the empirical basis for cultural concerns in Mountainous Karabagh was even broader than activists allowed. Mountainous Karabagh

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<sup>35</sup> *Haratch*, 3-14 December 1987.

<sup>36</sup> *Hye Gyank* (Los Angeles), 25 December 1987-19 February 1988, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 43.

received no television broadcasts from Armenia, limiting the population's exposure of Armenian-language television to one local station. The region's educational budget had gradually declined, with many Armenian-language schools closed and Armenian-language classes permitted only a few old textbooks (classes for Karabagh Armenians were otherwise taught in Russian, not Azerbaijani). Armenian history was not taught in the region's schools.<sup>37</sup>

Above all these concerns lay a potentially more significant (and particular) threat. This was an official scholarly endeavor to rewrite the history of Karabagh Armenians' ethnic roots.<sup>38</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of works were published by Azerbaijani scholars on the history and geography of Caucasian Albania, an ancient kingdom and province now part of Azerbaijan (and overlain, in part, by Mountainous Karabagh).<sup>39</sup> Ignoring references of medieval Albanian historians to their ethnic Armenian (if, politically, Albanian statist) identity, these studies argued that the inhabitants of

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<sup>37</sup> Grigor Avakian, *Nagornyi Karabakh: Otvet fal'sifikatoram* (Mountainous Karabagh: An answer to the falsifiers) (Erevan: Hayastan, 1991), 24; Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 23, 31; Mark Malkasian, "Gha-ra-bagh!": *The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 27; Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 27-28; A. N. Yamskov, "Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh," *Theory and Society* 20 (1991): 643; S. Dardykin and R. Lynev, "Meetings after the rallies. Report from our correspondents in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Izvestia* (Moscow), 24 March 1988, trans. in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 26 March 1988.

<sup>38</sup> In addition to the primary references below (n. 39-42), treatments of this debate can be found in Nora Dudwick, "The Case of the Caucasian Albanians: Ethnohistory and Ethnic Politics," *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 31, no. 2-3 (1990): 377-384; Karny, *Highlanders*, 371-387; and Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 151-157.

<sup>39</sup> Z. Buniyatov, *Azerbaijan v VII-IX vv.* (Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries) (Baku, 1965); K. Aliev, *Kavkazskaia Albania (I v. do n. e. – I v. n. e.)* (Caucasian Albania, 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. – 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.) (Baku, 1974); F. D. Mamedova, *Istoria alban' Moiseia Kalankatuiskogo kak istochnik po obshchestvennomu stroiu rannesrednevekovoi Albanii* (Moses Kalankatuatsi's 'History of the Albanians' as a source for the social organization of Albania in the early middle ages) (Baku, 1977).

Karabagh Albania were, throughout the Middle Ages, exclusively members of a distinct Albanian ethnic group who retained their identity for centuries until eventually assimilating into either Azerbaijani or Armenian identity. The implication was that the Armenians of Mountainous Karabagh were not members of a distinct ethnic group at all but were, rather, the “primeval” brethren of Azerbaijanis.

This project was not some scholarly quirk. A decade after this wave of publications emerged, one of the original authors, Farida Mamedova, published a new monograph on the same theme.<sup>40</sup> Mamedova’s monograph was published in 1986, just before the Karabagh Armenians initiated their campaign. Subsequently, two leading Azerbaijan historians published positive reviews of Mamedova’s study.<sup>41</sup> Considering that the reemergence of this thesis coincided with the introduction of glasnost, for Karabagh Armenians Gorbachev’s reforms now implied not only the possibility of political change but also a renewed threat to their national history.

While such a theory may have insulted the sensibilities of Karabagh Armenians, however, it is unclear to what extent it actually constituted a threat of cultural extinction. The “Albanian theory” was not hegemonic. Scholars in Armenia offered ready counters to the thesis that Karabagh Armenians could utilize to defend their own version of

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<sup>40</sup> F. Mamedova, *Politicheskaia istoria i istoricheskaia geografia Zakavkazskoi Albanii (III v. do n. e. – VIII v. n. e.)* (The political history and historical geography of Transcaucasian Albania, 3rd century B.C. – 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) (Baku, 1986). Mamedova’s findings are summarized in F. Mamedova, “O nekotorykh voprosakh istoricheskoi geografii Albanii I-VIII vv. (Several issues concerning the historical geography of Albania, 1<sup>st</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.),” in *Istoricheskaia geografia Azerbaidzhan* (Historical geography of Azerbaijan), eds. Z. M. Bunyatov et al. (Baku: Izdatel’stvo Elm, 1987), 7-45.

<sup>41</sup> I. Aliev, “Seriozniy vklad v albanistiku (A serious contribution to Albanian studies),” *Izvestia AN Azerbaidzhan*, 1986, no. 4, 111-114; and Z. Bunyatov, “Metsenatstvuyushchii apologet (A blind apologist),” *Izvestia AN Azerbaidzhan*, 1987, no. 4, 133-136.

Karabagh Armenian ethnic history.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the Azerbaijani thesis was simply that Karabagh Armenians and Azerbaijanis descended from the same original people. This did not imply that Azerbaijanis sought to turn Karabagh Armenians into (Turkic) Azerbaijanis, simply that they were “originally” more related to Azerbaijanis than they were to the rest of the Armenian nation. Such a theory may have been offensive to Karabagh Armenians, but as Chapter Five will show, it was more of an actual threat for political reasons than for cultural ones.

As for their other cultural concerns, Karabagh Armenians could have addressed them within existing political structures. Balayan, for example, had claimed there were no Armenian-language inspectors in Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Education. If this was correct, it was sensible for him to assert that this “is a very dangerous thing and it is harming us. Therefore the struggle will not stop until that question is resolved.” His next assertion, however, did not follow: “And there’s only one solution to that question.

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<sup>42</sup> See S. Mnatsakanian and P. S. Sevak, “Po povodu knigi Z. Buniatova ‘Azerbaijan v VII-IX vv.’ (Concerning Z. Buniatova’s ‘Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries’)”, *Istoriko-filologicheskii zhurnal*, 1967, no. 1; B. A. Arutiunian, “Administrativno-politicheskoe sostoianie severo-vostochnykh oblastei tsarstva velikoi Armenii v 387-451 gg. (The administrative-political composition of the northeast regions of the Greater Armenian kingdom, 387-451)”, *Vestnik Erevanskogo universiteta*, 1976, no. 2; B. A. Ulubabian, “Eshche odna proizvol’naia interpretatsia armianskoi ‘Istorii strani Agvank’ (Yet another interpretation of the Armenian ‘History of Agvank’)”, *Vestnik arkhivov Armenii*, 1979, no. 2; A. A. Akopian, M. M. Muradian, and K. N. Yuzbashian, “K izucheniu istorii Kavkazskoi Albanii (Towards a study of the history of Caucasian Albania)”, *Istoriko-filologicheskii zhurnal* (Yerevan), 1987, no. 3; and B. A. Arutiunian, “Kogda otsutstvuet nauchnaia dobrosovestnost’ (When scientific conscientiousness is absent)”, *Vestnik obshchestvennykh nauk AN Armianskoi SSR* (Yerevan), 1987, no. 7, all reprinted in P. M. Muradyan et al., *K osveshcheniiu problem istorii i kul’turi Kavkazskoi Albanii i vostochnykh provintsii Armenii, tom I* (Towards an understanding of the problems of the history and culture of Caucasian Albania and the western provinces of Armenia, vol. 1) (Erevan: Izdatel’sstvo erevanskogo universiteta, 1991), 296-310, 16-36, 321-397.

Karabagh...must enter within the jurisdiction of the Armenian Republic. I do not see any other solution....”<sup>43</sup>

But why was unification the “only” solution to such concerns? By late 1987, the Soviet government had already expressed a commitment to cultural reform in several republics.<sup>44</sup> Refusing to address the ethnic grievances of Karabagh Armenians was going to be a losing strategy for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis had never sought to assimilate Armenians, just to hinder the development of their own distinct culture. Under *glasnost*, this policy would be difficult to maintain.

## **VI. The Evidence for Cultural Extinction: Abkhazia**

For Abkhazians, the picture was more complex. Abkhazian complaints about Georgian assimilation had deep roots. In the Stalinist period, authorities made an effort to forcibly shift Abkhazians from a Russophile to a Georgophile population. First, the Abkhazian alphabet was shifted from a Cyrillic orthography to a Georgian one. Then, after World War II, Beria ordered the elimination of Abkhazian language from schools and a transition from Russian to Georgian as the primary language of instruction (for Abkhazians, education was in Abkhazian in early grades and then in Russian).<sup>45</sup> At the

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<sup>43</sup> *Hye Gyank*, 25 December 1987-19 February 1988.

<sup>44</sup> See Nahaylo and Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion*, 269-273.

<sup>45</sup> See B. E. Sagaria, ed., *Abkhazia: Dokumenti svidetel'stvuyut, 1937-1953 gg. Sbornik materialov* (Abkhazia: The documents lay witness, 1937-1953. A collection of materials) (Sukhum [Sukhumi]: Alashara, 1992), 13-14, 481-486; and Rachel Clogg, “Documents from the KGB archive in Sukhum. Abkhazia in the Stalin years,” *Central Asian Survey* 14, no. 1 (1995): 162. While the actual decree indicated that one course in Abkhazian language and literature would be preserved, the 1947 letter by three Abkhazian intellectuals indicated that even this was not the case in the republic’s urban centers and that in other schools the quality of teaching was low. They also noted that Abkhazian language and literature had been removed as a subject from the Sukhumi pedagogical

time, not only did Abkhazian intellectuals write letters of complaint to the Soviet government, internal security agents reported discontent among the Abkhazian population at large, including soldiers, managers, administrators, and parents (with many of the latter refusing to send their children to the “reorganized” schools).<sup>46</sup>

This problem was, however, largely resolved after Khrushchev’s rise to power. His new administration openly condemned the “forced assimilation” of the Stalinist period, bilingual Abkhazian-Russian schools were re-opened, and Russian once again took its central place in the republic.<sup>47</sup> In 1977, 130 members of the Abkhazian elite sent a letter to the Soviet government detailing various grievances against Georgian authorities and asking for a reconsideration of Abkhazia’s autonomous status. Faced with mass protests and pressure from the central government to resolve the issue, the Georgian government agreed to enact a sweeping array of reforms in Abkhazia. The reforms included measures to establish new Abkhazian-language television and radio stations, increase the number of Abkhazian-language books and magazines, and create a State Folk Dance Ensemble.<sup>48</sup> In the years that followed, Georgian authorities gave no signal they were planning to reverse this trend of Abkhazian cultural development. Subsequently, as the authors of a 1985 petitioned complained, Abkhazian children did not have the same opportunities to develop facility in their native language as did Georgian

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institute, that Abkhazian language had begun to disappear from the press, that it had been eliminated entirely from radio, and that the government had ordered that all official documentation be published only in Georgian and Russian. Darrell Slider reports that Abkhazian language radio, journals, and press were also eliminated at the time. Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 82-84; Darrell Slider, “Crisis and Response in Soviet Nationality Policy: The Case of Abkhazia,” *Central Asian Survey* 4, no. 4 (1985): 53.

<sup>46</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 81-86, 91-92; Clogg, “Documents from the KGB archive,” 164-166, 172-73.

<sup>47</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 115-117.

<sup>48</sup> Slider, “Crisis and Response,” 63.



children.<sup>49</sup> This, however, resulted from the dominance of Russian language in Abkhazia, not something for which Abkhazians could blame Georgians.

Still, Abkhazian organizers accused Georgians at length of engaging in a century-old policy of linguistic assimilation with the aim of blocking the development of the Abkhazian language and replacing Russian (the Abkhazians' main literary and professional language) with Georgian. They claimed that this policy emerged at the start of the century, when the Georgian church expanded its activities into Abkhazia (previously a venue for Russian Orthodox missionaries), and continued in independent Georgia, when the government liquidated the Cyrillic-based Abkhazian alphabet on the grounds that it was “artificial,” permitted only Georgian to be spoken at official functions, and, generally, pursued the “Georgianization” of Abkhazians.<sup>50</sup>

Abkhazian organizers noted that efforts at linguistic assimilation continued after the establishment of Soviet power. The Abkhazian Letter claimed that Georgians did not give up “the struggle” to establish the “supreme influence [of the Georgian language] on Abkhazian territory.” It argued that while Soviet Abkhazia enjoyed three official languages—Abkhazian, Russian, and Georgian—the inclusion of Abkhazian was a “fictional defense” that legitimized the increased use of Georgian in the republic. The Letter then explained how in 1937 (at the start of Stalin’s purges), the Abkhazian alphabet again shifted from Cyrillic to Georgian orthography and how, at the end of World War II, Abkhazian schools were transformed into Georgian-language schools.<sup>51</sup> The memorandum referred to the Stalinist period as a time of “repression...not only of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>50</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 72, 73, 110.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 75, 79, 83.

people (but of) the Abkhazian language...native geographic names, [and] the Abkhazian alphabet...”<sup>52</sup>

Even though organizers acknowledged the situation was remedied after Stalin’s death, they claimed that the Georgians never gave up their intent to assimilate the Abkhazians. The Letter stated that official visitors to Abkhazia still “do not recognize” Russian as the language of interethnic communication, insisting instead on speaking Georgian, and that Abkhazian government bodies often receive materials from Tbilisi only in Georgian. It indicated, moreover, that the struggle for Georgian language dominance was beginning to succeed: young Party workers “are obliged” to study Georgian, as “their future depends on it.” In conclusion, the Letter attacked Georgia’s alleged policy of linguistic assimilation as “not only an anachronism but a total appearance of national egoism and chauvinism towards other peoples.”<sup>53</sup>

The March memorandum updated the situation through 1989. By March, the memorandum noted, Georgians had already begun to carry out “open propaganda [demanding] the Georgianization of the non-Georgian population of the republic.”<sup>54</sup> As evidence, the memorandum quoted from an article in the Georgian press: “The non-Georgian...must know how to speak, write, and read Georgian, must be raised on Georgian literature, must be a sympathizer of the Georgian soul and, in the end, does not need to consider himself a citizen of Georgia if he does not have all this.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 82, 83.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 113-14, quoting A. Silagadze in *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* (Tbilisi), 11 November 1988.

Despite such extreme rhetoric, in the context of Gorbachev's reforms the possibility that new attempts were going to be made to forcibly "Georgianize" Abkhazians linguistically was not that high. Revealingly, Abkhazian organizers complained that Abkhazians were learning Georgian in order to improve their educational and professional prospects, not that the government was preventing Abkhazians from gaining proficiency in their own native tongue.

Even the increase in Georgian nationalist legislation after the Abkhazian Letter was issued in 1988 did not constitute a threat of cultural extinction. A draft of a new State Program on the Georgian Language was unveiled for discussion in November 1988.<sup>56</sup> This program sought to further develop the use of Georgian language in the republic as well as stimulate an increased knowledge of Georgian among the republic's minorities. The draft program mandated the creation of "favorable conditions...in all offices and enterprises" for non-Georgians to study Georgian. It also required that "all middle schools" in the republic possess a division of Georgian language and literature, ordering that "concrete proposals" for introducing mandatory Georgian language instruction in "non-Georgian" schools be worked out.<sup>57</sup> While the Program intended for Georgia's minorities to learn Georgian, it explicitly provided for the maintenance of "non-Georgian" schools in which minority languages and Russian would be taught and used.

Just as Karabagh Armenians could have mobilized to defend their cultural rights within Soviet Azerbaijan, Abkhazians rapidly responded to the Georgian State Program

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<sup>56</sup> The draft program on the Georgian language was published in Georgian in *Komunisti* (Tbilisi), 3 November 1988, and in Russian in *Zarya Vostoka*, 5 November 1988.

<sup>57</sup> In the final draft of the State Program the ethnic targeting of this clause was dropped, so that it referred not to the teaching of Georgian to "non-Georgians" but simply to individuals "who do not know Georgian." *Zarya Vostoka*, 25 August 1989.

with a policy to protect their own cultural rights. Two days after a draft of the Georgian State Language Program was published in *Soviet Abkhazia*, the Abkhazian government announced the establishment of a committee to develop a parallel project for the development of the Abkhazian language.<sup>58</sup> That project sought, among other things, to promote the development and use of the Abkhazian language in Abkhazia and offer courses in Abkhazian “to those who desire” to study it in the republic’s schools and university. The project was unveiled in January 1989 and was followed by a measured discussion in the press on how to implement the program.<sup>59</sup> The petition that Abkhazians produced in March 1989 to upgrade their autonomous status never even mentioned the Georgian language program as justification for their action.

If fear of linguistic assimilation was not so severe, the Abkhazians did have two other concerns about cultural extinction, regarding “statistical” assimilation and a rewriting of their national history, akin to that which Karabagh Armenians faced. The Abkhazian Letter had accused the Georgian government of the wholesale “forced assimilation” of Abkhazians living in the ethnically mixed district of Gali (formerly Samurzaqano), which bordered on the region of Mingrelia in Georgia proper. The Letter argued that in the first years of Soviet power, Abkhazians in Gali were encouraged to report they were Georgians in their internal passports in exchange for receiving various educational, professional, and material benefits. It also claimed that many individuals who reported they were Abkhazians in the 1926 census were nonetheless registered as Georgians. The March memorandum bolstered this claim by noting that between the two

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<sup>58</sup> *Sovietskaya Abkhazia*, 4, 6 November 1988.

<sup>59</sup> The draft program was published in *Sovietskaya Abkhazia*, 17 January 1989. The paper published discussions on the program on 1, 2, and 17 March 1989.

censuses of 1926 and 1939 approximately 80% of the Abkhazians in Gali had gone unaccounted for.<sup>60</sup> Subsequently, the Letter claimed, the main intention of the Stalin-era resettlement of Georgians in Abkhazia (see Chapter Four) was to create ethnic Georgian “enclaves” in Abkhazia that would become “beachheads” for “the processes of assimilation that had been planned.”<sup>61</sup>

Such a claim, however, was not that persuasive. The ethnic identity of Gali residents prior to the Soviet period was sufficiently fluid to render determination of its pre-Soviet composition virtually impossible. Whatever assimilation of Abkhazians by Mingrelians in Gali/Samurzaqano largely occurred in the nineteenth century under Russian imperial rule and took place on top of earlier waves of assimilation and/or ethnic cleansing of local Mingrelians by Abkhazians.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, whether intended to disguise ethnic Abkhazians as Mingrelians or rectify an earlier classification error of Mingrelians as Abkhazians, the Soviet-era “mass”

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<sup>60</sup> To be precise, the memorandum itself actually asserts a comparison of the years 1936 and 1939. The source it cites, however, reports the accurate comparison between the censuses of 1926 and 1939. See *ibid.*, 70-71; and G. Lezhava, *Izmenenie klassovo-natsional'noi strukturi naseleniia Abkhazii (konets XIX v. – 70-e gg. XX v.)* (Changes in the class-national structure of the population of Abkhazia [from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s]) (Sukhumi: Izdatel'stvo Alashara, 1989), 20.

<sup>61</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 66.

<sup>62</sup> Gali/Samurzaqano was part of Mingrelia until the 1670s, when the region was occupied by Abkhazian feudal lords and experienced an influx of Abkhazian settlers. Georgian chroniclers report, however, that the region had already been heavily depopulated as a result of prior Abkhazian and Turkish invasions. How many Mingrelians, if any, remained in the region after the Abkhazian occupation is unknown. Whatever the case may be, the ethnic identity of residents of Gali/Samurzaqano was a matter of considerable debate already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See, for example, Yu. Anchabadze, *Iz istorii srednevekovoi Abkhazii (VI-XVII vv.)* (From the history of medieval Abkhazia [6<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries]) (Sukhumi: Abkhazskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1959), 269-271, 297; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 59, docs. 127, 185 (n. 4), 186 (n.1); and George Hewitt, “Abkhazia: a problem of identity and ownership,” *Central Asian Survey* 12 (1993): 275-76, 319 (n. 54).

assimilation of 1926 to 1939 dealt with a relatively scant number of individuals. The 1926 census reported just under 13,000 Abkhazians in Gali, out of a total district population of 50,000. Subsequently, three Abkhazian villages with approximately 3,700 people were transferred to a neighboring district. Thus, while the 1939 census reported only 1,800 Abkhazians in Gali, this meant that just 7,500 Abkhazians went unaccounted for.<sup>63</sup> The statistical elimination of several thousand previously registered Abkhazians, while significant for a population as small as the Abkhazians (just 56,200 total according to the 1939 census), was not a project of mass assimilation.

Third, the assimilation of Gali Abkhazians, whenever it occurred, was a decidedly local phenomenon. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are no records or complaints of other Abkhazians, other than members of the nobility, assimilating into Georgian identity. Later, in the Soviet period, the Abkhazian population of Abkhazia steadily increased, revealing no signs of further “statistical” assimilation to Georgians. If anything, given the adoption of Russian as Abkhazians’ primary language, Abkhazians ran the risk of assimilating more into the Russian ethnos than into the Georgian one.

Finally, at the end of the twentieth century, the ethnic identity of Abkhazians was considerably “harder” than it had ever been before, thanks to Soviet national policies. It is not that surprising that nineteenth-century peasants in Samurzaqano had possessed a nuanced ethnic identity which others could label with equal confidence as Mingrelian or Abkhazian. This *would* be surprising, however, in the late Soviet period, after Abkhazians’ ethnic identity had been bolstered by a written language, a national historiography, and a number of other cultural institutions. While regional organizers

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<sup>63</sup> Lezhava, *Izmenenie klassovo-natsional’noi strukturi*, 16, 20.

may have tried to propagate a fear of “statistical” assimilation among Abkhazians, such blanket labeling of large numbers of Abkhazians as Georgians, even if Georgian authorities tried to do so, would simply not succeed.

If not statistical assimilation, Abkhazians had yet a third cultural concern—the rewriting of their ethnic history—that could have prompted them to act. The most radical form of this revisionist history was that the original Abkhazians, cited in ancient sources, were actually *ethnic Georgians* who were later displaced or assimilated by the ancestors of modern-day Abkhazians, migrants from the North Caucasus who, upon settling in Abkhazia, dominated the local population and assumed their name. Such a theory was an element of public discourse at least by 1947, when Abkhazian intellectuals complained that references to the “Abkhazian people” as a nation were forbidden and that efforts were being made to prove that “early” Abkhazians were really ethnic Georgian tribes.<sup>64</sup> Abkhazians later voiced concerns about the theory of Georgian literary critic Pavle Ingoroqva, who in 1954 stated his belief that Abkhazians were not indigenous to Abkhazia but migrants from the North Caucasus who had come to the region in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>65</sup>

This theory of the “true” Abkhazians’ Georgian origins continued to circulate among Georgian intellectuals even after Beria’s fall, although the Georgian Communist Party officially rejected it. Leading Abkhazians objected to its continued influence in

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<sup>64</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 86.

<sup>65</sup> Pavle Ingoroqva, *Giorgi Merchule—kartveli pisatel' X veka* (Giorgi Merchule: A Georgian writer of the 10<sup>th</sup> century) (Tbilisi, 1954), esp. 116-17, 146. For commentary, see Anchabadze, *Iz istorii srednevekovoi Abkhazii*, 219-230; Hewitt, “Abkhazia: a problem of identity and ownership,” 273-74; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 44-45.

1956 and 1957.<sup>66</sup> In 1965, Abkhazian intellectuals and the mass public repeatedly denounced as unscientific a study on the northernmost dialect of Abkhazian which demonstrated a linguistic affinity between “pure” Abkhazian and Georgian, thereby implying the two groups’ ethnic affinity.<sup>67</sup> When a prominent Georgian historian again raised Ingoroqva’s thesis as a subject meriting further research the following year, Abkhazians gathered by the thousands in a multi-day protest, and a formal complaint was issued to the Soviet government.<sup>68</sup>

The rewriting of Abkhazians’ ethnic history was still a subject of complaint in the 1970s. One letter from 1977 complained of an unjustified attack on an Abkhazian ethnographer’s works, as well as an emerging trend in Georgian historiography to refer to a united Abkhazian-Mingrelian-Georgian kingdom of the Middle Ages as the “Western Georgian” kingdom, keeping Abkhazia a “strictly geographic term, stripping it...of its ethnic...content.”<sup>69</sup> In the 1977 “Letter of the 130,” one of the petitioners’ main complaints was the continued circulation of Ingoroqva’s hypothesis in Georgian intellectual circles. A follow-up report in 1978 produced a list of thirty-two Georgian historical works that, in their view, distorted Abkhazian history and Abkhazian-Georgian relations.<sup>70</sup>

Even after the implementation of the 1978 reforms, one could still find traces of this trend. The Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia, published in 1981, provides some examples. The encyclopedia offers an explanation for Georgia’s “multiethnic

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<sup>66</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 124-125, 129-134.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 145-150.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 159-163.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>70</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 23-24; Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 206-218.



composition” based on “historical conditions that arose...in the Middle Ages,” thereby neglecting or denying Abkhazians’ ancient settlement of Abkhazia, and referred to historical research on “different peoples (Abkhazians and Ossetians) who settled in Georgia during the Middle Ages and in modern times.”<sup>71</sup> In 1983, twelve Abkhazian scholars sent a letter to the Soviet government complaining of these slights and the encyclopedia’s generally poor job of covering Abkhazian history and its inclusion of several unwarranted assumptions concerning ancient Abkhazian-Georgian political relations. As well, the authors noted that a new history book on Georgian history that was supposed to “[rely] on strictly scientific data [and] reflect the history of all the autonomous formations in the republic” had not yet seen the light of day, five years after it was decreed.<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, Abkhazian organizers accused Georgians of seeking to eradicate Abkhazians’ distinct ethnic identity from the history books. In general, the Abkhazian Letter attributed a “messianic character” to Georgian historiography, which credited the Georgian nation with both the spread of Christianity in the region as well as virtually all of its neighbors’ cultural achievements and traditions.<sup>73</sup> Of specific concern to Abkhazians were the efforts of Georgian scholars to prove that Abkhazians were not indigenous inhabitants of Abkhazia but early modern migrants from the North Caucasus that mixed with a local Georgian (“Abkhazian”) population and came to dominate them politically and linguistically. The Letter insisted that this “[f]alsification of Abkhazian

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<sup>71</sup> *Gruzinskaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia. Gruzinskaia SSR* (Georgian Soviet encyclopedia. Georgian SSR) (Tbilisi: Glavnaia nauchnaia redaktsia, 1981), 35, 223. Also see Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 364.

<sup>72</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 284, 371. Also see Slider, “Crisis and Response,” 63.

<sup>73</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 89-90.

history continues in each new publication. It has taken on the form of a law so much that it has become a part of Georgians' self-consciousness." The memorandum agreed that this falsification of history was continuing, although it noted that many Georgian scholars were now propagating a theory of "two indigenous peoples (Georgians and Abkhazians)," which, in any case, was still a "blatant manipulation [*vopiushchei podtasovkoi*] of the facts."<sup>74</sup> The Abkhazian Letter argued that local historians who did not adhere to official interpretations of Georgian history were either discredited or pressured to change their views and claimed that the Georgian government exerted control over all publications related to Abkhazia; according to the Letter, even the work of some Russian researchers did not see the light of day since their findings "did not correspond with the interests of several Georgian falsifiers of the historical process."<sup>75</sup>

By the 1980s, however, the "rewriting" of Abkhazians' ethnic history did not pose a major cultural threat. The fragments in the Georgian encyclopedia were not hegemonic. Even if Georgian authorities wished to control what was published on Abkhazian history, they exerted far less control in these matters than the Letter admitted. Within Georgia, Abkhazians *were* free to counter the thesis with scholarship of their own. Georgians might attack it (as Abkhazians did Georgian scholarship) but they did not prevent Abkhazian historians from publishing works that argued in favor of Abkhazians' indigenous status.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 84-85, 91, 114.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 87. A related grievance involved toponyms. The authors complained that place names were Georgianized. Many that had been given Russian names in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were then transformed to Georgian, rather than back to Abkhazian "so that it would be clear that they were already within the borders of Georgia." The Letter notes that of the five hundred places that had their names changed throughout Georgia from 1921-1966, over sixty percent of them were in Abkhazia. See *ibid.*, 91-95, 112.

Moreover, as the March memorandum admitted, Georgian scholarship itself did not adhere to a hegemonic interpretation of Abkhazians' late migrant origins. While the theory had its proponents, most Georgian historians rejected the theory in favor of a more moderate version. The "official" line, as organizers had themselves noted, was that Abkhazians and Georgians were both indigenous to Abkhazia. This argument was first noted by Abkhazians in 1977.<sup>76</sup> Even the Georgian Encyclopedia at one place accepted Abkhazians' indigenous status (a fact the 1983 letter acknowledged), referring to the "ancestors of Abkhazian tribes" who resided on Georgian territory in ancient times.<sup>77</sup> After Abkhazians issued their petition in 1989, the thesis that Abkhazians were relative newcomers to Georgia eventually acquired hegemonic status among the Georgian population. As late as September 1989, however, even members of the Georgian nationalist movement were still divided on this point. Two prominent nationalists, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Zurab Chavchavadze, discussed the question of ethnic minorities in interviews with the Georgian press. While Gamsakhurdia claimed that Abkhazians were not "aborigines of Georgian lands," Chavchavadze insisted that Abkhazians were just "as indigenous" to Georgia as the Georgians.<sup>78</sup> At the time of the campaign, Abkhazians had little reason to believe that the former theory would again dominate public discussion. As with Azerbaijani attitudes towards the history of Mountainous Karabagh, Georgian historiography posed a threat to the Abkhazians (as Chapter Five will discuss). The threat, however, was a political one, not a cultural one.

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<sup>76</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 200.

<sup>77</sup> *Gruzinskaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia*, 324. Also see Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 365.

<sup>78</sup> *Vechernyi Tbilisi* (Tbilisi), 12 September 1989; *Molodezh' Gruzii* (Tbilisi), 26 September 1989.

## VII. The Evidence for Cultural Extinction: South Ossetia

For South Ossetia, the linguistic picture was largely the same as that in Abkhazia. Like Abkhazians, urban Ossetians were primarily Russian speakers, Russian was the main language of instruction through South Ossetian schools, and the Ossetian language was relegated to the status of a class subject. Also like the Abkhazians, South Ossetians had been exposed to linguistic Georgianization in the Stalinist period. The previously Cyrillic alphabet was transformed into a Georgian alphabet and all schools became Georgian-language schools. These measures were reversed following Khrushchev's rise to power. Subsequently, South Ossetians were primarily educated in Russian and employed that language in the workplace (as did many at home).

Like the Abkhazians, furthermore, South Ossetians eagerly took advantage of the opportunity Gorbachev's reforms provided to develop their own language. According to the South Ossetian First Secretary of the time, A. Chekhoev, South Ossetians sought improvements in the study of the Ossetian language even before Georgians initiated their own language program.<sup>79</sup> A committee to develop a draft Ossetian language program was in place in September 1988, more than a month before the Georgian draft language program was published, and was published in December.<sup>80</sup> Proclaiming its intent to "guarantee the constitutional functioning of the Ossetian language" in the region, the program declared Ossetian to be an official state language of South Ossetia, together with Georgian and Russian. Unlike Abkhazian, the native language of the Ossetians never

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<sup>79</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 22 February 1989.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 September 1988, 18 November 1988, 8 December 1988.

enjoyed such a status. The program thus signaled a sea change in South Ossetian language policy, laying the basis for the further development of the Ossetian language and guaranteeing South Ossetians' use of Russian as well.

Unlike Abkhazia, however, the introduction of the Georgian State Language Program did coincide with the South Ossetians' campaign in a way that is difficult to ignore. When the draft state program was first published, Chekhoev ruefully noted that it provoked "a splash (*vsplash*) of emotion" among South Ossetians, even if it did not prompt mass demonstrations. The autumn demonstrations, which led to the petition to transform South Ossetia into an autonomous republic, began just days after the final draft of the State Program was published in *Soviet Ossetia*.<sup>81</sup>

What is the link between the State Program and the Ossetian demonstrations? South Ossetian organizers only once referred to a cultural threat, specifically in its linguistic form. The strikers' informal petition to the Soviet government in September 1989 assaulted the newly unveiled State Program on the Georgian Language for saying nothing about the languages of the republic's "small nations." It also explained that in South Ossetia, as in Abkhazia, "history was such that the language of business and interethnic communication was Russian, together with Ossetian" and that the language program said nothing about the "language of interethnic communication [i.e., Russian]." Both these measures, the petitioners argued, promised to lead to the "artificial assimilation" of South Ossetians.<sup>82</sup>

As with the Abkhazians, however, the State Program did *not* constitute an assault on the Ossetian language. The Ossetians' own language program was itself published

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 29 August 1989.

<sup>82</sup> *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*, 20 October 1989.

days after the State Program was published and was developed with the approval of central authorities.<sup>83</sup> While both draft programs were being worked out, members of the Ossetian elite specifically rejected accusations from *Adamon Nykhas* that the Ossetian language was under threat. One senior Ossetian researcher noted that “the question of preserving our language, our culture...depends on us alone.”<sup>84</sup> After the start of the protest campaign, *Soviet Ossetia* ran an editorial against regional activists’ objections to the language programs, arguing that “[s]ome excited people...are running faster than events are developing.”<sup>85</sup> One state official added that “[t]he authors of these demands either do not know the stability of the situation...or are knowingly pushing our people to a totally senseless dead-end.”<sup>86</sup> Commenting on the objection that the Georgian language program did not address the status of the Ossetian language, another official asked:

“Was [this] really necessary....? Why don’t people who consider themselves patriots of Ossetia think about it? Maybe we’re knocking on an open door, since what we are demanding is already fixed in law. If we don’t use the opportunities presented to us, then we are the ones who are guilty....They say the Ossetian language is sick. So let’s treat it and not raise a panic.”<sup>87</sup>

Finally, in a visit to South Ossetia, Georgian First Secretary Givi Gumbaridze himself held a meeting with representatives of the regional intelligentsia and *Adamon Nykhas*. At

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<sup>83</sup> The Ossetian language program was published in *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 5 September 1989.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 May 1989.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 September 1989.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 September 1989.

<sup>87</sup> When demonstrators accused the authors of the Ossetian language program of kowtowing to republican authorities, one of them angrily responded: “Nobody dictated anything to us from above, not one person told us what to fix in writing or what to throw out....The fate of our language is in our hands....Instead of inappropriate slogans we have to conduct practical work.” *Ibid.*, 11, 28 September 1989.

the meeting, he confirmed that Ossetian would be granted official language status together with Russian and Georgian.<sup>88</sup> South Ossetians clearly had complaints about the State Language program. In the next chapter, however, I demonstrate why these involved economic, not cultural, grievances.

Finally, unlike Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, South Ossetians did not face a threat to the writing of their ethnic history. It is true that Georgians considered South Ossetians to be migrants to Georgia who crossed the Caucasus mountains from the North Caucasus in the Middle Ages or later. The Georgian Encyclopedia published in 1981 noted that the Ossetians “gradually trickled” into the high mountains of Central Georgia, “from whence in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries they settled into the foothills and plains.”<sup>89</sup>

This, however, was also how South Ossetian scholars understood the history of their ethnic group. Textbooks on South Ossetian history explain how South Ossetians first arrived on the southern slopes of the Caucasus as a result of 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century Mongol invasions and subsequently outline a history of expansion southward as well as further migration from the North.<sup>90</sup> South Ossetians did not claim to be the indigenous

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 5 October 1989.

<sup>89</sup> *Gruzinskaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia*, 354.

<sup>90</sup> *Ocherki istorii Yugo-Osetinskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti. Tom 1. Istoriia Yuzhnykh Osetin do obrazovaniia YuOAO* (Essays on the history of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. Vol. 1. The history of South Ossetians before the establishment of the SOAR) (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1985), 83-104; and *Ocherki istorii Yugo-Osetii. Tom 1* (Sketches on the history of South Ossetia. Vol. 1) (Tskhinvali: Izdatel'stvo Iriston, 1969), 48-69. Also see the work by Z. N. Vaneev, the dean of South Ossetian history, “O vremeni pereseleniia Yuzhnykh Osetin (Regarding the time of South Ossetian settlement)” (unpublished, 1962), reprinted in *Izbrannyye raboty po istorii osetinskogo naroda. Tom 1* (Collected works on the history of the Ossetian people. Vol. 1) (Tskhinvali: Izdatel'stvo Iriston, 1989), 333-375.

inhabitants of the region or deny that Georgians lived there before their migration. They could hardly consider the Georgian depiction of their ethnic history, therefore, as an attack on their ethnic identity.

## **X. Conclusion**

Judging by the findings of this chapter, too much attention has been paid to fears of violence and cultural extinction as motivating forces for regional mobilization in Mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Of the three cases I examine, only for South Ossetia does the evidence suggest group members may have been responding to violence-related threats. While fears of violence may have later arisen as conflicts developed, these fears do not provide a convincing explanation for why the other two groups engaged in mass mobilization in the first place.

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While all these works discuss earlier waves of migration by tribes (Alans, Dvals) related to the modern-day Ossetians, in one of his earlier works Vaneev definitively asserted that “modern Ossetians...are not the descendants of earlier South Ossetians [i.e., those earlier tribes] but settled in the south at a later time.” Through an analysis of oral genealogies, he arrives at the conclusion that the earliest ancestors of modern South Ossetians settled in the region as late as the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century. This would accord with the traditional Georgian interpretation that while Ossetian refugees from the Mongol invasions had arrived in Georgia and proceeded “to ravage, destroy, and take Georgians hostage,” they were actually “driven out and destroyed” in turn by Georgian King Giorgi Brtsqinvale (“the Brilliant”) in the 1320s (thus implying that contemporary South Ossetians are the descendants of a later generation of Ossetian settlers). See Z. N. Vaneev, “K voprosu o vremeni zaseleniia Yugo-Osetii (Towards the question about the time of settlement of South Ossetia),” *Izvestia Yugo-Osetinskogo nauchno-issledovatel'skogo instituta* (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]), no. 3 (1936), reprinted in Vaneev, *Izbrannyye raboty*, 390-399; and Jondo Gvasalia, “Shida Kartli i Osetinskia Problema (Inner Kartli and the Ossetian Problem),” in *Osetinskii vopros* (Ossetian question), eds. A. Bakradze and O. Chubinidze (Tbilisi: Kera-XXI, 1994), 79.



Cultural threats likewise do not provide a convincing motivation for action. Only one group, Karabagh Armenians, appeared to suffer mildly from cultural policies, but these were clearly remediable in ways short of separation. In the Abkhazian and South Ossetian cases, Georgian authorities had even signaled—through their approval of the Abkhazian and Ossetian State Language Programs and their references to non-Georgian schools in the Georgian State Language Program—that cultural extinction was not their intent. While they sought to make minorities in Georgia accept the Georgian language as part of their ethnic repertoire, they did not seek to eliminate their distinct cultures. If the State Language program inspired them to mobilize, the reason for this lies in its economic implications. I now turn to explore alternative motivations for mass mobilization: concerns related to population shifts and economic discrimination.

**Table 3.1**  
**Summary of Motivations for Mass Mobilization:**  
**Violence and Cultural Extinction**

<b>VIOLENCE</b>	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b>	<b>Abkhazians</b>	<b>South Ossetians</b>	
History	High	Medium	High	
Rhetoric	Low	Medium-Low	Low	
Signals of Intent	Medium	Low	Medium	
Opponent Capabilities	Medium-Low	Medium	High	
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Medium-Low</b>	<b>Medium-High</b>	<b>Medium</b>

<b>CULTURAL EXTINCTION</b>	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b>	<b>Abkhazians</b>	<b>South Ossetians</b>	
History	Medium	Medium-High	Medium-Low	
Rhetoric	Medium-Low	High	Low	
Signals of Intent	Medium-Low	Low	Low	
Opponent Capabilities	Low	Low	Medium-Low	
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>Medium-Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Medium-Low</b>	<b>Medium-Low</b>

***Chapter Four***  
**Population Shift and Economic Discrimination: A Foundation for Regional Mobilization**

Chapter Three has argued that the evidence that Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, or South Ossetians mobilized mainly to protect themselves from violence or cultural extinction is not that compelling, with the possible exception of a South Ossetian fear of violence. This chapter assesses the evidence for an alternative claim—that fears of demographic shifts and economic discrimination motivated regional mobilization. I argue that these fears provide an explanation for regional mobilization that is applicable in all three cases. While South Ossetians might also have feared violence, the evidence suggests that more basic fears of demographic shifts and economic discrimination spurred them, along with their Karabagh Armenian and Abkhazian peers, to action (see Table 4.4 at the end of the chapter for a weighing of the evidence in summary form).

**I. The Evidence for Population Shift: Mountainous Karabagh**

Whether its composition was Armenian or mixed Albanian-Armenian in medieval times (see Chapter Three), by early modern times Mountainous Karabagh was overwhelmingly Armenian in population. Despite an influx of Azerbaijani Turks in the eighteenth century after a local tribal leader conquered the region, Mountainous Karabagh was still mainly Armenian by the time of the Russian revolution in 1917. Azerbaijanis lived primarily in the town of Shusha and neighboring villages. Even after

the mass Armenian flow from Shusha in 1920, which reduced the town's 20,000 strong Armenian population to virtually nothing (see Chapter Three), Karabagh Armenians still comprised 89% of the region (94% excluding Shusha).<sup>1</sup>

During the Soviet period, the Armenian population of Mountainous Karabagh stagnated. From 1921 to 1979, the year of the last census prior to the start of the Karabagh Armenian campaign, Karabagh Armenians had a growth rate of approximately zero percent: in both 1921 and 1979, their population numbered around 123,000.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the *relative* growth rate of Armenians to Azerbaijanis was also problematic. From 1921 to 1979, the Azerbaijani growth rate in the region was more than 140%, a rate

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<sup>1</sup> Including the population of Shusha, predominantly Azerbaijani, the 1921 Soviet census reports approximately 138,500 residents of Mountainous Karabagh: 122,800 Armenians (89%) and 15,400 Azerbaijanis (11%). Most references to the population of Mountainous Karabagh in the early 1920s claim that Armenians comprised 94-95% of the total population. While this figure might be drawn from the 1921 agricultural census (which excluded Shusha), it could also stem from statistics from 1923 that reported that 94.8% of Mountainous Karabagh's population was Armenian (149,600 Armenians to 7,700 Azerbaijanis). If this latter data is accurate, it means that over half of the Azerbaijanis that had lived in the region in 1921 no longer did so, either because they migrated or because their villages were left out of the region's final boundaries. Another discrepancy, however, casts doubt on the 1923 statistics—the data reports a jump in the Armenian population of the region by over 25,000 from 1921. This is particularly unusual given that certain Armenian-populated areas of Mountainous Karabagh were left out of the region's final Soviet boundaries. Moreover, in 1926, a Soviet census recorded only 111,700 Armenians in Mountainous Karabagh, an unexplained drop from 1923 of 38,000 individuals.

Statistics for 1921, 1923, and 1926 are provided by, respectively, Merujan Karapetian, "The Ethnic Structure of the Population of Mountainous Karabagh in 1921," *Armenian Review* 44, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 74; V. A. Atajanian, ed., *Pravda o Nagornom Karabakhe* (The truth about Mountainous Karabagh) (Stepanakert: Izdatel'stvo "Artsakh," 1989), 58; and G. A. Galoian and K. S. Khudaverdian, *Nagornyi Karabakh: Istoricheskaya spravka* (Mountainous Karabagh: The historical record) (Erevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armianskoi SSR, 1988), 47.

<sup>2</sup> The 1979 Soviet census reports 162,200 residents of Mountainous Karabagh, including 123,100 Armenians and 37,300 Azerbaijanis. Galoian and Khudaverdian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, 47.

of growth produced by Azerbaijani in-migration.<sup>3</sup> While in 1921, Karabagh Armenians made up 89% of the population, by 1979 they were down to 76% (for data on population trends in Mountainous Karabagh, see Table 4.1).<sup>4</sup>

Organizers of the Karabagh Armenian movement much such population shifts part of their justification for separating from Azerbaijan. Petition writer Suren Ayvazian lamented that in Azerbaijan “the Armenians are fleeing....the Armenian population...is decreasing....In Mountainous Karabagh the Armenian population has been reduced from 95% to 80% of the entire population.”<sup>5</sup> The mass petition which Karabagh Armenians presented to the Soviet government in 1988 similarly complained that “[e]very year the Armenian population of Mountainous Karabagh is decreasing....”<sup>6</sup> It also noted that the number of Azerbaijanis in the region was on the rise.

While true through the 1970s, however, this complaint does not accurately reflect the growth trend of Karabagh Armenians in the late 1980s, at the time they began mobilizing to separate from Azerbaijan. A major reason for Karabagh Armenians’ zero population growth was the community’s high casualty rate during World War II, when an

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<sup>3</sup> Karapetian, “Ethnic Structure of the Population of Mountainous Karabagh,” 74; Galoian and Khudaverdian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, 47. Azerbaijani officials have confirmed that the Azerbaijani government in the 1970s, at least, encouraged the settlement of Azerbaijanis in the region.

<sup>4</sup> Galoian and Khudaverdian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Haratch* (Paris), 3-14 December 1987, excerpted in Gerard J. Libaridian, ed., *The Karabagh File: Documents and Facts on the Region of Mountainous Karabagh (1918-1988)* (Cambridge, MA: The Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), doc. 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Droshak* (Athens), 13-14 October 1987, excerpted in Libaridian, *The Karabagh File*, doc. 48.

estimated 15-20% of the population perished at the front.<sup>7</sup> In the two decades after 1959, the first census after the war, Karabagh Armenians achieved twelve percent growth.

While data from 1979 until the start of the campaign is inexact, the Karabagh Armenian population continued to grow in the 1980s. The 1989 Soviet census reported 145,500 Armenians in Mountainous Karabagh—an impressive 18% growth rate from 1979.<sup>8</sup> A study that was conducted in 1987, prior to the outbreak of conflict, also indicates growth, albeit less spectacularly: 8% from 1979-1987.<sup>9</sup> Assuming a continuation of this growth rate through 1989, the census that year would have noted at least 10% growth for Karabagh Armenians.

As well, by the time the Karabagh Armenians began to mobilize in 1987, the worst of the population shift was over. Since 1959, Azerbaijani growth rates in the region had steadily declined. From 1959 to 1970, the Azerbaijani population grew by 51%; from 1970 to 1979, by 37%.<sup>10</sup> By comparison, the 1987 study estimated 18% growth from 1979-1987.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, the gap in relative growth between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Mountainous Karabagh was steadily decreasing, from 41% (from 1959 to

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<sup>7</sup> B. S. Mirzoian, “Nagornyi Karabakh: Statistical Considerations,” *Vestnik obshchestvennykh nauk* (Yerevan), 1988, no. 7, trans. and reprinted in *Soviet Anthropology and Archaeology* 29, no. 2 (1990): 13.

<sup>8</sup> Data from the 1989 census comes from the Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in the USA ([http://www.nkrusa.org/nk\\_conflict/references.html](http://www.nkrusa.org/nk_conflict/references.html)). The Office reports that this number does not include 23,000 Armenian refugees from other areas of Azerbaijan who fled to Mountainous Karabagh as a result of the conflict which began the year before.

<sup>9</sup> A. N. Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Theory and Society* 20 (1991): 645. Yamskov cites a study which estimated that in 1987 there were 133,200 Armenians (74%) and 43,900 Azerbaijanis (24%) in Mountainous Karabagh.

<sup>10</sup> I derive these growth rates from the data presented in Galoian and Khudaverdian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus,” 645.

1970), to 35% (1970 to 1979), to 10% (1979 to 1987). More spectacularly, the 1989 census indicated a total of just 40,600 Azerbaijanis in Mountainous Karabagh, which would mean only 9% growth for Azerbaijanis from 1979-1989. Combined with the data on Armenians in Mountainous Karabagh in 1989 (up a percentage to 77% of the population, and with 18% growth), this means that from 1979 to 1989, *the gap in relative growth had shifted in favor of the Karabagh Armenians, by 9%.*<sup>12</sup> Assuming this data is accurate, and the trend continued, Karabagh Armenians had little reason to fear their share of the population was going to dip even to two-thirds in the years to come. Just as Karabagh Armenians were not facing the prospects of absolute decline, neither were they threatened with being “swamped” by Azerbaijani migrants.

Still, given the precedent of Azerbaijani resettlement, Karabagh Armenians could have reasonably believed that less favorable rates of population shift would again develop in the future. Karabagh Armenians may not have needed to fear that much for their physical security or for their cultural identity within a *glasnost*’-era Soviet Azerbaijan. As long as Mountainous Karabagh remained part of Azerbaijan, however, it would be difficult to prevent further waves of Azerbaijanis from moving to the region. This would involve getting republican authorities to renounce all efforts to promote Azerbaijani settlement in Mountainous Karabagh, or seeking legislation that would ban “internal migration” within Azerbaijan. Given Gorbachev’s rhetoric of making citizens feel like “masters” of their country and “owners” of their home, restrictions on individual rights to internal migration—a hallmark of the authoritarian Soviet past—would likely be frowned upon, at least within the borders of Soviet republics. Karabagh Armenians might be able

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<sup>12</sup> Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in the USA ([http://www.nkrusa.org/nk\\_conflict/references.html](http://www.nkrusa.org/nk_conflict/references.html)).

to acquire security and cultural guarantees, but they would have few levers to prevent the Azerbaijani government from continuing to pursue a policy of demographic shift.

If, on the other hand, Mountainous Karabagh managed to separate from Azerbaijan and join with Armenia, population shift could be contained, or even reversed, as the Armenian government would be both willing and able to limit Azerbaijani migration to the region.

## **II. The Evidence for Population Shift: Abkhazia**

Demographically speaking, Abkhazians were in a particularly unenviable position. The Abkhazian population was severely reduced twice in the nineteenth century. After an uprising against Russian imperial authorities in 1866, more than 19,000 Abkhazians were forced to flee to Turkey. According to statistics cited by Dzidzaria, this amounted to approximately 25% of Abkhazia's total population at the time (although up to a few thousand returned to Abkhazia soon thereafter).<sup>13</sup> Then, when Turkey attacked Russia in 1877, Abkhazia surrendered without a fight and many Abkhazians took up

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<sup>13</sup> Some of these departed as contingents of Abkhazian nobility, who preferred emigration to Turkey over the loss of their former privileges. Others, however, were forcefully deported. See G. Dzidzaria, *Makhajirstvo i problemi istorii Abkhazii XIX stoletia. 2<sup>oe</sup> Izd.* (The "Mahajirstvo" and problems of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Abkhazian history. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Sukhumi: Izdatel'stvo "Alashara," 1982), 289; and S. Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii Abkhazii* (Essays on the political history of Abkhazia) (Sukhumi: Alashara, 1990), 30. Two early accounts of this event can be found in *Droeba* (Tiflis [Tbilisi]), 1867, no. 23, and 1875, no. 63, excerpted in T. Achugba, *Ethnicheskaiia "revoliutsiia" v Abkhazii (po sledam gruzinskoi periodiki XIX v.)* (The ethnic "revolution" in Abkhazia [according to the Georgian press of the 19<sup>th</sup> century]) (Sukhum [Sukhumi]: Izdatel'stvo Alashara, 1995), 24, 29.



arms, willingly or otherwise, against Russian imperial forces.<sup>14</sup> After the Russian victory, tens of thousands of Abkhazians were again forced to leave for Turkey. While the number of Abkhazians who departed is unknown, estimates range from 30,000 to 70,000 (with some 15,000 returning in subsequent years).<sup>15</sup>

Whatever the exact number, the generally accepted assumption is that at least half of all Abkhazians left for Turkey in the two waves of migration of 1866 and 1877—events collectively known in Abkhazian history as the *Makhajirstvo*, or exile.<sup>16</sup> Abkhazia lost virtually its entire population in central Abkhazia (near the region's later capital of Sukhumi) and a considerable portion in regions to the east and west. Only the Abkhazian-Mingrelian frontier region of Samurzaqano (later Gali) remained untouched, as it was more strongly defended by Russian troops in 1877.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The extent to which Abkhazian behavior in the Russo-Turkish war was involuntary is a matter of debate. During the war, many Abkhazians apparently left Abkhazia voluntarily, drawn either by religious affiliation (in the case of Muslim Abkhazians) or by the propaganda of Turkish Abkhazians who promised émigrés a better life in Turkey. Others departed, as in 1866, as contingents of pro-Turkish noblemen. At the same time, numerous pieces of evidence point to the forced deportation of many Abkhazians by the Turks. A member of the Georgian political elite, G. Tsereteli, reported in August 1877 that Abkhazians he conversed with insisted that they only took up arms against Russia after Russian forces had deserted Abkhazia and left the local population to face the Turkish invasion alone, compelling them to reach an accord with the occupiers. See Dzidzaria, *Makhajirstvo*, 357-362; and Achugba, *Ethnicheskaja "revoliutsiia,"* 12-13, 35-39.

<sup>15</sup> One notably impartial analysis of Abkhazian demography notes with some reservations a survey published in 1880 that indicates that the last wave of forced migration included 32,000 Abkhazians, leaving only 13,000 behind in Abkhazia proper. Daniel Müller, "Demography: ethno-demographic history, 1886-1989," in George Hewitt, ed., *The Abkhazians: A Handbook* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1998), 220-222. Also see Dzidzaria, *Makhajirstvo*, 371-374, 381-406.

<sup>16</sup> Müller estimates that a majority of the Abkhazian population either died or left Abkhazia during this time. Müller, "Demography," 220.

<sup>17</sup> Dzidzaria, *Makhajirstvo*, 371-375, 396; Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*, 38.

To determine Abkhazian population trends in the half-century following the *Mahajirstvo* is not easy. Censuses provide population figures that are too difficult to reconcile—in part due to disputes over how to record the residents of Samurzaqano (see Chapter Three). A rough comparison, however, can be made between the relatively indisputed census of 1897, which reported approximately 58,700 native speakers of Abkhazian in all of Abkhazia, and the 1926 Soviet census, which recorded an Abkhazian population of nearly 56,000. Based on these numbers, the Abkhazian population declined by five percent in the course of three decades (for population trends in Abkhazia, see Table 4.2).<sup>18</sup>

From then on, the Abkhazian population gradually recovered. During the next thirty years, Abkhazian growth was meager, half a percent to 1939 and nine percent over the next twenty years, reaching 61,200 by 1959. Subsequently, the Abkhazian growth rate increased more substantially. During the next three decades, the Abkhazian population increased by, respectively, 26%, 8%, and 12%. By 1989, there were more than 93,000

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<sup>18</sup> While Abkhazian organizers accurately noted a decline in the Abkhazian population during this period, they seriously exaggerated its extent. The Abkhazian Letter argued that there had been nearly 112,000 Abkhazians in 1916, thereby implying a 50% decline in the Abkhazian population in the 1926 census. It derives this number by combining various data from a 1916 population survey regarding the number of “nationalities” (*narodnosti*) in Abkhazia, including “Caucasian mountaineers, Muslim,” “Caucasian mountaineers, other beliefs,” and “other Asiatic peoples” (“Abkhazians” was not a category). It is unclear who these categories were actually supposed to represent and Müller considers the numbers themselves to be simply inaccurate. See M. Yu. Chumalov, ed., *Abkhazskii uzel: Dokumenty i materialy po etnicheskomy konfliktu v Abkhazii* (vypusk vtoroi: Narodnii forum Abkhazii “Aidgilara” i ego soyuzniki 1989-1990 gg.) (The Abkhazian knot: Documents and materials about the ethnic conflict in Abkhazia (2<sup>nd</sup> series: the Popular Forum of Abkhazia ‘Aidgilara’ and its allies, 1989-1990) (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniiu mezhnatsional’nykh otnoshenii IEA RAN, 1995), 72; and Müller, “Demography,” 227-228.

Abkhazians in Abkhazia. Given the experience of these last decades, Abkhazians ought to have had no concerns regarding their current growth rate.

Abkhazian demographic recovery was, however, not an isolated phenomenon. By 1989, Abkhazia had been a multiethnic society for more than a century. As well as worrying about their own growth rate, Abkhazians also had to contend with increasing numbers of Georgians, as well as members of other ethnic groups.

The influx of Georgians to Abkhazia began after the *Mahajirstvo*. At the time, Abkhazia was a target of colonization. Exactly who would settle in the region was a source of debate between the Russian imperial center and Georgian politicians and intellectuals, the former seeking to settle Russians and other Slavs while the latter promoted the immigration of Georgians.<sup>19</sup> During the first decades of settlement, the Georgians won. While the 1886 census recorded less than 4,200 Georgians in Abkhazia, excluding Samurzaqano, the 1897 census reported over 25,000 Georgians (mostly Mingrelians), compared to 5,100 Russians and 6,600 Armenians.<sup>20</sup> Assuming these figures are correct, Abkhazians continued to make up a slight majority of the total population of Abkhazia (55%) while Georgians made up less than a quarter.

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<sup>19</sup> Dzidzaria notes that plans for the colonization of Abkhazia had begun already after the first mass emigration of 1866. On the colonization project, see Dzidzaria, *Makhajirstvo*, 427-448. For a discussion of the Russian position, see Giorgi Jorjoliani et al., eds., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. V. Amiranishvili (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1995), 14-17. A major statement of the Georgian position is that of I. Gogebashvili, "Kem zaselit' Abkhaziiu (Who should be settled in Abkhazia?)," *Tiflisskii vestnik* (Tiflis [Tbilisi]), 1877, nos. 209, 210, 243-245, 248, 249. A brief discussion of this essay can be found in B. G. Hewitt, "Abkhazia: a problem of identity and ownership," *Central Asian Survey* 12:3 (1993): 275. For other defenses of the Georgian position, see Achugba, *Ethnicheskaiia "revoliutsiia"*, 27-29, 34, 40-42, 52-55, 58-58, 61, 65-66, 77.

<sup>20</sup> Müller, "Demography," 223, 225.

In the twentieth century, the Abkhazians lost even this simple majority status. Soviet statistics from 1925, reporting on the 1917 agricultural census, indicated that the Georgian population of rural Abkhazia (i.e., without Sukhumi) had more than doubled, reaching approximately 54,800.<sup>21</sup> By 1926, 67,500 Georgians were registered in Abkhazia, constituting 160% growth from 1897. In 1917, Georgians were already noted as making up 42% of the population, while Abkhazians made up 30%.<sup>22</sup> By 1926, Georgian and Abkhazian shares of the population had drawn closer: Georgians made up 36% of the population while Abkhazians made up 30%.<sup>23</sup>

The Abkhazian share of the population was reduced even further during Stalin's rule, however, mainly due to the resettlement of tens of thousands of Mingrelians in Abkhazia. From 1926 to 1939, the Georgian population increased by more than 36% and from 1939 to 1959, by 72%.<sup>24</sup> By 1959, Georgians made up 39% of the population while

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<sup>21</sup> Avtandil Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki sovremennogo separatizma v Gruzii* (Historical roots of modern separatism in Georgia) (Tbilisi: Tipografia Tbilisskogo universiteta, 1998), 98. Müller reports identical statistics from the 1917 agricultural census but notes that results appeared in 1923, not 1925. Complicating the findings somewhat is the fact that Menteshashvili, without explanation, also reports on different statistics from the 1917 agricultural census that the independent Georgian administration compiled in 1920. According to those statistics, Menteshashvili notes some 74,800 Georgians, 20,000 more than the Soviet records revealed. Müller, "Demography," 228; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> According to Menteshashvili's citation of independent Georgia's records on the 1917 agricultural census, there were only 28,100 Abkhazians in the rural population of Abkhazia, which made up just 21% of the entire rural population. Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Müller, "Demography," 231-232. The 1926 census records an additional 15,000 residents of Abkhazia, mainly Greeks, who were not Soviet citizens. Including these non-citizens into the total, Georgians made up 34% of the population, while Abkhazians made up 28%.

<sup>24</sup> The Abkhazian Letter exaggerates the number of Georgian settlers during the Stalinist period, claiming that close to 100,000 Georgians migrated to Abkhazia between 1937 and 1959. The March memorandum accurately notes that the *total* increase (including natural growth) in the Georgian population between 1939 and 1959 was just 70,000 (actually,

Abkhazians were reduced to just 15%. By 1989, they consisted, respectively, of 46% and 18% of Abkhazia's population.<sup>25</sup>

Understandably, this influx of Georgian migrants did not go unnoticed by Abkhazians. An internal security report from 1946 reports that Abkhazians were complaining about "all the Georgian thickies [they've sent] here" and that the Georgians were "driving us out..."<sup>26</sup> Complaints of ongoing migration continued even after the mass resettlement program ended.<sup>27</sup> At a gathering in the 1960s, even members of the public openly complained; one worker noted that migrants were generally of one type: "ignorant, uneducated, unable-to-set-themselves-up-in-any-way-in-Georgia Georgians."<sup>28</sup> Complaints were also uttered in letters to the Soviet government in 1967 and 1977; in the latter, Abkhazian activists accused Georgia for the first time of a purposive strategy for "radically changing the national structure of the population of Abkhazia to its advantage."<sup>29</sup> The following year, activists complained of reports of an anticipated new in-migration to staff a resort in the Abkhazian north and accused the authorities of

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66,000). Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 65, 111. To determine how many Georgians actually settled in Abkhazia at this time, Müller compares the growth rate of Georgians within Abkhazia to that of Georgians in the entire USSR and concludes that in 1959 there were 56,000 more Georgians in Abkhazia than would be expected by natural growth alone. Müller, "Demography," 235-236. A discussion of the resettlement project and an extensive collection of related documents, including lists of migrants by name, place of origin, and settlement, can be found in B. E. Sagaria, ed., *Abkhazia: Dokumenti svidetel'stvuyut, 1937-1953 gg. Sbornik materialov* (Abkhazia: The documents lay witness, 1937-1953. A collection of materials) (Sukhum [Sukhumi]: Alashara, 1992), 6-11, 17-422. Also see Rachel Clogg, "Documents from the KGB archive in Sukhum. Abkhazia in the Stalin years," *Central Asian Survey* 14, no. 1 (1995), 160-161, 175.

<sup>25</sup> Müller, "Demography," 237.

<sup>26</sup> Clogg, "Documents from the KGB," 175.

<sup>27</sup> I. Marykhuba, ed., *Abkhazskie pis'ma (1947-1989): Sbornik dokumentov. Tom 1* (Abkhazian letters [1947-1989]: A collection of documents, vol. 1) (Sukhum [Sukhumi]: Izdatel'skii tsentr' El'-fa, 1994), 112-113.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 161; Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 23, 26.

formulating resettlement policy not on the basis of “economic needs” but in order “to compactly settle Georgians” throughout Abkhazia.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, it was not logical for Abkhazians to blame only Georgians for the massive population shift which had occurred in their republic. The root cause of the population shift was the *Mahajirstvo*, which had nothing to do with Georgians (many of whom, in fact, publicly lamented the fate of the Abkhazians and declared firm support for their return).<sup>31</sup> As well, it was Russian imperial authorities, not Georgians, who planned Abkhazia’s colonization at the turn of the century. While Georgians constituted the bulk of the settler population, Russians and Armenians also settled at the time in large numbers. From 1886 to 1926, the Russian population of Abkhazia increased from less than 1,100 to more than 12,000. The Armenian population of Abkhazia blossomed even more spectacularly: from less than 1,100 to almost 26,000.<sup>32</sup>

This trend continued during the Stalinist period. While Georgians made up the greatest number of settlers, Russians and Armenians also migrated to Abkhazia in large numbers. From 1926 to 1959, the Russian population of Abkhazia leapt to almost 87,000, an increase of 588% (nearly 4.5 times the growth rate of Georgians in this period). During the same time, the Armenian population increased 150%, again higher than the Georgians’ own increase of 134%. If in 1926, Russians and Armenians together made up only 21% of Abkhazia’s population (compared to 36% for Georgians), by 1959 they had

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<sup>30</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 188-189.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Jorjoliani, *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects*, 16 (n. 20).

<sup>32</sup> Müller, “Demography,” 223, 232.

reached 37% (compared to the Georgians' 39%).<sup>33</sup> The Stalin-era settlements thus produced the “multiethnicization” of Abkhazia, not its “Georgianization.”

Nonetheless, Abkhazian activists in 1988 and 1989 specifically blamed Georgians for the demographic shifts in Abkhazia when justifying an upgrade in the status of their autonomous republic. Both the Abkhazian Letter and the March 1989 memorandum noted the relative stagnation of the Abkhazian population compared to other ethnic groups in Abkhazia. The memorandum observed that Abkhazians had gone from a majority of the population in the late nineteenth century to a minority of seventeen percent by 1988, while the share of the Georgian population had gone from 24% to 44%. Both sources blamed this population shift on a Georgian plan to colonize Abkhazia, first implemented in the late nineteenth century under Russian imperial rule.<sup>34</sup> The Letter also reported on the second wave of “colonization” beginning in 1937, under Georgian Communist Lavrentii Beria’s supervision. Exaggerating, the Abkhazian Letter asserted that 100,000 Georgians were settled in Abkhazia over the next two decades.<sup>35</sup> The Letter argued that Georgian authorities continued to carry out their plans for the “demographic assimilation of Abkhazia” through the importation of unneeded labor from other parts of Georgia. The Letter and the memorandum both insisted that “the process of resettlement...is continuing”; as evidence, the former cited a 1976 plan calling for the mass importation of workers through the year 2000.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 1959 statistics are from *ibid.*, 237.

<sup>34</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 38, 110. The memorandum was originally published in *Sovietskaya Abkhazia* (Sukhumi), 24 March 1989.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 65, 111.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

That Abkhazians would target, specifically, the Georgians for their plight, however, makes sense. While it would be more logical to blame Russians for their demographic plight, and be troubled about the growth in population of not only Georgians but Russians and Armenians as well, the most recent demographic trends clearly encouraged Abkhazians to focus, specifically, on the Georgian share of the population. From 1959 to 1989, the Russian population of Abkhazia actually declined, by 14%, while the Armenian population increased, but by only 19%.<sup>37</sup> In comparison, the number of Georgians increased by 52%. While in 1959 there were more Russians *and* more Armenians in Abkhazia than Abkhazians, by 1989 the number of Abkhazians had decisively surpassed the total number of both.

Georgians, on the other hand, had increased as much as Abkhazians during this time and, consequently, had improved their relative position in Abkhazia. While the Abkhazian share of the population may have been on the rise since 1959, rising roughly one percentage point every decade, Georgians' population share had risen even faster, from 39% in 1959 to 46% in 1989. As long as Abkhazia remained part of Soviet Georgia, there was no reason for Abkhazians to believe this growth rate was going to slow.

With the rise of the Georgian nationalist movement in late 1988, moreover, the threat of population shift increased even more. Throughout 1988, a major discussion among members of the Georgian intelligentsia concerned Georgians' own demographic

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. The secular trends of Russian and Armenian population growth were, in fact, more similar than these statistics show, with signs of out-migration of both groups from 1970 on. While Russians and Armenians both enjoyed increases in population from 1959 to 1970, their populations both decreased from 1970 to 1979 (slight for Armenians, substantial for Russians). From 1979 to 1989, the Armenian population increased, but by only 4%, while the Russian population decreased by 6% (compare to Abkhazian and Georgian increases in the same period of, respectively, 12.3% and 12.5%).



situation.<sup>38</sup> Sparking concern were two facts: the differing birth rates of Georgians and non-Georgians in the republic as well the longstanding minority status of Georgians in many of its border areas. While Georgians had maintained a steady two-thirds share of the republic's population (or higher) during Soviet rule, they now began to fret that this majority status was going to disappear, as it already had over the centuries in various borderlands.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, the Georgians' demographic discussion had two foci: how to increase Georgians' absolute birth rate and how to increase their share of Georgia's population. While discussions of the first point were not that relevant to the republic's minorities, those related to the second point were undeniably troubling. In a September 1988 article, Georgian academic Taniel Kvanchilishvili declared that there was "no need to hide the fact that the growth of Georgians is completely minimal in the republic, and the growth of representatives of other peoples progresses at an accelerated rate." As one way to deal with this problem, Kvanchilishvili drew on the entirely inappropriate example of China. Noting the Chinese government's policy of limiting births, Kvanchilishvili asked "why shouldn't we consider such a possibility, so that the peoples living [in Georgia] with high rates of growth limited their births?....At least with this the

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Nana Adeishvili, "Demograpiuli politikis dziritadi sakitkhebi (Central issues of demographic policy)," *Akhalgazrda komunisti* (Tbilisi), 24 December 1988. Adeishvili also mentions a program published in *Tbilisi* (Tbilisi), 2 February 1988.

<sup>39</sup> In fact, the 1989 census, while still in the future when this discussion began, would just have exacerbated this fear. While Georgians still consisted of 69% of the republic's population in 1979, the 1989 census reported a drop of eight percent, to 61%. In 1922, Georgians had made up 72% of the population. See Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 322; and Stephen Jones, "The Establishment of Soviet Power in Transcaucasia: The Case of Georgia 1921-1928," *Soviet Studies* 15 (1988): 617.

demographic process [in Georgia] would be normalized.”<sup>40</sup> Building on this idea, the November 1988 article cited above recommended that non-Georgians in the republic be limited to two children. For those “who wish extended reproduction,” the author suggested “granting the right to leave for a place of residence outside [of Georgia]”.<sup>41</sup>

While such comments may have constituted the ramblings of fringe nationalists, the fact that they were published in 1988, when the Communist Party was still in power in Georgia, gave them a more ominous quality than they otherwise merited. Svetlana Chervonnaya, a Russian commentator generally sympathetic to the Georgian position, is too honest to ignore the fact that such “crazy statements” had, in fact, been published in the Georgian press. Her claim, however, that “[t]he policy of Georgia...cannot be assessed on the basis of selected quotations from certain lunatic newspapers” is unsustainable.<sup>42</sup> Kvanchilishvili’s article was published in *Literary Georgia*, the official media organ of the Georgian Union of Writers. The other article cited was published in the official Georgian-language newspaper of the Communist Party. Even if the sentiments expressed represented the fringe of Georgian public opinion, more responsible

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<sup>40</sup> Taniel Kvanchilashvili, “Mere ra ikneba (Then what will be?)” *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*, 30 September 1988.

<sup>41</sup> *Komunisti* (Tbilisi), 21 November 1988, cited in Svetlana Chervonnaya, trans. Ariane Chanturia, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia, and the Russian Shadow* (Glastonbury, UK: Gothic Image Publications, 1994), 55. I am, unfortunately, unable to confirm this source. Chervonnaya herself does not quote the newspaper directly, citing as her source another academic study, Olga Vasilyeva’s *Georgia as a Model of Post-Communist Transformation* (Moscow, 1993; in Russian). One Ossetian commentator also noted, however, that the “two-baby” suggestion had emerged in the Georgian press, although he does not offer a citation. Igor Dzantiev, “Svobodu naroda zadushit’ nevozmozhno (The freedom of the people is impossible to strangle),” in *Yuzhnaia Osetia: I krov’, i pepel* (South Ossetia: Blood and ashes) (Vladikavkaz: Assotsiatsia tvorcheskoi i nauchnoi intelligentsia ‘Ir,’ 1991), 49.

<sup>42</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus*, 56.

Georgians still had to answer for the fact that they had appeared in official, ostensibly moderate, media organs.

So while Georgian authorities may not have seriously countenanced the suggestions offered in their pages, they also could not be so easily dismissed. Their publication did not have to mean that Georgian authorities were going to seriously consider implementing a “one minority, one baby” policy in the republic. Abkhazians need only have interpreted Georgian authorities’ willingness to publish such articles as a sign the government was at least prepared to countenance a new wave of Georgian migration to regions where Georgians were not a majority. Given the multiple precedents for Georgian resettlement in Abkhazia, such a conclusion was a reasonable one to make. Indeed, in November 1988, an Abkhazian official felt obliged to report that “the claims regarding the alleged practice of mass resettlement of individuals into Abkhazia from other regions is completely without foundation. For more than two decades no planned resettlement of families...has occurred.”<sup>43</sup> Be that as it may, Abkhazians now confronted, with the rise of the Georgian nationalist movement, not only the prospect that Georgians would become a majority in Abkhazia through natural growth, but the threat that Georgian officials would seek to accelerate that growth by artificial means. Leaving Georgia would not necessarily resolve the problem of the former. It would, however, at least prevent any more Georgian migrants from coming to Abkhazia.

### **III. The Evidence for Population Shift: South Ossetia**

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<sup>43</sup> *Sovietskaya Abkhazia*, 3 November 1988.

South Ossetians had a more favorable demographic position than either Karabagh Armenians or Abkhazians. The mostly mountainous northern half of South Ossetia had been overwhelmingly Ossetian in population since at least the eighteenth century.<sup>44</sup> The Ossetian population was drastically reduced in 1920 as a result of Georgian suppression. Most refugees returned to the region after Soviet occupation, however. Subsequently, the growth rate of South Ossetians was not dynamic—the population increased only eight percent from 1926 to 1989 (60,400 to 65,200).<sup>45</sup> At the same time, South Ossetians did not suffer the same relative decline that Karabagh Armenians or Abkhazians had. South Ossetians remained a majority in the region (unlike Abkhazians) and not a dwindling one (unlike Karabagh Armenians): if in 1926, they made up 69% of the population, from 1959 on they still possessed a steady two-thirds majority (see Table 4.3 for population trends in South Ossetia).<sup>46</sup> In 1959 and 1970, Georgians made up just 28% of the region's population; in 1979 and 1989, 29%. Moreover, South Ossetians acquired new demographic supremacy in the region's urban center of Tskhinvali. According to a 1922 census, only 613 Ossetians lived in Tskhinvali (compared to 1,436 Georgians, 1,651

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<sup>44</sup> On Ossetian migration to Georgia, see Chapter Three, n. 102.

<sup>45</sup> A. Totadze, *Naselenie Abkhazii/Osetini v Gruzii* (The Population of Abkhazia/Ossetians in Georgia) (Tbilisi: Samshoblo, 1994), 47.

<sup>46</sup> G. Togoshvili and I. Khabalashvili, *Osetis mosakhleoba (mogle istoriul-demografiuli mimokhilva)* (Population of Ossetia [a brief historical-demographic survey]) (Tskhinvali: Iriston, 1983), 52; *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 17 April 1990. The South Ossetian population's high point was the 1939 census, which recorded a total of 72,100 Ossetians (an increase of 19% from 1926). The Ossetian growth rate subsequently dropped 12% (to 63,700) by 1959. Evidently, the main reason for this was a 1944 resettlement of South Ossetians to North Ossetian regions left vacant after Stalin's wartime deportation of resident Ingush. See Soltan Dzarasov, "Anatomia konflikta (Anatomy of the conflict)," in *Yuzhnaia Osetia: I krov', i pepel* (South Ossetia: Blood and ashes) (Vladikavkaz: Assotsiatsia tvorcheskoi i nauchnoi intelligentsia 'Ir,' 1991), 24.

Georgian Jews, and 765 Armenians).<sup>47</sup> By 1989, there were almost 32,000 (75% of the town's total population).<sup>48</sup>

Ossetian activists were relatively subdued when it came to discussing population shift. They mentioned neither past nor present demographic trends. On several occasions, however, they did refer to the tendency of Georgian nationalists to label minorities within the republic as “guests” (of, that is, their Georgian “hosts”). At the July demonstration, Chochiev underlined the significance of this phrase by adding that Georgians were planning to make minorities leave Georgia.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, South Ossetians too had to be worried about the demographic implications of the Georgian nationalist movement. Not only would propositions like those discussed above affect South Ossetians as much as Abkhazians, the language of “hosts” and “guests” was even more relevant to South Ossetians. While Georgians were still disputing whether or not Abkhazians were a “host” (i.e., indigenous) population of Georgia (see Chapter Three), they firmly regarded South Ossetians as migrants from the North Caucasus (“guests”), who had come to Georgia “just” a few centuries before. So when commentators spoke of the need to assess the numerical relationship between “native” and “arrivee” populations or the unfavorable growth rate between “our own

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<sup>47</sup> Totadze, *Naselenie Abkhazii/Osetini v Gruzii*, 53. Even this was a relatively recent settlement. In 1886, there were no Ossetians recorded living in Tskhinvali.

<sup>48</sup> Data from the 1989 census available by district and city at [http://georgia-gateway.org/ENG/Regional/General\\_Data/cxrili.php3](http://georgia-gateway.org/ENG/Regional/General_Data/cxrili.php3).

<sup>49</sup> *Leninskoe Znamya* (Tbilisi), 24 October 1989, reprinted in *Sovietskaya Osetia* (Tskhinvali), 14 November 1989. Also see *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* (Tbilisi), 5 May 1989; *Sabchota Oseti* (Tskhinvali), 2 August 1989; and *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 15 November 1989.

people” and “our guests,” the implicit threat to South Ossetians in particular was significant.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, the association of the Georgian nationalist movement with the independent Georgian state of 1918-1921 could only bolster South Ossetian concerns regarding population shift. Independent Georgia had created a mass of South Ossetian refugees who had had no hope of ever returning to their homes. After the 1920 suppression, the government formed a “resettlement commission” to plan for the further relocation of suspect Ossetians from the region and the transfer there of Georgian villagers.<sup>51</sup> The commission even ordered the total evacuation of the areas around the northern village of Java, which had been the staging ground for the revolt, and “temporarily” revoked the right of residency for all Ossetians except those working in government service or who could otherwise prove themselves to be “faithful citizens of

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<sup>50</sup> Kvanchilishvili added that Georgians did not need to respect trite appeals to Soviet “internationalism” and avoid discussing such issues since, he asked, “what kind of real internationalism can we speak about, if 100,000 representatives of one nation settle down on the land of another people, push them out and create [for them] a danger of extinction?” Similarly, said Mishveladze, “[w]e must take any measure necessary so that the percentage of the Georgian population increased....It is Georgia’s unlimited naïve hospitality and a poor understanding of internationalism on the part of her former leaders that has brought her to this.” *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*, 30 September 1988. The “guest” language is presented in another such article published in *Akhalgarzda komunisti*, 29 June 1989, cited in Dzantiev, “Svobodu naroda zadushit’ nevozmozhno,” 51.

<sup>51</sup> The main order of the resettlement commission is reprinted in I. N. Tskhovrebov, ed., *Bor’ba trudyashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii za Sovetskuyu vlast’ (Dokumenty i materialy)* (The struggle of the working masses of South Ossetia for Soviet power [Documents and materials], 2nd ed.) (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]: Gosizdat Yugo-Osetii Tskhovrebov, 1960), doc. 97. Also see I. D. Nikonov, *Krest’yanskie vosstaniia v Yugo-Osetii v 1917-1920 gg.* (The peasant uprisings in South Ossetia, 1917-1920) (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]: Stalinirskaiia tipografia Gruzglavizdata, 1956), 63, 67; and B. Z. Pliev, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya Yuzhnoi Osetii za Sovetskuyu vlast’ v 1917-1921 gg.* (The struggle of the working masses of South Ossetia for Soviet power, 1917-1921) (Tskhinvali: Izdatel’svo Iriston, 1977), 245-246.

the republic.”<sup>52</sup> These troubling precedents made it possible to fear that Georgian nationalists, if they came to power, would adopt an aggressive demographic policy in the region in order to shift the population balance in favor of Georgians. In this case, even given South Ossetians’ existing demographic superiority, separating from Georgia was a sensible way to protect that position.

### ***The Significance of Population Shift***

As discussed in Chapter One, identifying the threat of population shift provides only a partial explanation of group motivation. What was it that made Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians so concerned about migration that they would mobilize to avoid it? The next section establishes a connection between migration and the more basic fear of economic discrimination.

## **IV. The Evidence for Economic Discrimination: Mountainous Karabagh**

Many times in the past, Karabagh Armenians had expressed a belief that their association with Azerbaijan stunted their economic advancement. During the period of

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<sup>52</sup> Tskhovrebov, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 97. There were also reports of some Ossetians protesting their loyalty to the Georgian state, begging not to be evicted from their homes. Pliev, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya*, 249. Days after the suppression, a delegation of South Ossetian workers from Tbilisi beseeched the government to state whether the rumor that it intended to “liquidate the Ossetian question...once and for all” through the mass resettlement of South Ossetians was true. Tskhovrebov, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 80; Pliev, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya*, 247. Poignantly, the purpose of the delegation’s request was to pave the way for an orderly, minimally violent deportation, if the government was indeed determined to pursue such a policy.

Azerbaijani independence (1918-1920), Karabagh Armenians complained repeatedly of economic oppression.<sup>53</sup>

Decades later, Karabagh Armenians again insisted that Azerbaijani authorities were targeting them economically. In their 1964 petition, activists claimed that Azerbaijani authorities were engaged in a series of discriminatory policies “intended to bring about a deterioration in the economy of the Armenian population.” Specifically, they argued that “every enterprise [in Mountainous Karabagh] has been thwarted and established institutions have either been inhibited from functioning or have been transferred to regions inhabited by Azerbaijanis.” They noted the destruction of traditional mulberry cultivation, excessive demands for wool, and the failure to repair or erect roads between the regional capital of Stepanakert and outlying districts. In Armenian-populated districts directly outside the autonomous region (which petitioners also sought to separate from Azerbaijan) the situation was “unbearable,” with discrimination “everywhere and in everything.” All these measures, the petitioners said, “have deprived the Armenian population of the region of its livelihood and well-being and forced it to abandon [Mountainous Karabagh].”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See Libaridian, *The Karabagh File*, docs. 10, 15. The former document is also available in V. A. Mikayelian, ed., *Nagornyi Karabakh v 1918-1923 gg. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Mountainous Karabagh, 1918-1923: A collection of documents and materials) (Yerevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armenii, 1992), doc. 105.

<sup>54</sup> *Armenian Review*, Autumn 1968, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 27. Their claim was, in fact, even more extensive: “Apparently, the followers of people’s enemy Bagirov [the former Azerbaijani first secretary] have not forgotten his instructions. Their objective was...the expulsion of the Armenian population of Karabagh. To this end, they relentlessly and systematically trampled upon the interests of the Armenian population, derided the workers and subjected the people in general to inexcusably hostile treatment....”



In the 1980s, when Karabagh Armenians' initiated their regional campaign, evidence of such discrimination becomes less compelling. Some commentators have attempted to demonstrate that Mountainous Karabagh was a target of regional discrimination by noting inequities between levels of capital investment in Mountainous Karabagh and in Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan's other autonomous formation, populated mainly by Azerbaijanis. One commentator, for instance, notes that Mountainous Karabagh had a per capita level of capital investment less than half of Nakhichevan's in the years 1970 and 1986, while a second notes considerably higher investment in Nakhichevan in 1975 and opposite trends in investment from 1981-1983 (an increase for Nakhichevan, decrease for Mountainous Karabagh).<sup>55</sup>

These statistics are, however, inconclusive. Ignoring the problem of using arbitrarily selected data, even if Nakhichevan enjoyed consistently higher levels of capital investment, this was hardly indicative of discrimination against Mountainous Karabagh. Nakhichevan rested on a highly strategic Soviet border, abutting both Turkey and Iran; as such, it could be expected to receive a greater share of capital investment than other, less strategic areas of Azerbaijan like Mountainous Karabagh. Moreover, the levels of capital investment in Mountainous Karabagh actually increased over time, while those of Nakhichevan declined. Compared to levels of investment in 1970, Nakhichevan had 28 to 48% *less* investment in four of the six subsequent years for which commentators

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<sup>55</sup> V. B. Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe: Khronika Chast' I (Fevral' 1988 g.-Ianvar' 1989 g.)* (Events in Mountainous Karabagh: A chronicle, vol. 1 [February 1988-January 1989]) (Erevan: Izdatel'stvo AN ArmSSR, 1990), 21; Grigor Avakian, *Nagorni Karabakh: Otvet fal'sifikatoram* (Mountainous Karabagh: An answer to the falsifiers) (Erevan: Hayastan, 1991), 22.

provided data. Mountainous Karabagh, on the other hand, had 16 to 72% *more* investment in four of these years and an identical amount of investment in another.<sup>56</sup>

Other statistics suggest that Mountainous Karabagh was actually better off than other regions of Azerbaijan on several socioeconomic indicators. While one commentator notes that “disproportions” similar to those in comparison to Nakhichevan existed between districts within Mountainous Karabagh and neighboring districts outside the region, he only provides one such example without any supporting evidence.<sup>57</sup> Soon after the separatist campaign began, Azerbaijanis themselves produced statistics which included “data on nine socio-economic indicators, including numbers of hospital beds and doctors per capita, libraries, child care facilities, and living space.” According to the data, Mountainous Karabagh “was ahead of Armenia on all but two factors, ahead of the Azerbaijan aggregate figures on all but one, and ahead of the USSR averages on five of nine factors measured and nearly even on a sixth.”<sup>58</sup>

If Mountainous Karabagh was underdeveloped, then, we can attribute this fact to the general neglect of provincial areas, a trend that affected all of Azerbaijan and, for that matter, the entire USSR—not discrimination against Mountainous Karabagh per se. Other examples commentators have provided uphold this observation, such as the region’s

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<sup>56</sup> I have calculated these numbers from the data provided by Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 21-22; and Avakian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 21.

<sup>58</sup> Audrey L. Alstadt, “*O Patria Mia: National Conflict in Mountainous Karabagh*,” in *Ethnic Nationalism and Regional Conflict: The Former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*, ed. W. Raymond Duncan and G. Paul Holman, Jr. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 115-116. The statistics are from an article on economic development in Mountainous Karabagh published in *Bakinskii rabochii*, 11 March 1988, reprinted in *Konflikt v Nagornom Karabakhe: sbornik statei* (Conflict in Mountainous Karabagh: A collection of articles) (Baku: Azerbaijanskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1990), 79-97 (at 87).

monoculture of grape production and the wholesale destruction of its vineyards.<sup>59</sup> One commentator admits, however, that the grape monoculture was the same in Mountainous Karabagh as “in Azerbaijan as a whole” and the destruction of vineyards resulted from “Gorbachev’s [i.e., not Azerbaijan’s] anti-alcohol campaign.”<sup>60</sup> The fact that Armenian residents of nearby rural districts *within Armenia itself* were leaving the countryside at a faster pace than those in Mountainous Karabagh suggests that rural flight was caused not by Karabagh Armenians’ association with Azerbaijan but by the conditions of life in the Soviet countryside more generally.<sup>61</sup>

This is a conclusion that scholars on both sides of the debate have reached. Historian and scholar of Azerbaijan Audrey Altstadt has noted that “[p]erceived problems in [Mountainous Karabagh] were apparently less a product of Azerbaijani rule than of Soviet conditions of low productivity, neglect of the environment and a wide range of other problems that plague many regions of the USSR including Azerbaijan and Armenia.” Nora Dudwick, an anthropologist and expert on Armenia, tentatively concurs: “the Karabagh Armenians’ standard of living may not have been significantly worse than

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<sup>59</sup> Mark Malkasian, “*Gha-ra-bagh!*”: *The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 27; Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 21; Avakian, *Otvét fal’sifikatoram*, 22; Galoian and Khudaverdian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, 47-48; Mirzoian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, 20, 27.

<sup>60</sup> Malkasian, “*Gha-ra-bagh!*”, 27.

<sup>61</sup> The Armenian population in these districts declined twenty percent or more when, by contrast, the Karabagh Armenian population actually increased. I derived these percentages from the data provided by Avakian, *Otvét fal’sifikatoram*, 135. Using the somewhat different data provided by Yamskov, the population shift in these regions appears even greater. Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus,” 646. A similar point is made in Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 140.

that of their non-Armenian neighbors.”<sup>62</sup> Other observers have expressed a similar opinion.<sup>63</sup>

This hesitation is reflected in the lack of economic justifications for action produced by Armenian activists. Suren Ayvazian was the only one who mentioned economic threats specifically, claiming that Azerbaijan was “[expelling] local Armenians from their administrative positions.”<sup>64</sup>

Even so, Karabagh Armenians may still have blamed the Azerbaijani center for their low level of economic development. One Armenian commentator argues that most of the increased capital investment of the 1970s did not actually help the region, as most of it was applied towards the construction of a reservoir which irrigated lands almost exclusively outside Mountainous Karabagh.<sup>65</sup> As for the destruction of the region’s vineyards, even if this was a consequence of Soviet central policy, it was still carried out by agents of the Azerbaijani center. Karabagh Armenians could thus have reasoned that Azerbaijani officials had taken the policy to an unnecessary extreme, something that would not have occurred if Mountainous Karabagh had been part of Armenia. In the end, regardless of whether Mountainous Karabagh was better or worse off than other areas in Azerbaijan, that Karabagh Armenians believed their region would be better off under Armenian administration is not difficult to imagine.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Alstadt, “*O Patria Mia*,” 116; Nora Dudwick, “Armenian-Azerbaijani Relations and Karabagh: History, Memory, and Politics,” *Armenian Review* 46 (1993): 83.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus,” 640; and de Waal, *Black Garden*, 139.

<sup>64</sup> *Haratch*, 3-14 December 1987.

<sup>65</sup> Mirzoian, “Nagorny Karabakh: Statistical Considerations,” 19.

<sup>66</sup> This point is made in both Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus,” 640; and de Waal, *Black Garden*, 139.

Moreover, while Mountainous Karabagh may not have suffered from regional discrimination after the 1960s, Karabagh Armenians still had to contend with prospects of ethnic competition at the local level, as Ayvazian's memo suggested. In 1975, the regional Party committee announced a decision to promote more "representatives of all nationalities" to administrative positions in Mountainous Karabagh, a phrase that implied the need to increase appointments of Azerbaijanis in the region. Subsequently, according to one Yerevan commentator, mainly Azerbaijanis "were hired in the law enforcement and economic bodies." The commentator also noted that "in the Armenian population points, [Azerbaijani] personnel appointed in Baku began to work as specialists."<sup>67</sup> So long as this trend continued in the 1980s, Karabagh Armenians would have had reason to be concerned about competition with Azerbaijanis for positions in administration or the local economy. Moreover, as Karabagh Armenians feared, Azerbaijani authorities continued promoting the settlement of Azerbaijanis in the region, this fight for economic privilege would only worsen. Given this, the fact that statistics fail to prove regional discrimination is not determining—given the threat of economic discrimination in favor of in-migrating Azerbaijanis, Karabagh Armenians could still have considered that their economic status would be protected if they were to separate from Azerbaijan.

## **V. The Evidence for Economic Discrimination: Abkhazia**

The evidence for the economic impact of Abkhazia's association with Georgia is also mixed. Some commentators point to data on low capital investment as proof of

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<sup>67</sup> Mirzoian, "Nagorny Karabakh: Statistical Considerations," 23.

regional discrimination. Like Mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia was under-industrialized compared to Georgia as a whole. Darrell Slider notes that Abkhazia's industrial sector accounted for only 14% of employment in 1978, compared to 20% in Georgia. He also estimates that Abkhazia's state budget ("an important source of centralized investment") was, per capita, consistently about 40% lower than that of Georgia. Finally, he notes that the rate of capital investment in Abkhazia increased only 21% between the two five-year plans of the 1970s, compared to an increase of 39% in Georgia.<sup>68</sup>

Still, such statistics do not fully reflect Abkhazia's relative state of development. First of all, the years leading up to the Abkhazians' regional campaign in 1988-1989 have to be distinguished from the years that Slider surveyed. In addition to introducing cultural reforms, the 1978 reform package (see Chapter Three) outlined plans for increased investment in key factories and industrial areas, as well as the erection of new roads, medical facilities, schools, government offices, and agricultural hothouses throughout the republic.<sup>69</sup>

Additionally, Abkhazia's reputation as the "Soviet Riviera" cannot be ignored. One observer of the Abkhazian scene, Giorgi Derluguian, notes that "[a]t its peak, Abkhazia...was visited annually by more than two million vacationers. The coastal strip emerged as one of the wealthiest spots in the USSR, conspicuously displayed in its

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<sup>68</sup> Darrell Slider, "Crisis and Response in Soviet Nationality Policy: The Case of Abkhazia," *Central Asian Survey* 4, no. 4 (1985): 57, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 64. Slider also notes that orders were passed to preserve Abkhazia's forests (long a victim of an overzealous lumber industry) and to reduce pollution.

abundance of private mansions and automobiles.”<sup>70</sup> Data on capital investment, therefore, does not necessarily provide an accurate depiction of regional wealth.

That said, Abkhazians may still have believed that their group, if not their region, was at an economic disadvantage. Evidence suggests that many Abkhazians felt this way at least in earlier years. In 1946, KGB agents reported a number of “expressions of malicious anti-Soviet sentiment” among Abkhazians who complained that they had lost their jobs because they were Abkhazian or were being forced to wait for work until migrants from other parts of Georgia had been placed.<sup>71</sup> The following year, members of the Abkhazian intellectual elite sent a letter to the Soviet government to raise a number of local concerns, one of which was that Georgian settlers were receiving preferential housing and, in many cases, taking jobs away from members of the local population.<sup>72</sup> In later years, Abkhazians complained in writing or at public demonstrations that Abkhazians were not receiving professional training, that Abkhazians (and Russians) worked the mines of Abkhazia while Georgians operated them, and that Abkhazians who received a higher education outside of Georgia (to take advantage of quality Russian-language education) had little prospect of finding work when they returned, since the distribution of positions was controlled by Georgian officials who gave preference to individuals educated in Georgian (i.e., Georgian-language) institutions.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Giorgi Derluguian, “The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria Before and Since the Soviet Collapse,” *The Myth of “Ethnic Conflict”: Politics, Economics, and “Cultural” Violence*, ed. Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D. Lipschutz (Berkeley: International and Area Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1998), 268, 269.

<sup>71</sup> Clogg, “Documents from the KGB,” 168-170.

<sup>72</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 86.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 132, 139; Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 28. These points were made, respectively, in 1957, 1965, and 1977.

The same picture emerges with regards to professional employment. Authors of a letter to the Soviet government in 1985 noted considerable population ratio imbalances in the 1970s related to workers with higher education in the state economic sector as well as numbers of scientists and scholars (*nauchnie rabotniki*). The authors indicated that in 1970 the ratio of Georgian workers with higher education to the Georgian population as a whole in Abkhazia was 1 in 30, while the corresponding Abkhazian ratio was only 1 in 45. In 1975, they indicated, the ratio of Georgian scientists and scholars to total population (throughout Georgia) was nearly 2.5 times as great as the corresponding Abkhazian ratio.<sup>74</sup>

Related data confirm these imbalances. The authors of the 1985 letter noted that the number of graduates of higher education in Georgia was over 50 per 1000 while in Abkhazia it was only 31. Since authors did not distinguish on the basis of ethnicity, this data is admittedly of limited utility. Other data, however, indicate a problem of higher education specific to Abkhazians: the number of Abkhazians enrolled in institutions of higher education gradually decreased from 2500 in 1967 to 1800 in 1976, a drop of 28%. Moreover, the number of Abkhazian scholars and scientists in the latter half of the 1970s increased hardly at all, from 249 in 1975 to 251 in 1979.<sup>75</sup>

None of this data, however, conclusively proves discrimination against Abkhazians. Statistics on professional employment obscure considerable variation in starting point. As late as 1939, 78% of Abkhazians were still classified as peasants, compared to 59% of Georgians. As late as 1950, there were only 15 (!) Abkhazian scientists and scholars in all of Georgia; the fact that the number reached even 250 in

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<sup>74</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 379, 380.

<sup>75</sup> Slider, "Crisis and Response," 56.



twenty-five years was a notable accomplishment. Moreover, from 1960 to 1967 the number of Abkhazians enrolled in institutions of higher education steadily increased; the last two years had particularly high increases, most likely a governmental response to the wave of protests in the region in 1966-67 (see Chapter Three).<sup>76</sup> Even with the subsequent declines of the next decade, the number of Abkhazians enrolled in institutions of higher education were still several hundred higher than before these increases. Finally, even Abkhazians in 1977 themselves noted that Georgian overrepresentation in higher education was at the expense of other minorities' representation, not that of Abkhazians themselves.<sup>77</sup>

As well, the years prior to the regional campaign again must be distinguished from the 1970s and before. The 1978 protest had a result in the educational sphere similar to that of the 1966-67 protests: between 1976 and 1980, the number of Abkhazians enrolled in institutions of higher education leapt from 1800 to 2600.<sup>78</sup> Many of these new enrollees were the beneficiary of the transformation of Abkhazia's main institution of higher education, the Sukhumi Pedagogical Institute, into a full-fledged Abkhazian State University: while the institute had had only 265 students in 1978, by 1983 the university had 3700. Many other Abkhazian students were admitted to Georgia's universities and colleges without customary entrance examinations; still others were allowed to take their examinations in Russian as well as receive customized Russian-language instruction.<sup>79</sup>

Data on Communist Party membership also undermines the argument that Abkhazians were a target of discrimination (such data being a proxy for economic

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 56, 58.

<sup>77</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 29.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>79</sup> Slider, "Crisis and Response," 63.

advantage as much as, if not more than, political advantage). While Georgians were over-represented in the republican Communist Party (the norm in all union republics of the Soviet Union), as in higher education such Georgian overrepresentation was mainly at the expense of Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Russians, not Abkhazians. Abkhazians enjoyed a membership/population ratio quite close to that of Georgians (8% for Georgians, 7% for Abkhazians).<sup>80</sup> Also, while Georgians were over-represented in the Abkhazian Communist Party, comprising over 50% of the overall membership while making up only 40% of the total population, this overrepresentation was again at the expense of ethnic minorities other than Abkhazians. From 1960 to 1981 the Georgian share of regional Party membership fluctuated between 50% and 51%; this amounted to an overrepresentation of Georgians within the Communist Party of approximately 6 to 7%. At the same time, the Abkhazian share of regional Party membership increased several percentage points, from 14% to 19%, ultimately resulting in a slight overrepresentation (1 to 2%) of Abkhazians as well.<sup>81</sup> While other minorities in Abkhazia may have suffered from Georgian overrepresentation in regional Party membership, Abkhazians did not.

Other evidence also suggests that Abkhazians did not suffer economically. Derluguian reports that while Abkhazians were “prominent in neither the tourist business nor in organized crime,” their positions “in the police, managerial and party bureaucracies, and the intelligentsia provided sufficient legal and extralegal means of

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<sup>80</sup> The respective ratios for Russians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis was 4.8%, 5.1%, and 3.5%. Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 101.

<sup>81</sup> See the data presented by Slider, “Crisis and Response,” 53.

compensation.” Moreover, according to Derluguian, Abkhazians “controlled much of the land and the most lucrative crops.”<sup>82</sup>

That said, Abkhazian organizers expressed a wide array of economic concerns. The March 1989 memorandum introduced the issue with a quotation from a Georgian communist’s 1926 speech accusing the independent Georgian government of “turn[ing] Abkhazia into an object of exploitation” and seeking to control all the republic’s resources, land in particular.<sup>83</sup>

Both the Letter and the memorandum went on to argue that the situation was the same at the present time. The Abkhazian Letter accused Georgian authorities of engaging in a policy of “economic strangulation.”<sup>84</sup> The memorandum concurred, noting that Abkhazia lacked “the opportunity to independently administer its economy and resolve even some of the major economic problems in the region.” According to both, the Abkhazian government controlled less than ten percent of all enterprises in the republic.<sup>85</sup> The Letter also noted that Abkhazia’s agrarian economy churned out export crops like tobacco, tea, and citrus instead of focusing on sectors that would benefit the local population (like cattle, corn, and nuts). Land distribution was entirely in the hands of Georgian government, “without whose consent no one can domesticate a single patch of land.” This situation, the Letter claimed, “accords with the aim of the [Georgian] government to use Abkhazia’s land fund for their resettlement policies.” Finally, the

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<sup>82</sup> Derluguian, “Tale of Two Resorts,” 268, 269.

<sup>83</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 110.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 98, 114.

Letter held that Georgians were over-represented in institutions of higher education, skilled professions, and the Communist Party.<sup>86</sup>

The Abkhazian Letter placed particular emphasis on unfair benefits conferred on the imported labor force. The Letter noted that when Georgian settlers first arrived in Abkhazia during Stalin's rule, they received priority housing and land and their settlement was financed at the expense of the local budget. It noted that local factories with Georgian managers "give preference" in hiring to ethnic Georgians and claimed that several managers exclusively employ an imported labor force which receives preferential housing while many locals languish in unacceptable living conditions. Such a policy, the Letter said, "creates the impression that these enterprises...exist only to take in workers from Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi," and other cities and towns outside of Abkhazia.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, the Abkhazian Letter briefly considered the impact of language policy not on Abkhazians' ethnic identity but on their economic welfare. It claimed that in Stalin's last years, government and business employees who did not know Georgian had lost their jobs. It also accused Georgian authorities since then of seeking to promote Georgian-speakers over Russian-speakers in professional positions.<sup>88</sup>

Both the Abkhazian Letter and the memorandum held that Abkhazians' economic concerns would continue so long as Abkhazia was a part of Georgia. The memorandum reported that throughout its existence as a Soviet autonomy, Abkhazia

"was for all intents and purposes deprived of the opportunity to independently administer its economy, resolve at least some of the significant

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 98, 99-100, 101.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 66, 67-69.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 80, 83.

economic questions in the region. The [Soviet federal] system of administration holds back the socio-economic development of Abkhazia....Only with the transformation of the Abkhazian ASSR into [a full union republic] will the development of its economy become possible.”

The Letter concurred, stating simply that ”there are no hopes that [Georgia’s economic] relationship to Abkhazia and the Abkhazian people will ever change.”<sup>89</sup>

At the very least, Abkhazians certainly had reason to worry about competition from Georgians. Derluguian notes a stable division of labor within the Abkhazian economy, with “tourism...left to the Armenians and Greeks” and “coal mining and power supply...to immigrant Russians and Ukrainians.” In this division Georgians did not have an uncontested place. Their sources of economic advancement were the same as those of Abkhazians—the procurement of administrative posts as well as positions in agricultural management and labor. Given their sizable portion of the population, any advantage Abkhazians had due to preferential treatment was bound to be fragile, particularly under conditions of democratization.

Most importantly, the increased likelihood of political change that existed after activists issued the Abkhazian Letter in the summer of 1988 could easily have transformed Abkhazian concerns regarding economic competition into fear of permanent discrimination. On the early agenda of the Georgian nationalist movement was, after all, the cessation of alleged centrally-supported discrimination *by minorities against Georgians* in various regions of the republic.<sup>90</sup> If the nationalist movement was

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>90</sup> See Elizabeth Fuller, “Independent Political Groupings in Georgia,” *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin* 527/88 (25 November 1988).

successful, Abkhazians could assume, their competition with Georgians would end up in the institutionalized victory of the latter, with ever more Georgians receiving preferred positions in republican administration and agriculture. This would be especially true if Georgians were to carry out a new plan of Georgian settlement to the region, as nationalist rhetoric suggested.

## **VI. The Evidence for Economic Discrimination: South Ossetia**

With regards to South Ossetia, we can dismiss fears of regional (as opposed to ethnic) discrimination as a cause of mobilization. True, South Ossetia was a predominantly mountainous, rural, underdeveloped region. Moreover, South Ossetians revealed their concern with regional underdevelopment in an unprecedented display of mass mobilization in April 1988, just two months after Karabagh Armenians issued their petition to unify with Armenia. In a series of large, public demonstrations, residents of the regional capital Tskhinvali blamed a local breakout of typhoid fever on the town's water supply system and called for long-overdue improvements in urban services and the punishment of local officials.<sup>91</sup> Demonstrations against the regional leadership continued until the regional Party Committee agreed to release the region's Party First Secretary Feliks Sanakoyev from his duties.<sup>92</sup>

While such demonstrations would suggest that fears of underdevelopment played a role in South Ossetian mobilization, a question lingers: If South Ossetians eventually

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<sup>91</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 20, 21 April 1988; *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Moscow), 26 April 1988, trans. available in the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 30 April 1988.

<sup>92</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 23 April 1988; *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 26 April 1988.

mobilized for institutional change on this basis, why did their original mobilization in April 1988 consist solely of demands for regional development and *not* (as in the case of Karabagh Armenians) for a redrawing of administrative boundaries? The fact that it did not focus on this political goal compels us to dismiss a link between fears of underdevelopment and the South Ossetians' own political campaign, which arose more than a year later.<sup>93</sup>

Intriguingly, South Ossetian organizers themselves were quick to dismiss underdevelopment as justification for separatist mobilization. In an October 1989 interview, Chochiev outright denied that South Ossetians were a target of economic discrimination. While he insisted that South Ossetians were “discriminated against,” he clarified that “[w]e distinguish between political and economic equality. *The Ossetian people are not economically oppressed in any way*” (emphasis mine).<sup>94</sup>

At the same time, South Ossetian organizers expressed some economic complaints and fears. *Adamon Nykhas*' manifesto blamed the local Ossetian nomenklatura, together with Georgian authorities, for bringing “the region's economy to the verge of collapse.”<sup>95</sup> The autumn 1989 petition blamed the Georgian State Language Program for being “discriminatory.”<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, as the Georgian nationalist movement grew in strength, South Ossetians could not be complacent about the threat of prospective ethnic discrimination.

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<sup>93</sup> This is so particularly if, as one Ossetian commentator has noted, *Adamon Nykhas* itself organized these strikes. See Soltan Dzarasov, “Anatomia konflikta (Anatomy of the conflict),” in *Yuzhnaia Osetia: I krov', i pepel* (South Ossetia: Blood and ashes) (Vladikavkaz: Assotsiatsia tvorcheskoi i nauchnoi intelligentsia ‘Ir,’ 1991), 26.

<sup>94</sup> *Komunisti*, 15 October 1989.

<sup>95</sup> *Leninskoe Znamya*, 24 October 1989.

<sup>96</sup> *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*, 20 October 1989.

Traditionally, Ossetians had been serfs residing on lands owned by Georgian feudal lords.<sup>97</sup> While the independent Georgian state of 1918-1921 eventually initiated land reform, its rulers were later pilloried by the Soviet establishment as collaborators of the noble class.<sup>98</sup> The Georgian nationalist movement—fashioning itself as a successor to the government—could have tried to dispel this image by emphasizing the socialist ideals and policies of the independent government it sought to succeed. Instead, it emphasized elements of Georgian traditionalism, enabling South Ossetians to equate it with the ethnic-based feudalism of the past. The threat of Georgian migration to the region only exacerbated fears that in an independent Georgia South Ossetians would be returned to a subordinate economic role.

The Georgian State Language Program further raised Ossetian fears of an economic threat.<sup>99</sup> According to the Program, applicants to even the “non-Georgian sectors” of Georgia’s universities and colleges were now going to have to undergo informal pre-application interviews (*sobesedovanie*) to ascertain minimal proficiency in

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<sup>97</sup> See Z. Vaneev, *Krest’ianskii vopros i krest’ianskoe dvizhenie v Yugo-Osetii v XIX veke* (The peasant question and the peasant movement in South Ossetia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo Yugo-Osetii, 1956); and V. Abaev, *Ekonomicheskoe razvitie Yugo-Osetii v period kapitalisma (1864-1917-1921 gg.)* (The economic development of South Ossetia in the period of capitalism [1864-1917-1921]) (Tbilisi: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk GSSR, 1956).

<sup>98</sup> For a lucid discussion of land reform in independent Georgia, see Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 96-112. Also see Vaneev, *Krest’ianskii vopros i krest’ianskoe dvizhenie*, 290-302; and Abaev, *Ekonomicheskoe razvitie Yugo-Osetii*, 18-26.

<sup>99</sup> When the final draft of the program was published in August 1989, it provoked a similar wave of strikes in Abkhazia, with an estimated thirty to forty thousand participants (10-15% of Abkhazia’s entire non-Georgian population). The strikers complained that the Language Program was unclear regarding the extent to which Georgian was going to replace Russian as the language of not only education, but also industry and business. *Sovietskaya Abkhazia*, 9, 13, 14, 16, 19 September 1989.



Georgian language and literature.<sup>100</sup> In this, the Program failed to make any distinction between Georgia proper and autonomies like South Ossetia. It thus implied that South Ossetian students were not only going to have to learn more Georgian in their public schools but would also have to demonstrate at least minimal proficiency in Georgian if they hoped to enter even “their” local institution of higher education, the Russian-language Pedagogical Institute in Tskhinvali.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the State Language Program posed a threat not of forced assimilation, as Chapter Three discussed, but of new obstacles to economic advancement for South Ossetians.

Certain developments during the course of South Ossetian demonstrations enforced this threat of language-based discrimination. In September 1989, local enterprises began to receive letters from republican ministries printed only in Georgian, some of them mandating a transfer of language of administration from Russian to Georgian.<sup>102</sup> When this happened, Georgian First Secretary Givi Gumbaridze hastened to the region to assure the public that the letters had been sent to enterprises in South

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<sup>100</sup> In the final draft, this clause was modified to indicate that the precise nature of these interviews would be left to local college and university administrators. This, however, was not a sufficient qualifier to assuage fears of linguistic discrimination, as government appointees could be expected to take up these positions. *Zarya Vostoka* (Tbilisi), 25 August 1989.

<sup>101</sup> The State Program also established a new requirement for prospective humanities majors in the republic’s Georgian-language institutions of higher education. While previously they only had to pass a written entrance examination in Georgian language and literature, now they would have to pass an oral examination as well. The final draft of the State Program also noted that prospective technical majors (including applicants to the Art Academy, Theatrical Institute, and Musical Conservatory) would have to pass written, but not oral, examinations in Georgian language and literature. This, however, was a re-assertion of existing policy, not a new hurdle, stated to clarify the new distinction between the entrance examinations for these majors and those in the humanities. *Ibid.*; and personal conversation with Tamar Rukhadze, former university student.

<sup>102</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 28 September, 5 October, 14 November 1989.

Ossetia in error and insisted that the “rights of the South Ossetian autonomous oblast will not be violated in any way.”<sup>103</sup> Still, the fact that these letters were sent to local enterprises in the first place was a signal of what South Ossetians could expect if Georgian nationalists managed to wrest power away from the Soviet government.

## **X. Conclusion**

A focus on demographic and economic interests provides a more consistent set of motivations for mobilization among Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians than either fears of violence or cultural extinction (see Table 4.5 for a ranking of motivations). All had fears of state policies that would shift local population ratios, mainly through the encouragement of Azerbaijani and Georgian resettlement, which could be addressed via institutional change. Moreover, all had concerns related to economic discrimination, in part linked to these feared demographic shifts. While demographic and economic grievances of the past may have already been addressed, uncertainty regarding the future of local demography and economic position made groups mobilize for political change—not fear of cultural extinction nor, with the possible exception of South Ossetians, fear of violence.

To return to the discussion of Chapter One, then, similar acts of mass mobilization in the South Caucasus may very well have been produced by similar motivations. In Chapter Six, I will discuss the implications of this finding on the study of

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 5 October 1989.

ethnic mobilization in the late Soviet Union more generally. In Chapter Eight, I will discuss its particular implications on conflict resolution.

However, while suggesting an answer to one question—what motivated groups to mobilize?—this finding raises a second: why did groups not seek to negotiate an adequate settlement to these concerns? After all, all three groups understood that unilateral moves could be dangerous. As the Karabagh Armenian campaign rolled to its conclusion, organizers cancelled a major demonstration in Stepanakert precisely because of warnings that Azerbaijanis from neighboring regions were planning to march on the region.<sup>104</sup> Later, Igor Muradyan, an organizer of the separatist campaign working in Armenia proper and who had family roots in Mountainous Karabagh, acknowledged that “we knew...pogroms were possible before this happened.”<sup>105</sup> In making a decision to try to separate from Georgia, Abkhazians had to contend with nearly a quarter of a million Georgians who lived in Abkhazia, held positions of power, and could hardly be expected

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<sup>104</sup> Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe*, 36.

<sup>105</sup> Yuri Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, trans. Elizabeth Rogers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 24. Muradyan's comment, which he made after the February 1988 attacks against Armenians in the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait (see Chapter Seven), serves as a reminder that the actions of regional groups not only risked reprisal against regional groups themselves, but against their ethnic brethren elsewhere—a risk organizers, at least, were aware of and willing to take. Mountainous Karabagh housed only 22% of Azerbaijan's total Armenian population. While 100,000 Armenians lived inside the region, another 350,000 lived in other areas of Azerbaijan—mainly Baku, two other Azerbaijani cities (Kirovabad [Ganja] and Sumgait) and in rural districts surrounding Mountainous Karabagh. During the subsequent conflict, practically all these Armenians fled (as did Azerbaijanis from Armenia). Similarly, Ossetian residents of Georgia primarily lived *outside* their autonomous region. In 1989, South Ossetia housed just 60,000 Ossetians; an additional 120,000 lived in other areas of Georgia. Many of them also fled during conflict. Only Abkhazians hardly had any ethnic brethren elsewhere in Georgia that were vulnerable to reprisal. Data on the geographic distribution of Armenians in Azerbaijan and Ossetians in Georgia comes from, respectively, Avakian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, 133, 134; and the data from the 1989 Soviet census available at [http://georgia-gateway.org/ENG/Regional/General\\_Data/cxrili.php3](http://georgia-gateway.org/ENG/Regional/General_Data/cxrili.php3).

to accept such an outcome without a fight. Finally, South Ossetians were acutely aware that mobilizing in favor of political change was risky. In late July 1989, the participants of a joint meeting of Ossetians from South Ossetia and outside the region expressed sorrow for the violence in Abkhazia and declared that “the time had come to condemn irresponsible slogans.”<sup>106</sup> *Adamon Nykhas* itself co-sponsored an address with the leading Georgian nationalist movement, the Ilya Chavchavadze Society, in which it denounced rumors of Georgian attack as the work of “provocateurs” and called upon the population to ignore them.<sup>107</sup> Of greatest significance was the publication in *Soviet Ossetia* of a strikingly candid criticism of *Adamon Nykhas* by two leading members of the Ossetian elite in Moscow, Soviet Army Major-General Kim Tsagalov and national artist Zaur Aboev. In an open letter to Chochiev, Tsagalov and Aboev expressed their opinion that “in this complex situation, it is necessary to lead not with emotion but with reason” and “never by the path of pseudo-patriotism and ‘hoorah’ nationalism.” “This path,” they said, “leads to a dead end, to tragedy for the people.”<sup>108</sup>

Part Three offers an explanation why regional groups ignored such warnings. Chapter Five outlines the nature of the political commitment problem Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians all faced. Chapter Six then explains how the ideology of Gorbachev’s reforms variously affected group beliefs regarding prospects of success, providing two groups, Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, with the hope that they could effect radical political change. In addition to motivation, therefore, I argue that beliefs regarding both the hopelessness of negotiations within the existing system

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<sup>106</sup> *Zarya Vostoka*, 28 July 1989.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 July 1989.

<sup>108</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 27 July 1989.

and the hope that that system could be changed were both critical elements of regional mobilization.

**Table 4.1**  
**Population of Mountainous Karabagh: 1921-1989**  
*(rounded to hundreds)*

	<b>1921</b>	<b>1926</b>	<b>1939</b>	<b>1959</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1987*</b>	<b>1989**</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>138,500</b>	<b>125,300</b>	<b>150,800</b>	<b>130,400</b>	<b>150,300</b>	<b>162,200</b>	<b>180,000</b>	<b>189,000</b>
<b>% increase (from previous census)</b>		-9.5%	20.4%	-13.5%	15.3%	7.9%	11.0%	16.5%
<b>Armenians</b>	122,800	111,700	132,800	110,100	121,100	123,100	133,200	145,500
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>88.7%</b>	<b>89.1%</b>	<b>88.1%</b>	<b>84.4%</b>	<b>80.6%</b>	<b>75.9%</b>	<b>74.0%</b>	<b>77.0%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		-9.0%	18.9%	-17.1%	10.0%	1.7%	8.2%	18.2%
<b>Azeris</b>	15,400	12,600	14,100	18,000	27,200	37,300	43,900	40,600
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>11.1%</b>	<b>10.1%</b>	<b>9.4%</b>	<b>13.8%</b>	<b>18.1%</b>	<b>23.0%</b>	<b>24.4%</b>	<b>21.5%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		-18.2%	11.9%	27.7%	51.1%	37.1%	17.7%	8.8%
<b>Other***</b>	300	1,000	3,900	2,300	2,000	1,800	2,900	2,900
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>0.2%</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	<b>2.6%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>1.3%</b>	<b>1.1%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		233.3%	290.0%	-41.0%	-13.0%	-10.0%	61.1%	61.1%

\*unofficial estimate

\*\*% increase from 1979 census

\*\*\*Data for "other" is extrapolated, except for 1921

**Sources:**

1921: Merujan Karapetian, "The Ethnic Structure of the Population of Mountainous Karabagh in 1921," *Armenian Review*, 44, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 74, 85 (combines totals for the rural and Shusha town populations)

1926- G. A. Galoian and K. S. Khudaverdian, *Nagorny Karabakh: Istoricheskaia spravka* (Mountainous

1979: Karabagh: The historical record) (Erevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armianskoi SSR, 1988), 47

1987: A. N. Yamskov, "Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh," *Theory and Society* 20 (1991): 645

1989: NKR Office ([http://www.nkrusa.org/nk\\_conflict/references.html](http://www.nkrusa.org/nk_conflict/references.html))

**Table 4.2**  
**Population of Abkhazia: 1897-1989**  
*(rounded to hundreds)*

	<b>1897*</b>	<b>1926</b>	<b>1939</b>	<b>1959</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1989</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>106,200</b>	<b>186,000</b>	<b>311,900</b>	<b>404,700</b>	<b>487,000</b>	<b>486,100</b>	<b>525,100</b>
<b>% increase (from previous census)</b>		75.1%	67.7%	29.8%	20.3%	-0.2%	8.0%
<b>Abkhazians</b>	58,700	55,900	56,200	61,200	77,300	83,100	93,300
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>55.3%</b>	<b>30.1%</b>	<b>18.0%</b>	<b>15.1%</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>17.1%</b>	<b>17.8%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		-4.8%	0.5%	8.9%	26.3%	7.5%	12.3%
<b>Georgians</b>	25,900	67,500	92,000	158,200	199,600	213,300	239,900
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>24.4%</b>	<b>36.3%</b>	<b>29.5%</b>	<b>39.1%</b>	<b>41.0%</b>	<b>43.9%</b>	<b>45.7%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		160.6%	36.3%	72.0%	26.2%	6.9%	12.5%
<b>Armenians</b>	6,600	25,700	49,700	64,400	74,900	73,400	76,500
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>6.2%</b>	<b>13.8%</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>15.4%</b>	<b>15.1%</b>	<b>14.6%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		289.4%	93.4%	29.6%	16.3%	-2.0%	4.2%
<b>Russians</b>	5,100	12,600	60,200	86,700	92,900	79,700	74,900
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>4.8%</b>	<b>6.8%</b>	<b>19.3%</b>	<b>21.4%</b>	<b>19.1%</b>	<b>16.4%</b>	<b>14.3%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		147.1%	377.8%	44.0%	7.2%	-14.2%	-6.0%
<b>Other**</b>	9,900	24,300	53,800	34,200	42,300	36,600	40,500
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>13.1%</b>	<b>17.2%</b>	<b>8.5%</b>	<b>8.7%</b>	<b>7.5%</b>	<b>7.7%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		145.5%	121.4%	-36.4%	23.7%	-13.5%	10.7%

\*Respondents by "mother tongue"

\*\*Data for "other" is extrapolated

**Source:**

Daniel Muller, "Demography: ethno-demographic history, 1886-1989," in *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, ed. George Hewitt (New York: St. Martins Press, 1998), 231-32, 236, 237

**Table 4.3**  
**Population of South Ossetia: 1926-1989**  
*(rounded to hundreds)*

**Table 4.3**  
**Population of South Ossetia: 1926-1989**  
*(rounded to hundreds)*

	<b>1926</b>	<b>1939</b>	<b>1959</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1989</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>87,400</b>	<b>106,100</b>	<b>96,800</b>	<b>99,420</b>	<b>98,000</b>	<b>98,500</b>
<b>% increase (from previous census)</b>		21.4%	-8.8%	2.7%	-1.4%	0.5%
<b>Ossetians</b>	60,400	72,100	63,700	66,100	65,000	65,200
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>69.1%</b>	<b>68.0%</b>	<b>65.8%</b>	<b>66.5%</b>	<b>66.3%</b>	<b>66.2%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		19.4%	-11.7%	3.8%	-1.7%	0.3%
<b>Georgians*</b>	23,500	27,480	26,800	28,100	28,200	28,500
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>25.9%</b>	<b>27.7%</b>	<b>28.3%</b>	<b>28.8%</b>	<b>28.9%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		17%	-2%	5%	0%	1%
<b>Other**</b>	3,500	6,520	6,300	5,220	4,800	4,800
<b>% of total pop.</b>	<b>4.0%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>	<b>6.5%</b>	<b>5.3%</b>	<b>4.9%</b>	<b>4.9%</b>
<b>% increase</b>		86%	-3%	-17%	-8%	0%

\*Data for Georgian population in 1939 is extrapolated from % of total pop.

\*\*Data for "other" is extrapolated

**Sources:**

1926- G. Togoshvili and I. Khabalashvili, *Osetis mosakhleoba* (mogle istoriul-demograpiuli mimokhilva)

1979: (Population of Ossetia [a brief historical-demographic survey]) (Tskhinvali: Iriston, 1983), 32-33, 38-39, 44, 51

1989: [http://georgia-gateway.org/ENG/Regional/General\\_Data/cxrili.php3](http://georgia-gateway.org/ENG/Regional/General_Data/cxrili.php3)



**Table 4.4**  
**Summary of Motivations for Mass Mobilization:**  
**Demographic Shift and Economic Discrimination**

<b>DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT</b>	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b>	<b>Abkhazians</b>	<b>South Ossetians</b>	
History	High	High	High	
Rhetoric	Medium-Low	Medium-High	Low	
Signals of Intent	Medium-Low	Medium-High	Medium	
Opponent Capabilities	High	High	High	
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>Medium-High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium-High</b>	<b>Medium-High</b>

<b>ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION I (Regional)</b>	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b>	<b>Abkhazians</b>	<b>South Ossetians</b>	
History	Medium	Medium	Medium-Low	
Rhetoric	None	Medium	Low	
Signals of Intent	Low	Low	Low	
Opponent Capabilities	High	High	High	
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>Medium-Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Medium-Low</b>	<b>Medium-Low</b>

<b>ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION II (Ethnic)</b>	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b>	<b>Abkhazians</b>	<b>South Ossetians</b>	
History	Medium-High	High	Medium-High	
Rhetoric	Low	Medium	Low	
Signals of Intent	Medium	High	High	
Opponent Capabilities	High	High	High	
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Medium-High</b>	<b>Medium-High</b>	<b>Medium-High</b>

**Table 4.5**  
**Ranking Motivations for Mass Mobilization**

**Average Rankings Across Cases**

Demographic Shift:	<i>Medium-High</i>
Economic Discrimination II:	<i>Medium-High</i>
Violence:	<i>Medium</i>
Economic Discrimination I:	<i>Medium-Low</i>
Cultural Extinction:	<i>Medium-Low</i>

**Karabagh Armenians:**

Demographic Shift:	<i>Medium-High</i>
Economic Discrimination II:	<i>Medium</i>
Violence:	<i>Medium</i>
Economic Discrimination I:	<i>Medium-Low</i>
Cultural Extinction:	<i>Medium-Low</i>

**Abkhazians:**

Demographic Shift:	<i>High</i>
Economic Discrimination II:	<i>Medium-High</i>
Cultural Extinction:	<i>Medium</i>
Economic Discrimination I:	<i>Medium</i>
Violence:	<i>Medium-Low</i>

**South Ossetians:**

Demographic Shift:	<i>Medium-High</i>
Violence:	<i>Medium-High</i>
Economic Discrimination II:	<i>Medium-High</i>
Economic Discrimination I:	<i>Medium-Low</i>
Cultural Extinction:	<i>Medium-Low</i>

## *Chapter Five* **A Problem of Commitment**

### **I. Introduction**

As Chapter Four has shown, Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians had fears regarding population shift and economic competition. This did not mean, however, that they should have lent their support to movements seeking ethnoterritorial change. They could also have sought to reach compromise settlements with their opponents within the framework of existing institutions of self-governance. Why they did not do so is the focus of this chapter.

My argument is that each group faced a political “commitment problem”—in the form of the absence of a mechanism which would guarantee that central republican governments would protect their demographic and economic interests in the event they agreed to compromise.<sup>1</sup> For all three regional groups, compromise meant a real shift of political power from central republican governments to autonomous authorities. Promises of centrally-administered legislation on demographic and economic matters were insufficient, as these could be subverted or overturned. Republican governments could

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<sup>1</sup> On the commitment problem, see James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49 (1995): 381, 401-409; James D. Fearon, “Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict,” in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, eds. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 107-126; Barry R. Weingast, “Constructing Trust: The Political and Economic Roots of Ethnic and Regional Conflict,” in *Institutions and Social Order*, ed. Karol Soltan, Eric M. Uslaner, and Virginia Haufler (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press); and Barbara Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

offer a more compelling commitment to the interests of regional groups if they granted group members an ability to legislate, implement, and enforce measures to protect their own demographic and economic interests. Even so, however, they would still lack an ironclad guarantee that republican governments would refrain from altering formulas of decentralization in the future, once their authority over the autonomous units was reaffirmed. This meant that it was still risky for regional groups to agree to compromise.

Moreover, by the time groups initiated their petitions, the commitment problem was not just a theoretical one. Regional groups already had reason to suspect that republican governments would not respect new agreements on decentralization, even if they swore they would commit to them now. For Karabagh Armenians, hints their autonomy was vulnerable came with the recycling of old theories regarding Azerbaijan's "right" to rule Mountainous Karabagh (discussed in Chapter Three), supplemented by minor, but forcible, demonstrations of authority. For Abkhazians, the massive Georgian demonstrations in the autumn of 1988 represented a clear effort to deepen, not limit, central republican authority throughout Georgia. Subsequently, in South Ossetia, Georgian nationalists indicated a willingness to deal with limits to centralized rule in even more direct fashion—by abolishing the region's autonomy altogether. These signals increased the probability that republican governments would not abide by the agreements they made on paper.

Furthermore, these signals of centralizing intent were not isolated incidents. Regional groups could interpret them as substantial threats on the basis of past Azerbaijani and Georgian state centralization efforts. Political history provided context to otherwise only suggestive signals. Karabagh Armenians' political history consisted of a

steady trajectory of Azerbaijani centralization, extending from their first modern encounter with Azerbaijan in 1918 through the late Soviet period. Abkhazians had a more cyclical encounter with Georgian centralization, as the Soviet center periodically held such efforts at bay. South Ossetians, finally, could recall a dramatic, initial experience with centralization in the 1918-1921 period of Georgian independence. In all three cases, historical experiences provided strong justification for caution in the context of increasing republican sovereignty. They transformed indicators of possible threat to evidence of highly probable outcomes, as the Soviet central government's hold on its various republics weakened (see Table 5.1).<sup>2</sup>

## **II. Hints of Centralization**

The introduction of Gorbachev's reforms might have persuaded Karabagh Armenians that a golden opportunity was at hand to negotiate a new, less centralized framework for Azerbaijani-Mountainous Karabagh relations. Shortly after glasnost was declared, however, Karabagh Armenians received a strong signal that Azerbaijani authorities were unwilling to countenance decentralization in Mountainous Karabagh. As discussed in Chapter Three, Azerbaijani scholars began to recycle theories of Karabagh Armenian ethnopolitical history which held that Mountainous Karabagh was an integral part of Azerbaijani historical territory and that Armenians themselves were relative newcomers to the region.

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<sup>2</sup> On the role of historical knowledge in assessing probable outcomes, see Barry Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35 (1993): 27-47; Robert H. Bates, Rui J. P. de Figuerido, Jr., and Barry R. Weingast, "The Politics of Interpretation: Rationality, Culture, and Transition," *Politics and Society* 26 (1998): 603-42.

For Karabagh Armenians, it was the political—not cultural—implication of these publications that mattered: if Armenians had no particular historical claim to rule Mountainous Karabagh, there was no reason for them to enjoy institutions of self-governance. More Armenians lived in Azerbaijan outside of Mountainous Karabagh than within; these did not enjoy powers of self-rule. Moreover, in neighboring Armenia there were densely-settled Azerbaijani communities that also lacked institutions of self-rule. By placing Karabagh Armenians on the same level as these other, non-autonomous ethnic minorities, this official historiography hinted at an upcoming challenge to Karabagh Armenian rule.

For Karabagh Armenians that were yet hopeful a new framework for relations could be negotiated, subsequent events in the village of Chardakhlu in fall 1987 and the power-laden threats of Azerbaijani officials as their campaign reached its culmination (see Chapter Three) provided further signals that were difficult to ignore. Even after the announcement of central reform, Azerbaijani authorities continued to relate to Armenians through the language of domination and force. Because of this, Karabagh Armenians were not likely to presume Azerbaijanis could be relied upon to ensure that Karabagh Armenians retained authentic political power in their autonomy.

For Abkhazians, Gorbachev's reforms provided the basis for concern. Democratization threatened to undermine both the formal and informal powers Abkhazians enjoyed as a privileged minority in Soviet Abkhazia. Georgians were nearly fifty percent of Abkhazia's population (and growing), and the threat that Georgians would use Gorbachev's reforms to attempt a political "coup by majority" in Abkhazia was quite real. By the start of 1989, the rising Georgian nationalist movement was less

focused on how to maintain delicate power-sharing systems with minorities than in achieving more power for Georgians as a whole.

Moreover, like Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians were concerned about the political implications of Georgian historiography. The Abkhazian Letter made explicit the link from history to the threat of increased Georgian centralization. The alleged Georgian attack on Abkhazian historiography was not just an assault on the Abkhazians' cultural identity, but an effort to establish a “‘juridical’ base for the historical rights of Georgia and the Georgian people to rule...Abkhazia.”<sup>3</sup>

The Letter also noted that given the Abkhazians' minority status, Georgians had begun to question their right to possess an autonomous republic at all. The fact that Abkhazians are a minority within Abkhazia, the Letter stated, creates “[t]he impression...that the very existence of the Abkhazian ASSR is something abnormal and that it arose and exists solely thanks to the goodwill of the Georgian people.”<sup>4</sup>

Of the three regional groups, South Ossetians faced the least obvious threat to political decentralization. While Georgian historiography did not legitimize the South Ossetians' claim to self-rule, neither did Georgians immediately emit other signals that would suggest centralizing intentions in South Ossetia (focused, as they were, at the time on the situation in Abkhazia). The Georgian government was even explicitly conciliatory

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<sup>3</sup> M. Yu. Chumalov, ed., *Abkhazskii uzel: Dokumenty i materialy po etnicheskomy konfliktu v Abkhazii (vypusk vtoroi: Narodnii forum Abkhazii “Aidgilara” i ego soyuzniki 1989-1990 gg.)* (The Abkhazian knot: Documents and materials about the ethnic conflict in Abkhazia (2<sup>nd</sup> series: the Popular Forum of Abkhazia ‘Aidgilara’ and its allies, 1989-1990) (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniiu mezhnatsional’nykh otnoshenii IEA RAN, 1995), 85. Even in 1977, Abkhazians had complained that the autonomous republic's impotency stemmed from the fact that Georgians considered Abkhazia to be a part of Georgia like any other “ethnographic corner” of Georgia and Abkhazians to be just another Georgian subgroup. *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

after South Ossetians began to mobilize in the fall of 1989—possibly in an effort to avoid the kind of violent escalation that had by then occurred in Abkhazia.<sup>5</sup>

The efforts of South Ossetian activists to mobilize the population eventually led to new signals of Georgian centralizing intent. During the autumn rallies, rumors circulated among demonstrators that the autonomous region was to be “liquidated.”<sup>6</sup> In mid-September, the Georgian government issued a draft of nationalist-influenced legislation which barely mentioned South Ossetia, let alone elaborate upon its autonomous rights and privileges.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, a handful of articles in the Georgian press proposed that the autonomous region be abolished or at least that this option be considered. Nationalist leader (and future president of Georgia) Zviad Gamsakhurdia referred to the Georgian autonomies as “illegal...unjust,” and “a clear result of the crimes of Stalinism against the peoples of the USSR.”<sup>8</sup> Another opposition leader, Zurab Chavchavadze, made a more specific argument against South Ossetia’s autonomy:

“[T]here is not, and cannot be, an Ossetian state as such on the territory of Georgia. As for the Ossetians who ended up on Georgian territory as a result of historical cataclysms and here acquired their second homeland, we support their having wide cultural autonomy for the full development of Ossetian language,

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<sup>5</sup> In an open visit to Tskhinvali, Georgian First Secretary Givi Gumbaridze held a meeting with *Adamon Nykhas* and other members of the public, listened to their complaints and assured them that no changes would be made to the region’s status. The rector of the Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute (and future South Ossetian president), Ludvig Chibirov later informed readers of the official South Ossetian newspaper *Sovietskaya Osetia* that Gumbaridze had suitably addressed all the grievances the meeting’s participants had raised. *Sovietskaya Osetia* (Tskhinvali) 5, 19 October 1989.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 16, 28 September 1989; 11 October 1989.

<sup>7</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 20 September 1989.

<sup>8</sup> *Vechernyi Tbilisi* (Tbilisi), 12 September 1989.



science,...national self-awareness. To us, this seems to be the only just resolution of the matter.”<sup>9</sup>

These interviews were followed by the publication of a petition by several leaders of the nationalist movement that explicitly called for the abolition of South Ossetian autonomy.<sup>10</sup>

This radical political threat played a critical role in encouraging South Ossetians to carry their campaign to its end. While South Ossetian officials denied the rumors concerning the liquidation of the autonomous region, by the end of October, demonstrators were still claiming that “the Georgians want to secede from the USSR, but first they want to take away our autonomy....”<sup>11</sup> Even South Ossetians who believed demands like making Ossetian the autonomy’s sole state language were inappropriate expressed a readiness to mobilize against the threat that their autonomy would be abolished. As one local veteran wrote to *Soviet Ossetia*, “[i]t’s another matter when demonstrators protest against the fact that calls for the liquidation of the region...are being published in the republican press and the leadership of the republic keeps silent. [Such protests] are completely just and I join my voice to theirs.”<sup>12</sup> In an address to Georgian citizens after the South Ossetians formally sought to upgrade the status of their autonomy, *Adamon Nykhas* justified the request on the basis of this threat. Noting that the

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<sup>9</sup> *Molodezh’ Gruzii* (Tbilisi), 26 September 1989.

<sup>10</sup> *Kartvlis Deda* (Tbilisi), September 1989, reprinted in *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* (Tbilisi), 20 October 1989.

<sup>11</sup> *Izvestia* (Moscow), 28 October 1989, trans. in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 41, no. 43 (22 November 1989). South Ossetian First Secretary A. Chekhoev insisted that the “rumors and inventions concerning the liquidation of our autonomy are utterly baseless,” while the head of the executive regional committee called rumors that the regional leadership had examined the question of the autonomous region’s liquidation “lies.” *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 9, 28 September 1989.

<sup>12</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 29 September 1989.

association was fighting for the “survival of our national way of life, language, [and] sovereignty,” the association asked whether “there [was] a real threat to all of this? Undoubtedly, since certain circles of so-called ‘informals’...are calling for the liquidation of our region’s autonomous status....”<sup>13</sup>.

### **III. Histories of Centralization**

Did such indicators of centralizing intent constitute a sufficient basis for regional groups to reject negotiations? On the basis of the above signals alone, regional groups might still have been willing to risk the uncertainties of a negotiated settlement. Such signals did not necessarily imply that titular groups would not abide by a compromise, if they could be made to agree to one.

We need to be aware, however, of the histories that informed group interpretations of Azerbaijani and Georgian intent. The history of Karabagh Armenians’ political relations with Azerbaijan—during its brief tenure as an independent state in 1918-1920 and subsequently as a Soviet republic—provided overwhelming support for the assumption that Azerbaijan would never tolerate a sustained devolution of power to Karabagh Armenians. Hence, Karabagh Armenians did not perceive a “centralizing” Azerbaijani historiography and forcible displays of authority as ambiguous signals of intent that might or might not be moderated via negotiation. Rather, they viewed them as extensions of a consistently centralizing policy.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 15 November 1989.

Abkhazians and South Ossetians had different historical experiences, which may have given them greater ground to support the status quo but still made them cautious about political change. In both the independent Georgia of 1918-1921 and in early Soviet Georgia, Georgians had pursued a policy of centralization in Abkhazia. Unlike in Mountainous Karabagh, however, after the Stalin era Soviet authorities helped stem the consolidation of Georgian power in the autonomous republic. Loosening central control now meant granting Georgians the opportunity to again seek to consolidate power in Abkhazia.

South Ossetians had little complaint regarding relations with the Georgian center during Soviet times. However, in the independent Georgia of 1918-1921, Georgian leaders had consistently refused to accommodate South Ossetian demands for autonomy. Since the Georgian nationalist movement fashioned itself as a successor to these historical Georgian state builders, South Ossetians had to take their threats seriously.

Each in their own way then, historical records provided context to contemporary signals of centralizing intent. Together they made regional groups exceedingly wary of negotiated settlements. When combined with a belief that they did not *have* to negotiate (see Chapter Six), group members engaged in acts of mass mobilization in favor of institutional change.

#### **IV. Independent Azerbaijan and Mountainous Karabagh (1918-1920)**

The first encounter of Karabagh Armenians with modern Azerbaijan was as a target of forcible state building. When Azerbaijan became temporarily independent in

1918, it refused to negotiate Mountainous Karabagh's inclusion in Azerbaijan, concerned that without firm control of this strategic region it would go over to its neighboring state-in-development, Armenia, then at war with Azerbaijan's ally Turkey. Ignoring the "People's Government" Karabagh Armenians established, Azerbaijani authorities—backed by Turkish troops—insisted that Mountainous Karabagh join Azerbaijan. When the Karabagh Armenian government declined, joint Azerbaijani-Turkish forces threatened to occupy the region by force.<sup>14</sup> The Karabagh Armenian government surrendered, along with its urban constituency in Shusha, the region's urban center.<sup>15</sup>

The Turkish Army left the Caucasus less than two months later, at the end of World War I, eliminating Azerbaijani control over Mountainous Karabagh. Azerbaijan managed to wrest the submission of the region to its authority the next year, however, with the assistance of the British, who had arrived in the Caucasus as war victors. At the start of 1919, the British mission in the Caucasus endorsed an Azerbaijani plan to establish a "provisional governor-generalship" in all of Karabagh (as well as the neighboring region of Zangezur) and ordered the local population to obey the orders of the Azerbaijani governor-general, Khosrov Bek-Sultanov. The British insisted that the creation of this provisional institution would not prejudice an ultimate decision regarding the region's political affiliation to be made at an impending peace conference of Allied

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<sup>14</sup> V. A. Mikayelian, ed., *Nagorny Karabakh v 1918-1923 gg. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Mountainous Karabagh, 1918-1923: A collection of documents and materials) (Yerevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armenii, 1992), doc. 8; Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vol. 1, *The First Year, 1918-1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 83.

<sup>15</sup> The rural Karabagh Armenian population was far less compliant and refused to accept the surrender. See Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, docs. 17, 26, 28, 29, 36, 48.

victors.<sup>16</sup> Karabagh Armenians, however, refused to abide by this British directive. Eventually, Sultanov tired of this resistance and prepared to establish control over Mountainous Karabagh by force. He posted Azerbaijani troops along the road from a nearby garrison to Shusha and blocked all roads into town.<sup>17</sup> After conflict broke out between Azerbaijani soldiers and Armenian irregulars, the British informed the Armenians that occupation was inevitable but that it would be peaceful if the Armenians surrendered. They agreed, and British soldiers escorted Azerbaijani troops to their barracks in the town's Armenian quarter.<sup>18</sup>

Having established control over Mountainous Karabagh, Azerbaijan now demonstrated no interest in a regional devolution of power. The Karabagh Armenian administration formulated conditions for their temporary submission, accepting that Karabagh Armenians “would consider themselves to be temporarily within the Azerbaijani republic” in exchange for the reorganization of the Armenian-populated territories into their own administrative unit, as well as the appointment of Armenian administrators in regions populated by Armenians and a ban on the posting of Azerbaijani troops in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Azerbaijan rejected this compromise, however. Azerbaijani officials presented the Karabagh Armenians with a modified agreement that did not reorganize the Armenian-

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<sup>16</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, docs. 38, 53, 62, 83. For a political history of Karabagh in 1919-1920, see Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 1, chap. 6; and Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vol. 3, *From London to Sevres, February-August 1920* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), chap. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, docs. 135, 143, 155, 177, 180.

<sup>18</sup> The British also demanded the eviction of seven leading Armenians (although they ultimately settled on the departure of three). Previously, they had summoned these seven to demand they sign a statement saying they would not interfere in the region's political affairs. *Ibid.*, docs. 150-152, 153, 155, 162.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, doc. 185.

populated territories into a separate administrative unit. The agreement also permitted the local stationing of Azerbaijani troops. When the Assembly resisted these modifications, Sultanov threatened he would enact the agreement by force if delegates did not sign.<sup>20</sup> Again succumbing, the Karabagh Armenians signed the accord, although delegates again stressed the agreement was temporary, pending resolution of the dispute at the Allied peace conference.<sup>21</sup>

In the end, Azerbaijan failed to abide even by the terms of this modified agreement. Instead, the government treated it as a formal prelude to Mountainous Karabagh's complete and final inclusion into Azerbaijan. When an Armenian delegation arrived in Shusha for the signing ceremony, Sultanov spoke magnanimously of the "cultural and economic unity of all citizens of the republic" and the need to preserve the rights of the "minority" Armenians in Karabagh.<sup>22</sup> A leading politician boasted in the official newspaper in Baku that "Karabagh...has been freed from the clutches of our stubborn neighbors....[T]he Armenian people have elected to seek a peaceful settlement and have accepted the sovereignty of Azerbaijan."<sup>23</sup> Such rhetoric did not reflect the fact that Mountainous Karabagh's acceptance of Azerbaijani jurisdiction was both temporary and provisional.

The Azerbaijani government then broke its agreement when trying to alter the prevailing status quo in Zangezur, temporary control of which British officials had earlier

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<sup>20</sup> According to a report of the meeting, Sultanov posted guns around both the village where the Assembly was meeting as well as the Armenian sector of Shusha, conspicuously moved his residence from the Armenian to the Azerbaijani sector, and closed the main road into Shusha. Ibid., doc. 216.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., doc. 214.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., doc. 215.

<sup>23</sup> *Azerbaijan* (Baku), 28 August 1919, quoted in Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 1, 188-189.

acknowledged belonged to Armenians.<sup>24</sup> To do this required what Sultanov termed the “preservation of calm” in Mountainous Karabagh—an increase in the number of troops in the region and their mobilization, a move that was expressly forbidden without the consent of the Karabagh Council.<sup>25</sup>

In February 1920, Sultanov sought to make Mountainous Karabagh’s incorporation into Azerbaijan permanent. He requested that the National Council consider at an upcoming Assembly the question of Mountainous Karabagh’s “definitive union” with Azerbaijan, indicating that the Allied peace conference was dissolving, that the Allied Powers could not even solve their own problems, and that “we ourselves must find a way out of this abnormal situation.”<sup>26</sup> Later that month, the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs notified the Armenian delegation at the peace conference that they had received warning that Azerbaijan was planning for Zangezur’s occupation as well as to disarm Karabagh and force its submission to Azerbaijan.<sup>27</sup>

After the destruction of Shusha in March 1920, Azerbaijan fought with the rest of Mountainous Karabagh to establish its authority in the region. With the assistance of Armenian General Dro Kanayan, however, Karabagh Armenians battled Azerbaijani

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<sup>24</sup> While the British initially supported the inclusion of Zangezur in the Karabagh General-Governorship, they later bowed to facts on the ground, repeatedly affirming that Zangezur lay outside the governorship and that temporary authority was in the hands of the local Armenian National Council. See Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, docs. 133, 146, 172.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., docs. 233, 247, 251, 257.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., doc. 257; Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 3, 143.

<sup>27</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, doc. 250.

troops to a stalemate. This was the situation in April 1920 when the Azerbaijani government surrendered to the Soviet Red Army.<sup>28</sup>

## **V. Soviet Azerbaijan and Mountainous Karabagh (1920-1988)**

Having denied Mountainous Karabagh rights of self-rule while Azerbaijan was independent, government authorities resisted doing so in Soviet Azerbaijan as well. Several media reports in the summer of 1920 indicate that the population accepted Sovietization peacefully, that they were being disarmed without event, and that Armenians and Azerbaijanis were again developing friendly relations.<sup>29</sup> A Red Army commander in the region, however, revealed a different situation: while the population may not have resisted Sovietization, he noted, “the masses are uncompromising” when it comes to the question of their rule by Azerbaijan. He warned that Azerbaijanis were unlikely to adopt a “true policy of internationalism” and that “we can even expect some...excesses from some individual [Party] workers which...will play a strong provocational role.”<sup>30</sup> In the end, Soviet authorities devised a compromise solution, granting Mountainous Karabagh the status of an autonomous region within Azerbaijan (for details, see Chapter Six).

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<sup>28</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 291, 335, 342; Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 3, 158-159.

<sup>29</sup> *Kommunist* (Baku), 24 June 1920, 3 July 1920, 7 July 1920, reprinted in D. Guliev, ed., *K istorii obrazovaniia Nagorno-Karabakhskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti Azerbaidzhanskoi SSR, 1918-1925: Dokumenty i materialy* (Towards a history of the formation of the Nagorno-Karabagh autonomous district of the Azerbaijani SSR, 1918-1925: Documents and materials (Baku: Azerbaidzhanskoi gosudarstvennoe isdatel'stvo, 1989), 51-53.

<sup>30</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 382.



What kind of autonomy Azerbaijani authorities intended to implement, however, soon was clear. Azerbaijani authorities did not concern themselves with the substantive content of Mountainous Karabagh's autonomy. Their first concern was to "improve the quality" of the regional police. A decree to this effect was issued prior to the declaration that the region enjoyed "the right of internal self-administration." The next day the Azerbaijani government organized a commission, which included representatives of the Azerbaijani NKVD (the secret police), to unilaterally develop a constitution for Mountainous Karabagh. At the end of September, the government asked Soviet authorities in the Caucasus to reconsider Mountainous Karabagh's grant of autonomy in its entirety. A conference of Karabagh workers (i.e., from all of Karabagh, including representatives of the wider region's majority Azerbaijani population) supported this request, declaring it inappropriate to separate Mountainous Karabagh into its own autonomy.<sup>31</sup>

Azerbaijani resistance towards self-rule for Mountainous Karabagh extended further into the Soviet period. Scant evidence is available for the first decades of Soviet rule.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the details of governance in those early years, Karabagh Armenians were still accusing Azerbaijani authorities of seeking to render Mountainous Karabagh's autonomy impotent in the post-Stalin years. In a 1964 petition, Karabagh Armenians

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<sup>31</sup> Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 93-94, 96-97, 99-101.

<sup>32</sup> An Armenian diaspora newspaper article of 1928 does contain the testimony of one Karabagh Armenian émigré, who indicated that "Karabagh's old folks relate that even under the Kezembashes (sic) and the cruel local rulers of tsarist times, no such oppression, repression...and acts of violence had taken place....[W]e decided to leave at any price, to flee from the claws of this repressive government." *Haratch* (Paris), 15 February 1928, excerpted in Gerard J. Libaridian, ed., *The Karabagh File: Documents and Facts on the Region of Mountainous Karabagh (1918-1988)* (Cambridge, MA: The Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), doc. 25.

complained that “the rights of the autonomous region were gradually curtailed and presently are almost entirely abrogated,” that the population of Mountainous Karabagh had an “abnormal and critical status” that “mocks the idea of autonomy....”, and that “[t]he managerial-administrative functions of the region have all but disintegrated.” They concluded that, in Mountainous Karabagh, “[t]here is in fact no autonomous region.”<sup>33</sup>

A subsequent pattern of political rule in the region suggests that this political impotency never dissipated. Since 1972, Mountainous Karabagh was ruled by First Secretary Boris Kevorkov, an ethnic Armenian from Baku. Despite Kevorkov’s ethnic heritage, Karabagh Armenians perceived him as a lackey of the republican center whose objective was to do the center’s bidding with no regard for the needs or desires of the local population.<sup>34</sup> According to one native commentator, Kevorkov was no anomaly: from 1968 on, not only did the region’s first secretary come from Baku, so did three second secretaries, two chairmen and two first deputy chairmen of the region’s executive committee, five heads and one deputy head of the KGB, two heads and three deputy heads of the Department of Internal Affairs, two procurators, and three military commandants.<sup>35</sup> None of these administrators were natives of the region and none of them (including, presumably, Kevorkov) spoke Armenian (Baku Armenians were mainly Russophones). The same commentator notes that even though many of them worked in Mountainous Karabagh for five years or more, they considered their positions to be

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<sup>33</sup> *Armenian Review*, Autumn 1968, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 29.

<sup>34</sup> For a negative appraisal of Kevorkov’s tenure, see A. Sabirov, “NKAO: Gor’kie plodyi zastoia (Mountainous Karabagh: The bitter fruits of stagnation),” *Izvestia* (Moscow), 13 July 1988, reprinted in V. A. Atajanian, ed., *Pravda o Nagornom Karabakhe* (The truth about Mountainous Karabagh) (Stepanakert: Izdatel’stvo “Artsakh,” 1989), 62-68.

<sup>35</sup> V. B. Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe: Khronika Chast’ I (Fevral’ 1988 g.-Ianvar’ 1989 g.)* (Events in Mountainous Karabagh: A chronicle, vol. 1, February 1988-January 1989) (Erevan: Izdatel’stvo AN ArmSSR, 1990), 26.

temporary postings and did not bother to learn local “customs or traditions” or strive to defend local interests.<sup>36</sup>

Given this history, contemporary Azerbaijani historiography that dismissed Karabagh Armenian claims to political distinctiveness, sporadic cases of anti-Armenian violence, and the use of threats to dissuade Karabagh Armenians from carrying their campaign to its conclusion were not just vague indicators that the Azerbaijani government might not abide by a compromise political agreement. They were interpreted, rather, as evidence that Azerbaijan had no intention of changing a longstanding policy. Given a different historical experience, Karabagh Armenians might have allowed that Azerbaijani actions were anomalous or at least that Azerbaijani behavior was flexible. As it was, the past provided a powerful argument for not trusting Azerbaijan to respect Karabagh Armenian self-rule.

## **VI. Independent Georgia and Abkhazia (1918-1921)**

Abkhazians possessed a similar, if more complex, narrative regarding Georgian centralization during the period of independence. Following the Russian Revolution and the disintegration of the Russian Empire, Abkhazians hoped to have, at most, an equal federal relationship with Georgia within some larger political entity. Some Abkhazians anticipated they would be equal partners in an emerging Transcaucasus Federation or

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Arutiunian also notes that Karabagh Armenians jokingly referred to these administrators as “seasonal laborers.”

even a pan-Caucasus federation.<sup>37</sup> Others, led by the Bolsheviks, declared loyalty to Soviet Russia. When the Transcaucasus formally declared its independence from Russia in April 1918, the Bolsheviks controlled much of Abkhazia. Transcaucasian authorities had to battle them to establish authority in the region.<sup>38</sup>

When Georgia declared its own independence from the Transcaucasus Federation in May 1918, its new government assumed that Abkhazia would now be subordinated to its authority.<sup>39</sup> The Abkhazian National Council, however, insisted that Abkhazia was independent from Georgia, the latter having lost, with the collapse of the Transcaucasus

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<sup>37</sup> For details, see G. Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii, 1910-1921* (Sketches on the history of Abkhazia, 1910-1921) (Tbilisi: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo 'Sabchota Sakartvelo,' 1963), 87-93; S. Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii Abkhazii* (Essays on the political history of Abkhazia) (Sukhumi: Alashara, 1990), 29, 62-64; Jemal Gamakharia and Badri Gogia, eds., *Abkhazia—istoricheskaiia oblast' Gruzii: istoriografiia, dokumenty i materialy, kommentarii (s drevneishykh vremen do 30-x godov XX veka)* (Abkhazia—a historical region of Georgia: Historiography, documents and materials, commentary [from ancient times until the 1930s]) (Tbilisi: Aghdoma, 1997), docs. 210, 213, 214, 220; Avtandil Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki sovremennogo separatizma v Gruzii* (Historical roots of modern separatism in Georgia) (Tbilisi: Tipografia Tbilisskogo universiteta, 1998), 15; Stanislav Lakoba, "Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Caucasus Confederation," *Caucasian Regional Studies* 3, nos. 2-3 (1998) (<http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/Georgians/chp0701.html>).

<sup>38</sup> On Bolshevik activities and support in Abkhazia, see Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 62-66, 82-84, 108-09, 121-140, 169-176, 206; G. Dzidzaria, ed., *Bor'ba za Oktiabr' v Abkhazii: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov, 1917-1921* (The struggle for October in Abkhazia: A collection of documents and materials, 1917-1921), new and rev. ed. (Sukhumi: Izdatel'stvo "Alashara," 1967), docs. 14, 31, 37; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 73, docs. 220, 232 (n. 3).

<sup>39</sup> This arrangement was evidently part of an agreement between Georgia and Germany when the latter agreed to support Georgia's independence. In a "Secret Letter" attached to the German-Georgian agreement, diplomat Von Lossow informed Georgian authorities that Germany would consider Abkhazia to be a part of Georgia as long as Georgia was independent. If, however, an independent Caucasian confederation was to develop, Abkhazians would have the right to an independent existence within that confederation. Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 178; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 18.

Federation, a “juridical foundation” for unification with Abkhazia.<sup>40</sup> Optimistically declaring that it welcomes “assistance from the Georgian National Council in organizing independent governmental power in Abkhazia,” the National Council protested “against the orders of the government of the Georgian republic...as violating the sovereign rights of the Abkhazian National Council.”<sup>41</sup>

The Abkhazian National Council consented, however, to Abkhazia’s unification with Georgia soon thereafter, once it understood that such “state-to-state” assistance would not be forthcoming. Less than three weeks after Georgia declared independence, the Council signed an agreement with the Georgian government, considered an “extension and supplement” of a pre-independence agreement that established the principles of cooperation between Abkhazia and Georgia.<sup>42</sup> The agreement declared that

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<sup>40</sup> The Council also indicated that it expected to retain a division of the former Transcaucasian National Guard under its control in Sukhumi, explaining its request by noting that “the division of the Transcaucasian Red Guard, which now presents itself as the military division of the Georgian Republic, has ended up outside the borders of its state, although complete authority for all intents and purposes lies in its hands.” Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 20; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 224.

<sup>41</sup> Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 180; Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii Abkhazii*, 66; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 20; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 224.

<sup>42</sup> On February 9, one day before the convocation of the newly-elected (but still not independent) Transcaucasian parliament, members of the Abkhazian National Council met with Georgian authorities to discuss their political relations. In the end, they left the precise “form of Abkhazia’s future political construction” to be determined after the convocation of a democratically-elected parliamentary assembly in Abkhazia. In return, Georgia agreed to help “restore a united, undivided Abkhazia” that would include the largely Mingrelian-populated region of Samurzaqano, which had stayed outside the National Council’s orbit, as well as the westernmost Gagra region, which Russian authorities had separated from Abkhazia in 1904. Additionally, both Abkhazia and Georgia promised to consult each other in advance if either wished to “enter into political...relations” with other nations or states.

What institutional relations between Georgia and Abkhazia were intended by this February agreement is a matter of debate. Georgian historian Avtandil Menteshashvili

a Minister of Abkhazian Affairs would be appointed in Abkhazia, “internal administration and self-administration” in the region would belong to the Abkhazian National Council, financial assistance would be provided, and a multi-ethnic armed division would be set up. For now, however, Georgian troops were to be sent to Abkhazia “for the rapid establishment of revolutionary order and the organization of [state] power.” While the agreement did not specify the precise nature of Abkhazia’s political relations with Georgia, unification on an autonomous basis was the clear implication.<sup>43</sup>

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holds that while the Abkhazian delegation expressed a desire solely “to have neighborly relations with Georgia, like an equal neighbor,” this was insufficient for the Georgians, who wished for Abkhazia to become an autonomous part of Georgia. According to Menteshashvili, this condition was eventually accepted by the Abkhazian delegation, under pressure from both the Georgians as well as one of their own members, an Abkhazian nobleman from Samurzaqano.

Such a conclusion, however, does not seem warranted. The text of the agreement makes no mention of autonomy, and Menteshashvili asserts his claim without providing specific evidence. The agreement was reached, moreover, within the context of an emerging Transcaucasian Federation, itself not even yet committed to independence from Russia. The assertion that the Abkhazian delegates agreed to autonomy *within* Georgia *within* such a federation *within* Russia stretches the political imagination. After the agreement was signed, an Abkhazian assembly announced that Abkhazia would enter “into the general family of the Transcaucasian nations as an equal member,” not as an autonomy of Georgia. In the absence of more persuasive evidence, we can only conclude that at the meeting the Abkhazian delegation agreed to the association of Abkhazia with Georgia within the Transcaucasian Federation, but, as the agreement itself specified, resolved to determine the precise form of this association at a later date. See Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 113; A. Menteshashvili, *Oktiabrskaiia revoliutsia i natsional’no-osvoboditel’noe dvizhenie v Gruzii, 1917-1921* (The October revolution and the national-liberation movement in Georgia) (Tbilisi: Izdatel’stvo Ganatleba, 1987), 115-117; Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*, 64; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 212 (and n. 4), doc. 218; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 15-17, doc. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Besides the fact that the newly-established Minister of Abkhazian Affairs, the ethnic Abkhazian Robert Chkhotua, referred at least twice to Abkhazia’s “autonomy” in subsequent months, another member of the Abkhazian National Council, M. Tarnava, later wrote in his memoirs that the Council’s members had been “forced to echo the demands and desires” of the Georgian government and agreed to send a delegation to reach an agreement with Georgia “regarding the foundations of the incorporation of Abkhazia within the Georgian Menshevik state.” It appears that only one member of the Abkhazian National Council, S. Basaria, opposed all compromise on the question of

Shortly after the signing of this agreement, however, the Georgian government arrogated to itself direct responsibility for the region's administration. The catalyst was two consecutive military challenges, a Bolshevik rebellion that began five days after the agreement was signed, and the unexpected landing of a detachment of ethnic Abkhazian soldiers from the Turkish Army less than two weeks later.<sup>44</sup> In accordance with the terms of the agreement, and following a request from the Abkhazian National Council, the Georgians first sent a military force to Abkhazia, led by General G. Mazniev (Mazniashvili), to oust the Bolsheviks.<sup>45</sup> Most of the Turkish soldiers were subsequently expelled.

How the Georgian government dealt with these security threats was against both the letter and spirit of the agreement it signed with the Abkhazians. In addition to sending Mazniev to help fight the Bolsheviks, the government unexpectedly appointed him to the administrative post of Abkhazian general-governor. In July, the head of the Abkhazian

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Abkhazia's independence. Basaria voted against the agreement, insisting that the Abkhazian population supports "total political freedom" and that it would "as an independent national organism...enter into neighborly treaty alliances and agreements" with Georgia. Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 183; Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii Abkhazii*, 67; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 21-22, doc. 2; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 225 (and n. 1-2); B. E. Sagaria, *Natsional'noe gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo v Abkhazii (1921-1931 gg.)* (National-state construction in Abkhazia, 1921-1931) (Sukhumi: Izdatel'stvo Alashara, 1970), 16-17.

<sup>44</sup> On the Bolshevik uprising, see Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 182-86; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 24. On the Turkish affair, see Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 205-07; Lakoba, "Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Caucasus Confederation"; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 17, 25; and, especially, the discussion in Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 73-74, 77-82, docs. 223 (n. 1), 226 (and n. 2-3), 227 (n. 2), and 232 (n. 3).

<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, the Abkhazian National Council asked Mazniev to turn his attention to Samurzaqano, still under the control of local Bolsheviks. With its capture in mid-September, all of Abkhazia came under Georgian military control. Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 186-95; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 24-25; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 74, 76, doc. 226 (and n. 2-3), 227 (n. 2).

National Council, Varlam Shervashidze, wrote to the head of the Georgian government, Noe Zhordania, to “remind” him that while the Abkhazian National Council had granted Mazniev wide authority, it had done so only with respect to military operations and that it never agreed to his administrative appointment as governor-general or, for that matter, his right to demand of the population that they “unquestionably submit” to all the laws of the Georgian state.<sup>46</sup>

If any question concerning Georgian authority in Abkhazia remained, the resolution of the Turkish “situation” clarified matters. Georgian authorities arrested a number of Abkhazian peasants in conjunction with the suppression of the Turkish troops, and houses of “unreliable” villagers were destroyed. Thirteen individuals were arrested, including members of the Abkhazian National Council, and others were expelled from the region. The Council was reorganized to include representatives of other ethnic groups in Abkhazia besides Abkhazians (admittedly long overdue) and directed to “fulfill [the] orders” of the Georgian government’s recently appointed civil representative in Abkhazia, Isidor Ramishvili.<sup>47</sup> Some months later, the ethnic Abkhazian Minister of Abkhazian Affairs Robert Chkhotua informed Shervashidze that “[i]f the Abkhazian people linked their fate with the Georgian people on an autonomous basis then...it was necessary to have developed conditions that were clear and unambiguous.” Simultaneously, he complained to Georgian authorities that “various departments and

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<sup>46</sup> Even Gamakharia and Gogia, staunch advocates of the Georgian position, thrice admit that the Georgians did not abide by the terms of the agreement. Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 75, 77, 82.

<sup>47</sup> Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 208-211; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 83-84, doc. 227, doc. 232 (n. 3), doc. 233 (and n. 2), doc. 234 (n. 2).



officials of some institutions continue to look on Abkhazia not like an autonomy of the Georgian republic but like one of its provinces.”<sup>48</sup>

Georgia further extended its control over Abkhazia in October 1918. The context was again a military threat, this time from the White Army in southern Russia.<sup>49</sup> Fearing attack via Abkhazia, the Georgian government used what appears to have been an internal coup attempt by members of the Abkhazian National Council against their head to consolidate Georgian control over the region. Accusing the conspirators of seeking to wrest Abkhazia away from Georgia with White Army assistance, the Georgian government dissolved the Council, announced preparations for new elections, appointed a former Sukhumi city mayor (and ethnic Georgian) temporary administrator of Abkhazia, and removed Chkhotua, who had been involved in the coup, from his post, assigning his duties temporarily to the Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs. It also arrested six Council members in connection with the affair.<sup>50</sup>

The Georgian government subsequently continued its effort to incorporate Abkhazia as fully as possible into a unitary state. In March 1919, a newly elected Abkhazian council—including an appropriate number of representatives of Abkhazia’s

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<sup>48</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’stvo*, 16-17; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 225 (n. 2).

<sup>49</sup> See *Dokumenti i materialy po vneshnei politike Zakavkaz’ia i Gruzii* (Documents and materials on the foreign policy of the Transcaucasus and Georgia) (Tbilisi: Kooperativ Niamori, 1990; Tiflis, 1919), docs. 193-197; Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 190-195; Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*, 68; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 25-27; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 76, 84, doc. 226 (and n. 2-3).

<sup>50</sup> Even before failed negotiations with the White Army, the Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs reported from Sochi that a “delegation of Abkhazians” had visited White Army General Mikhail Alekseev to inform him that Abkhazia had been joined to Georgia against its will and that they desired to join Russia. Alekseev himself explicitly accepted Abkhazia’s union with Georgia in subsequent negotiations. See Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 205, 211, 217; Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*, 68-70; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 30-31; and Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 84, 86, doc. 234.

Georgian population, already a plurality in the region—passed legislation recognizing Abkhazia’s “autonomous” status.<sup>51</sup> In addition to noting that the “sanction” for Abkhazia’s autonomy derived from the Georgian parliament, however, the legislation sweepingly noted that on matters of foreign, military, economic, legal, communication, and transport issues, central government authority would apply. “All other matters,” the declaration stated, “enter into the competency of the Abkhazian National Council.” Not much was left: the declaration itself specified, as examples, education, culture, local (i.e., village) administration, health, and minority rights.<sup>52</sup>

This dispute over Abkhazia’s powers of self-rule continued throughout the rest of Georgia’s brief independent existence. Shortly after the act on Abkhazia’s autonomy was passed, Georgians and Abkhazians in Abkhazia grappled over the extent of autonomous powers Abkhazia should be granted. The central government noted that the Abkhazian National Council “had the right to issue laws on all questions,” albeit with the rather significant exceptions “of those relating to foreign policy, the military, the administration of ports, the financial, monetary, tax and trade system, the general system of courts, civil, criminal, and national legislation, mail, telegraph, and railways and roads that are of overall governmental significance.” On issues of land reform—a particularly divisive issue—the National Council was to make decisions “in agreement with” the central land ministry. Eventually, the Georgian and Abkhazian members of the Abkhazian National Council hammered out a compromise constitution for Abkhazia, which granted certain

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<sup>51</sup> Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 232-33; Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*, 74-75; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 51-52, doc. 4; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 87-88, docs. 238-240.

<sup>52</sup> Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 232-33; Lakoba, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*, 74-75; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 87-88, docs. 238-240.

financial powers to the National Council and granted it responsibility for internal security as well.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this acceptance by Abkhazians to their autonomous status, the Georgian government still hesitated to formalize these arrangements. In July 1920, an Abkhazian delegation informed the Georgian government that the fact that Abkhazia's autonomous status "had still not obtained legal recognition prevents the healthy functioning of the existing autonomous organs" and urged that the current session of the Parliament discuss the issue of Abkhazia's legal status in order to "calm minds." In response, the government informed the delegation that it was too early to introduce a constitution for Abkhazia, given that Georgia had yet to introduce its own constitution.<sup>54</sup>

While the Georgian government eventually implemented Abkhazian autonomy, the authorities did it in a way that further emphasized the dominance of Georgian central rule. The government first explained that the final development of Abkhazia's constitution would not be in the hands of the joint Abkhazian-Georgian commission, as had been legally specified in agreement with the Abkhazians, but of the Georgian parliament.<sup>55</sup> Next, it legalized Abkhazian autonomy through an "act on the administration of autonomous Abkhazia." This was to be appended to the Georgian Constitution and not, as had long been granted, stand as its own Abkhazian Constitution. The act was approved, together with the Georgian constitution, on February 21, 1921.

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<sup>53</sup> With the defection of seven Abkhazians from the ruling Menshevik fraction, the latter was left with exactly twenty members. I assume, but do not know for certain, that these were the twenty which approved of the compromise draft. On several points, the opposition continued to dissent. See Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 232-33; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 97-100, 105-108, docs. 246, 254; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 53, docs. 7-9.

<sup>54</sup> Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 105, doc. 254.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., doc. 254; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 53-55.

The Georgians never had an opportunity to demonstrate that this act would actually provide for Abkhazian self-government, however. Ten days before the constitutional legislation was introduced, Bolsheviks had already engineered an uprising in the south of Georgia as prelude for the country's conquest. As the Red Army prepared to march on Tbilisi, the Bolsheviks attacked Abkhazia. Its sovereignty under siege, the Georgian parliament fancifully approved both Georgia's constitution and Abkhazia's autonomy. Tbilisi fell four days after this futile, symbolic act.<sup>56</sup>

## **VII. Soviet Georgia and Abkhazia (1921-1988)**

The Abkhazians' history of political relations with Georgia in the Soviet period provides a similar picture of Georgian intent to establish control over Abkhazia. Soviet rule at first appeared to imply the victory of the Abkhazian position. On March 10, the Abkhazian revolutionary committee issued declarations which indicated that Abkhazia was Georgia's political equal, hailing "the fraternal union of the workers of Georgia and Abkhazia!" and "the new Soviet Socialist Republics—Georgia and Abkhazia!"<sup>57</sup> At the end of the month, the Abkhazian Revkom issued a declaration establishing the "independent" Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic, as leading Georgian Communists congratulated the Abkhazians on their accomplishment. In mid-May, Soviet Georgian authorities approved the establishment of this Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic,

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<sup>56</sup> The Abkhazian Bolsheviks occupied Gagra on February 23. The next day the battle for Tbilisi began. It ended on February 25 as the Georgian government fled for Batumi. Gudauta was occupied on February 26, Sukhumi on March 4, and the rest of Abkhazia by March 8. Dzidzaria, *Bor'ba za Oktiabr'*, docs. 188, 203; Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii*, 68-77.

<sup>57</sup> Dzidzaria, *Bor'ba za Oktiabr'*, docs. 237-238.

noting that “Abkhazia remains independent up until the summoning of the Congress of the Soviets of Abkhazia” when its final political status would be resolved.<sup>58</sup>

That status ultimately consisted of a treaty of “union” in December 1921 which formalized a federal relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia. The first clause of this treaty indicated that “the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia and the Socialist Soviet Republic of Abkhazia conclude between themselves a military, political, and financial-economic union.” To achieve this, the treaty established common Commissariats to administer a number of all-Union spheres of governance: military, financial, economic, communications, justice, and sea transport, as well as an “extraordinary commission” and a “worker-peasant inspectorate.” Foreign affairs remained under the control of Georgia while railroads and trade fell under the jurisdiction of pan-Transcaucasian organizations.<sup>59</sup>

In 1925, however, the Abkhazians produced a constitution of their own that made virtually no mention of Abkhazia’s union with Georgia. It specified the powers of Abkhazia’s various governmental branches and introduced a series of local Commissariats (Internal Affairs, Justice, Education, Health, Land, and Social Welfare). It also specified Abkhazia’s relations with both the Soviet Transcaucasus Federation (established in 1922) and the USSR as a whole, conspicuously leaving out any specification of relations with Georgia. The only mention of Georgia in the entire constitution was an acknowledgement that Abkhazia, “having united on the basis of a

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<sup>58</sup> Levan Toidze, *K voprosu o politicheskom statuse Abkhazii: Stranitsi istorii, 1921-1931 gg.* (Towards the question of the political status of Abkhazia: Pages from history, 1921-1931) (Tbilisi: Samshoblo), 13-14; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, docs. 258 (n. 4), 260.

<sup>59</sup> Toidze, *K voprosu*, 18-19; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 276.

special treaty of union” with Georgia, enters the Transcaucasian Federation “via” the latter.<sup>60</sup>

This constitution did not last. In September, Transcaucasian authorities ordered the Abkhazians to revise it.<sup>61</sup> In 1926, a session of the Georgian central executive committee was held in Sukhumi, at which delegates discussed a new Georgian constitution as well as relations between Georgia and Abkhazia. At the session, Georgians and Abkhazians reached a compromise that was enshrined in new constitutions of both republics. The new Georgian constitution contained a chapter explicitly devoted to the status of Abkhazia. While reiterating that Abkhazia “enters into” Georgia on the basis of a special treaty, it repeated the presentation of the commissariats of Abkhazia outlined in the 1925 constitution and noted that they were “self-functioning and independent of the corresponding” commissariats of Georgia. It also indicated that in the areas of government under its control, the Abkhazian government had the right to independently issue its own legislation and that it could also issue legislation to further develop or expand on all-Georgian legislation otherwise binding in Abkhazia. The Abkhazian constitution, in turn, noted that the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia “exerts self-functioning and independent governmental authority on its territory, insofar as this authority is not limited by treaty relations with” Georgia or by the constitutions of the Transcaucasian Federation or the USSR. It also contained a chapter on relations with Georgia that replicated all the articles from the corresponding chapter in Georgia’s

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<sup>60</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’sтво*, 88-94; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 23, 25; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 122-123, doc. 282.

<sup>61</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’sтво*, 98, 102; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 25.

constitution.<sup>62</sup> With this, Georgia and Abkhazia appeared to have reached a compromise on Abkhazian rights of self-rule.

Less than a year later, however, Abkhazia was formally subordinated to Georgia. In April 1930, Abkhazia's own central executive committee raised the question of Abkhazia's constitutional status. The session noted that the 1921 agreement between Abkhazia and Georgia "did not reflect the actual state of relations" between the two and "had lost real significance." In particular, it noted that all the administrative organs that were supposed to be shared by Abkhazia and Georgia according to the 1921 agreement (military, financial, economic, and communications) were by then under all-Soviet jurisdiction and could hardly constitute the bedrock of a distinctive Abkhazian-Georgian union.<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, the session resolved to modify the Abkhazian constitution so that it no longer referred to Abkhazia as a republic unified by "treaty" but, simply, as an "autonomous republic" of Soviet Georgia. At an assembly of Abkhazian councils in February 1931, this decision was confirmed. Abkhazia was now formally subordinated to Georgia, on the basis of the principles outlined in the Abkhazian and Georgian constitutions but with the firm admission that Abkhazia was no longer united with Georgia but *within* it.<sup>64</sup>

While Abkhazians may have retained a measure of self-government in the first years of Soviet rule, this institutional transformation set the stage for a severe reduction of power during the Stalin era. In 1947, Abkhazian petitioners to the Soviet government

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<sup>62</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional'noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo*, 100-08; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 25-26; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 287.

<sup>63</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional'noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo*, 140; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional'noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo*, 139-143; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 27; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 289.

complained that there were only five Abkhazians employed in the Party regional committee and none in top Party and government positions throughout the republic.<sup>65</sup> The Georgian Party resolution that introduced an Abkhazian reform package in 1978 (see Chapter Three) admitted that in 1949 only 4% of district and city first secretaries in the republic were Abkhazian.<sup>66</sup>

In a remarkable display of affirmative action, however, Abkhazian representation in government increased in subsequent years, considerably beyond what their share of the population would dictate. The 1978 Party resolution noted that by 1963, 30% of district and city first secretaries were Abkhazian, twice their share of the region's population. By 1978, it noted, 38% of district and city first secretaries were Abkhazian, a number already more than twice their share of the region's population. While the resolution did not provide numbers for representation at the republican level for earlier years, it did note that by 1978 39% of the republican Party committee were Abkhazian, 56% of government officials, and 42% of Supreme Soviet deputies.<sup>67</sup> In 1988, while the Abkhazian Letter was correct to claim that the leading posts of the Council of Ministers, the Council of Trade Unions, the KGB, the Sukhumi city party committee, the Sukhumi city Young Communists, and the republican ministries of finance and communication were occupied by Georgians, the Letter failed to state that this was the result of an

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<sup>65</sup> I. Marykhuba, ed., *Abkhazskie pis'ma (1947-1989): Sbornik dokumentov. Tom 1* (Abkhazian letters [1947-1989]: A collection of documents, vol. 1) (Sukhum [Sukhumi]: Izdatel'skii tsentr' El'-fa, 1994), 85.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 281. Also see Darrell Slider, "Crisis and Response in Soviet Nationality Policy: The Case of Abkhazia," *Central Asian Survey* 4, no. 4 (1985): 54.

<sup>67</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 85; Slider, "Crisis and Response," 54. Such figures cast doubt on a claim, submitted by petitioners in 1985, that Abkhazians were numerically subordinated to Georgians at both the republican and district level of government. See Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 381.



informal division of labor in Abkhazian politics, in which Abkhazians themselves occupied an equal number of official posts: the regional Party first secretary, the chairman of the Presidium, the chairman and secretary of the Supreme Soviet, the first deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, the Party first secretaries of the Ochamchire and Gudauta districts, the Party first secretaries of the towns of Gagra and Tkvarcheli, as well as eight ministerial posts.<sup>68</sup>

This division of powers, however, did not necessarily imply the preservation of political autonomy for the region. In 1977, Abkhazian petitioners already complained that while Georgians might accept that the “autonomy of Abkhazia is a given,” it is “in the form of a certain, really doesn’t mean anything, abstract reality.” The letter complained that “since the mid-1930s the government of the autonomous republic has been...completely deprived of its independence.” It claimed that a “significant part” of Abkhazia’s state officials were Georgians sent from Tbilisi and that the Abkhazian government was “an obedient, assiduous, diligent executor of all orders from Tbilisi.”<sup>69</sup> Even the reforms instituted the next year did not necessarily eradicate this perception of political impotency: a 1985 letter noted that Abkhazia “has turned out to be a Georgian autonomy within the Georgian republic....The formation of the Abkhazian autonomous republic has lost [its] meaning.”<sup>70</sup>

In the Abkhazian Letter of 1988, Abkhazian activists reiterated these political grievances. Related to almost every other point in the “Abkhazian Letter” was the complaint that the autonomous government of Abkhazia had never had any substantive

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<sup>68</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 100 (and n. 39).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 31, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Marykhuba, *Abkhazskie pis'ma*, 381.

power and that “the [Georgian] government...looks upon Abkhazia the same way it does any other administrative region of Georgia.” The Letter contended that the Georgian government’s “actions represent a direct continuation of the policy of direct rule, which was carried out by the Mensheviks in their own time with respect to Abkhazia.” It accused the Georgian government of regularly “dictating its conditions” to Abkhazia and accused the republic’s officials and employees of “being marionettes and lacking initiative....useless and directly dependent on Tbilisi for the distribution of posts.”<sup>71</sup> It held that Georgians were in a privileged political position, retaining hold of all important posts.<sup>72</sup>

Regardless of how accurate a picture this was of the existing system, once Georgians began mobilizing in large numbers in favor of republican sovereignty, Abkhazian activists could easily make the case that the threat of “direct rule”—evident during the period of Georgian independence and in the Stalin era—was again on the horizon. Without this history of Georgian centralization, such demonstrations might have been somewhat threatening, but the Abkhazians would not have had reason to believe that calls for greater Georgian sovereignty necessarily precluded compromise with the Abkhazians. Past efforts at centralization allowed Abkhazians to conclude that these Georgian actions were the beginning of a sustained effort to undo the Abkhazians’ past gains. Signals of intent and the historical record of centralization combined to make Abkhazians believe Georgia could not be trusted to respect Abkhazian self-rule.

## **VIII. Independent Georgia and South Ossetia (1918-1921)**

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<sup>71</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 69, 74.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 100-01.

Finally, South Ossetians also had a history of Georgian centralization, most clearly during the period of Georgian independence and in the early months of Sovietization. After the Revolution, South Ossetians, like Abkhazians, hoped their region would be granted its own political unit within a reformed, democratic Russia.<sup>73</sup> When Georgia became independent in May 1918, most South Ossetians were not willing to recognize its authority. The leading political force in South Ossetia, the Social Revolutionaries (SRs), held out hope for an overthrow of the Bolsheviks, the development of a unified, federal Russia, and the unification of North and South Ossetia within that federation.<sup>74</sup> A South Ossetian National Assembly, held days after Georgia declared its independence, refused to recognize Georgian authority or the government's demand to disarm. Three weeks later, delegates voted to leave the question of South Ossetia's political status open and to enter into talks with North Ossetia regarding unification. Representatives of the Georgian government, who had come to the Assembly to plead their case, were forced to leave South Ossetia without the pledge of allegiance they sought.<sup>75</sup>

As Georgia's independence became more secure, the SRs modified their position and prepared to accept Georgian rule. They made their acceptance conditional, however,

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<sup>73</sup> B. Z. Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya Yuzhnoi Osetii za Sovetskuyu vlast' v 1917-1921 gg.* (The struggle of the working masses of South Ossetia for Soviet power, 1917-1921) (Tskhinvali: Izdatel'stvo Iriston, 1977), 130-132; Levan Toidze, *Rogor sheikmna samkhret osetis avtonomiuri olki* (How the South Ossetian autonomous district was created) (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1991), 14-19.

<sup>74</sup> I. D. Nikonov, *Krest'yanskoe vosstaniia v Yugo-Osetii v 1917-1920 gg.* (The peasant uprisings in South Ossetia, 1917-1920) (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]: Stalinirskaia tipografia Gruzglavizdata, 1956), 36; Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya*, 132.

<sup>75</sup> Nikonov, *Krest'yanskoe vosstaniia*, 40, 42. Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya*, 141, 144-145.

on the Georgian government granting South Ossetia the same kind of autonomous self-rule within Georgia that they had hoped to attain within a federal Russia. At a National Assembly in August 1918, the SRs presented a plan for territorial autonomy. Referring to an upcoming vote on this autonomy, the Menshevik newspaper *Bor'ba* reported that all influential political factions in South Ossetia supported it. In October, the National Council asked the Georgian government for its consent.<sup>76</sup>

This, however, was not something the Georgian government was prepared to give. Even before Georgians declared independence, the Mensheviks had “sharply condemned” the South Ossetian request for ethnoterritorial autonomy within the Transcaucasus Federation. When the South Ossetian National Assembly declared its intent to establish autonomy in August 1918, Georgian authorities were dismissive: “the form in which Ossetian nationalists demand the realization of their self-government is unacceptable to us.” Instead, the government declared they were willing to grant individual districts within South Ossetia limited powers of self-rule and repeatedly advised the National Council to implement these “cantons” of self-government, focus on the development of national culture, and reject ambitions for regional autonomy.<sup>77</sup>

Nonetheless, the South Ossetians made moves to turn the region into a functioning autonomy. A December 1918 convocation of the National Assembly announced the unilateral establishment of regional autonomy and to keep the question of South Ossetia’s unification with Georgia open.<sup>78</sup> The National Council elected by the Assembly took on the role of a local government, taking control of finances, declaring a

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 155, 148-50.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 130, 149, 133.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 151.

people's court, and replacing local government appointees.<sup>79</sup> It announced that South Ossetia would not participate in upcoming statewide elections and scheduled their own instead.<sup>80</sup>

Georgia's response was not conciliatory. In March 1919, the head of the Tskhinvali military division reported that for reasons of state security the region had to be occupied by force and the South Ossetian National Council liquidated.<sup>81</sup> The government implemented this decision in May with orders to arrest resisting members (most went into hiding).<sup>82</sup> State officials characterized the South Ossetian request for regional self-rule as an illegitimate goal promoted by local Bolsheviks and not as the authentic desire of the Ossetian people.<sup>83</sup> It convened a new National Assembly, made up of delegates they believed would be more willing to accept the government's demands. At the assembly, the Georgian official responsible for the region informed delegates that with Georgia's independence, local national councils would be irrelevant unless they limited themselves solely to cultural matters. "Several councils," he lectured, "for example, the South Ossetian, did not understand this and continued their work, creating a system of dual

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<sup>79</sup> I. N. Tskhovrebov, ed., *Bor'ba trudyashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii za Sovetskuyu vlast' (Dokumenty i materialy)* (The struggle of the working masses of South Ossetia for Soviet power [Documents and materials], 2nd ed.) (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]: Gosizdat Yugo-Osetii, 1960), doc. 32.

<sup>80</sup> Nikonov, *Krest'yanskie vosstaniia*, 48; Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya*, 155; V. D. Tskhovrebov and M. P. Sanakoev, *Yuzhnaya Osetia v period tryokh revolutsii (1900-1921 gg.)* (South Ossetia in the period of three revolutions [1900-1921]) (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1981), 202.

<sup>81</sup> Tskhovrebov, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 35.

<sup>82</sup> Nikonov, *Krest'yanskie vosstaniia*, 48-49; Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya*, 158; Tskhovrebov and Sanakoev, *Yuzhnaya Osetia*, 202.

<sup>83</sup> Pliev, *Bor'ba trudiashchikhsya*, 147.

power.” This, he said, was intolerable.<sup>84</sup> At the Assembly, Georgian authorities pushed through a condemnation of the prior National Council’s activities.

Despite a promise to continue discussing the possibility of self-government for South Ossetians, the government prevaricated. In June 1919, the National Council presented a new project for autonomy. After that project was criticized, they presented another variant.<sup>85</sup> Receiving no response, they sent a delegation to Tbilisi in the fall, only to be told that while the government had created a special commission to study the issue, it was going to take time to resolve the matter. In October, the National Council asked the government to speed up the process, but while the Mensheviks “surrounded themselves with promises, projects, and discussions in all kinds of committees and the press,” they refused to give autonomy to the region.<sup>86</sup>

In the aftermath of the ill-fated Bolshevik rebellion of May 1920 (see Chapter Three), the Georgian government consolidated its control over South Ossetia. Georgia’s massive retaliation against this rebellion not only eliminated the Bolsheviks as a local force, it also firmly established central government authority in South Ossetia.

## **IX. Soviet Georgia and South Ossetia (1921-1989)**

Eight months later, power relations in the region were turned on their head. South Ossetians received what they had been seeking. On February 25, 1921, the day the Red Army occupied Tbilisi, the South Ossetian Soviet Regional Committee resolved that

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 158-59.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 163-4; Tskhovrebov and Sanakoev, *Yuzhnaya Osetia*, 203.

<sup>86</sup> Pliev, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya*, 165.

South Ossetia would be “separate[d] out as an autonomous unit” with Tskhinvali as its capital.<sup>87</sup> Shortly thereafter a South Ossetian division made up of “rebels and refugees” crossed the Caucasus mountain range and occupied Tskhinvali.<sup>88</sup> With this, the Georgian Communist newspaper *Komunisti* acknowledged the decision to “again declare Soviet power in South Ossetia [and establish there] a distinct political unit.”<sup>89</sup> In September, South Ossetian communists issued a resolution asserting the necessity of establishing “a Socialist Soviet Republic of South Ossetia” with borders that correspond to the “ethnographic, geographic, and economic conditions which guarantee the free economic and cultural development of the toiling masses of South Ossetia.” At the same time, they agreed to “voluntarily enter into a federal relation with the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia.”<sup>90</sup> In such a way, the South Ossetian Communists sought to establish relations with Georgia akin to those sought by Abkhazian Communists.

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<sup>87</sup> Tskhovrebov, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 150.

<sup>88</sup> Nikonov, *Krest’yanskii vosstaniia*, 84; Pliev, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya*, 280-81.

<sup>89</sup> The South Ossetian Revkom also dispatched a telegram to Lenin heralding the establishment of Soviet power in South Ossetia and expressing their hope that now “no one will hinder [the South Ossetian peasantry] from building its life as it wishes, not by some alien dictate.” *Komunisti* (Tbilisi), 6 March 1921, reprinted in Tskhovrebov, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 137; Nikonov, *Krest’yanskii vosstaniia*, 83-84; Pliev, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya*, 280. Nikonov, *Krest’yanskii vosstaniia*, 85.

<sup>90</sup> Levan Toidze, “Obrazovanie osetinskoi avtonomii v Gruzii (Formation of the Ossetian autonomy in Georgia),” in *Osetinskii vopros* (Ossetian question), eds. A. Bakradze and O. Chubinidze (Tbilisi: Kera-XXI, 1994), 297-98. An attached report lay out the justifications for these demands. This document as published in a South Ossetian collection of documents in 1960 states that the South Ossetian communists were requesting the establishment of an “autonomous region” of South Ossetia (i.e., the form in which it ultimately was established), and not a full-fledged republic. This, however, is a later emendation, as is clear from additional areas of the text, where the editor places “autonomous region” in brackets preceding the words “of South Ossetia” and in one place leaves the name “socialist Soviet republic” in its entirety. See Tskhovrebov, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 160.

At first, the attitude of Soviet Georgia towards South Ossetian self-rule differed little from that of independent Georgia. In May 1921, the Georgian Revolutionary Committee concluded that South Ossetia did not require the status of an autonomous region, let alone its own republic. Instead, it proposed that South Ossetian communities be granted a series of small autonomous districts which would be adequate to address South Ossetians' concerns.<sup>91</sup> At the end of September, the Commissariat of Internal Affairs issued its own findings on the matter:

“After detailed study of the issue, the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs considers the separation of South Ossetia into its own administrative unit with the rights of a region (uezd) to be impossible by geographic and economic considerations. As a complete geographic whole, South Ossetia does not exist. There are only separate areas settled by Ossetians. These areas are not connected with each other geographically or economically....During the year they are separate from each other for several months.”<sup>92</sup>

The report again suggested that separate autonomous districts be established on the basis of South Ossetian communities whose representatives in the Revkom would “defend the interests of the Ossetian population on the scale of the entire region.”<sup>93</sup>

In the end, Soviet authorities established a compromise solution similar to that established for Mountainous Karabagh. In 1922, South Ossetia was granted the status of

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<sup>91</sup> B. Z. Pliev and I. N. Tskhovrebov, *Obrazovanie Yugo-Osetinskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti (k 50-letiiu avtonomii)* (Formation of the South Ossetian Autonomous District [on 50 years of autonomy]) (Tskhinvali: Iriston, 1972), 51-52.

<sup>92</sup> Toidze, “Obrazovanie osetinskoi avtonomii,” 304-305.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 307. Also see Pliev and Tskhovrebov, *Obrazovanie*, 52-53.



an autonomous region within Soviet Georgia.<sup>94</sup> At first, the autonomy “enjoyed for all intents and purposes the rights of an autonomous republic.” Its powers, however, were later restricted in administrative reorganizations of the late 1930s that, in addition to centralizing power more generally, also served to better distinguish between autonomous “regions” like South Ossetia (and Mountainous Karabagh) and “more” autonomous republics like Abkhazia.<sup>95</sup>

In the post-Stalin period, South Ossetian ability to exert political control in their region was considerably less of an issue than it was for Karabagh Armenians or Abkhazians. While some complaints about Georgian rule were recorded in early years, South Ossetians neither issued petitions, sent letters, nor gathered in mass demonstrations to complain of Georgian abuse of power during the post-Stalin period.

Like Abkhazians, South Ossetian activists in the Gorbachev period nonetheless sought to rouse the population to action by highlighting South Ossetians’ political frailty. Echoing the language of Abkhazian organizers, the manifesto of *Adamon Nykhas* noted that the local nomenklatura were “marionettes” who were “slavishly dependent on the republican government.”<sup>96</sup> Chochiev explained that the Soviet ethnofederal system was a “feudal relic” and indicated that South Ossetia was more “discriminated against” than North Ossetia, since it had received only autonomous regional status, rather than autonomous republican status. Overall, he insisted that “[South Ossetians] are

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<sup>94</sup> The establishment of the South Ossetian autonomous district was formally declared in a decree that was issued on 20 April 1922. The decree is published in whole in Toidze, *Rogor sheikmna*, 81-84. Also see Tskhovrebov, *Bor’ba trudiashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii*, doc. 169; and Toidze, “Obrazovanie osetinskoi avtonomii,” 314-315.

<sup>95</sup> Pliev and Tskhovrebov, *Obrazovanie Yugo-Osetinskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti*, 70.

<sup>96</sup> *Leninskoe Znamya* (Tbilisi), 24 October 1989, reprinted in *Sovietskaya Osetia* (Tskhinvali), 14 November 1989.

discriminated against politically, in comparison to the Soviet republics' core nations.”<sup>97</sup>

A leader of the strike committee later enunciated this basic political grievance: “[U]ntil this day our autonomy has had only a formal character.”<sup>98</sup> In an address to the citizens of Georgia, *Adamon Nykhas* justified their campaign as “an effort to create the conditions by which the conception of the autonomous region will cease to be a fiction and which will allow all of the people who live in it to truly decide all questions of cultural and economic life....”<sup>99</sup>

In the absence of a specific threat to South Ossetian political control, the South Ossetian nationalist movement did not garner wide support. When Georgian nationalists began speaking of abolishing South Ossetia's autonomy, however, the movement began to win over large numbers of committed individuals. Given a different historical record, South Ossetians might not have taken Georgian calls to abolish their autonomy that seriously, treating them as nothing more than the empty rhetoric of extremists. Combined with the historical record, however, this threat compelled South Ossetians to seek a way to protect their political status. With it, the South Ossetian commitment problem at last came to the fore.

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<sup>97</sup> *Komunisti* (Tbilisi), 15 October 1989.

<sup>98</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetiya*, 19 October 1989.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 November 1989.

**Table 5.1**  
**Contemporary Signals and Historical Precedents**

	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b>	<b>Abkhazians</b>	<b>South Ossetians</b>
<b>Signal</b>	<b>Beatings, Historical Claims</b>	<b>Rise of Nationalist Movement</b>	<b>Threat to Abolish Autonomy</b>
<b>History</b>	<b>Steady efforts at centralization</b>	<b>Interrupted efforts at centralization leading to stalemate</b>	<b>Initial effort at centralization held at bay</b>
<b>Interpretation</b>	<b>Nothing has changed.</b>	<b>Georgians seek to restore lost gains.</b>	<b>Georgian seek to dismantle entire system.</b>

## *Chapter Six* **An Opportunity for Success**

### **I. Introduction**

For acts of mass mobilization to occur, scholars concur that identifying motivations for action provides an insufficient explanation. The opportunity to succeed or, more precisely, the belief that change is possible is also vital to the emergence of a mass political movement.<sup>1</sup>

When scholars consider the opportunity structure for mass mobilization in the late USSR in particular, they typically point to democratization as the key element of reform which gave populations confidence they could successfully pursue political change.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis on democratization is, however, incomplete. First, it does not account for the many cases of Soviet ethnic groups that did not engage in mass mobilization in favor of institutional change. As I discuss at the end of this chapter, other

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<sup>1</sup> For general theoretical discussions of opportunity and mobilization, see Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978), chap. 4; William Gamson and David Meyer, "The Framing of Political Opportunity," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 275-90; and Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 5.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 73-76; Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 32; and Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chap. 2.

ethnic groups in the USSR had similar motivations and faced a similar commitment problem. Relying only on Gorbachev's promise of democratization, we cannot explain why these groups did not mobilize.

Second, an emphasis on democratization does not account for the significant variation in goals we find among the various groups that did mobilize. Even within our small sample of movements in the South Caucasus, variation of goals existed. While Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians mobilized to undo their subordinate status, the South Ossetians' campaign originally fell short of this goal. The South Ossetian regional assembly first issued a petition to transform their autonomous region into an autonomous republic within Georgia, not a unit separate from it. While the preferences of South Ossetian activists were self-avowedly separatist, they did not launch their movement with a separatist declaration. Democratization alone cannot account for this unusual restraint.

In addition to democratization, therefore, I consider an additional element of Gorbachev's reforms that did not affect groups equally. In introducing his reforms, Gorbachev called for a "return" to the ideals on which the Soviet state was founded. By terming the failures of the Soviet system "mistakes" that Stalin and his successors had visited upon the Soviet Union's political and economic institutions, he hoped to implement needed reforms while still preserving the legitimacy of Soviet rule.

What Gorbachev did not consider, however, was how ethnic groups might appropriate such calls to further their own particular goals. For Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, a promise to restore Soviet revolutionary institutions of governance provided an unparalleled opportunity to pursue an agenda of institutional change. They were able to make the case that existing ethno-political institutions had deviated from the

arrangements Soviet founders had originally established in the South Caucasus. “Piggy-backing” onto central reforms, these groups believed they would be able to convince the central government to undo their subordinate status. In contrast, South Ossetians could not make such a case and, consequently, did not have the same faith in their ability to get the central government’s support. At first, therefore, they only pushed for greater rights as an autonomy of Soviet Georgia. Only after conflict escalated did they initiate efforts to separate from Georgia completely (see Table 6.1).

The following section discusses Gorbachev’s efforts to place his reforms squarely in the revolutionary tradition. The chapter then assesses the narratives of revolutionary state formation in the South Caucasus. It exhibits why the Karabagh Armenians and the Abkhazians could make a case, on the basis of early Soviet state-building, that their subordination to Soviet Azerbaijan and Georgia ought to be undone, with Mountainous Karabagh joining Armenia and Abkhazia becoming its own union republic. Conversely, it shows why the South Ossetians could not.

## **II. Reforming the Revolution**

Even before Mikhail Gorbachev became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), he expressed his belief that to rectify the “shortcomings and omissions” in Soviet society and economy, it was necessary to “speak to [members of the public] in the language of truth.” The typical Soviet citizen “is a person of developed culture and education,” Gorbachev graciously observed in a December 1984 speech, who “won’t accept simplified answers to his questions” and “is

sensitive to falsehoods.” Declaring the need for a new policy of openness, or *glasnost*, Gorbachev insisted that “[w]ide, prompt, and frank information is evidence of confidence in the people and respect for their intelligence and feelings, and for their ability to understand events for themselves.”<sup>3</sup> Only if members of the public believed they enjoyed the confidence and respect of the government, he reasoned, would they assist in the implementation of political and economic reforms.

For Gorbachev, this desire to “speak in the language of truth” extended to a discussion of the Soviet past, in particular Stalinism. Acknowledging the mistakes, abuses of power, and tragic crimes of the Stalinist past, Gorbachev sought to make a clear distinction between the reforms he wished to pursue and the “rigid system of centralization and command” that Stalinism had represented. At a plenum of the CPSU’s Central Committee in October 1987, Gorbachev surveyed the number of Party members and military officers that had suffered in Stalin’s purges and delivered a firm verdict: “Stalin and his immediate circle are guilty before the Party and the people.”<sup>4</sup>

The following month, Gorbachev delivered a public speech on the occasion of the Revolution’s seventieth anniversary. In it, he denounced the “atmosphere of intolerance” that had been created during Stalin’s rule, as well as the “crimes [that stemmed] from an abuse of power,” including the “mass repressions” of the era. In an evident concession to his conservative opponents, Gorbachev accepted Stalin’s “indisputable contribution to the struggle for socialism.” Revealingly, however, he urged Soviet society to recognize “the flagrant political mistakes and arbitrary actions committed by him and his entourage.”

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<sup>3</sup> The quotations are from Robert G. Kaiser, *Why Gorbachev Happened: His Triumphs, His Failure, and His Fall* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1992), 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 187, 179.

Repeating the claim he made at the closed-door plenum in October, Gorbachev noted that Stalin's guilt "is enormous and unforgivable."<sup>5</sup>

For Gorbachev, uncovering the crimes of the past was to serve as prelude to political change. "[A] truthful analysis" of the past, he insisted, "should help solve our current problems of democratization, legality, *glasnost*, and the overcoming of bureaucratism—in short, the vital problems of *perestroika*."<sup>6</sup>

Gorbachev's attack on Stalin and Stalinism did not mean, however, that he wished to entirely discredit the Soviet system of rule. While choosing, in the words of Robert Kaiser, "to attack the system he inherited," Gorbachev also sought to ground his reforms firmly in Russian revolutionary tradition. According to Kaiser, Gorbachev "always considered himself a good Communist and a faithful Leninist....He...never stopped quoting Lenin, or defending Lenin's vision." While denouncing Stalin to the editorial board of a leading reform journal *Soviet Culture* in July 1987, Gorbachev hastened to add that this "does not detract from all we have today" or from "the enormous strength that is to be found in socialism." Rather than denounce communism, Gorbachev denounced "[s]purious notions of communism....ideas [wrongly] equated with the essential characteristics of socialism" and which were "deviation[s] from Leninist policy."<sup>7</sup>

Such remarks offered a stamp of approval for activities members of the Party *intelligentsia* had been engaged in since the end of 1986. During these months, a number of movies, plays, poems, and novels condemning Stalinism had been released, published,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 187-88.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 153, 161, 173, 188.



or performed.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Gorbachev's November 1987 speech was an open "invitation to the country's intellectuals and historians to continue to dig into the past."<sup>9</sup>

However inadvertently, though, it was also an invitation for various Soviet ethnic groups to "dig into the past" in order to defend their own agenda of political change. Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Moldovans, and Western Ukrainians had to dig the least: the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 with which Nazi Germany had conceded their homelands to the USSR reeked of Stalinist illegitimacy.<sup>10</sup> If Gorbachev was serious about recognizing Stalin's crimes, such groups reasoned, he was going to have to accept that their incorporation into the USSR had been illegitimate and was, therefore, up for discussion.

For Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, Gorbachev's call for a return to Soviet revolutionary foundations provided a similar opportunity. While it could not support a claim for independence from the USSR (which, in any case, was not their goal), it could support a claim for undoing their subordinate status. In the beginning, Soviet revolutionaries had promised different political arrangements for Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians than the autonomous institutions they eventually received. If they could plausibly pin these changes on Stalin or his associates, both groups reasoned, they could pressure the central government to consent to their political demands.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 142-46, 156-58, 175.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>10</sup> The Pact placed the independent states of Estonia, Latvia, and (in a later amendment) Lithuania, as well as Polish Ukrainian (i.e., Western Ukrainian) territory, in the "sphere of interest" of the USSR. It also recognized a special Soviet interest in Romanian Bessarabia (i.e., Moldova). These states and territories were subsequently annexed to the USSR. See Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion: A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 82-83.

For South Ossetians, on the other hand, Gorbachev's call meant very little. Soviet revolutionaries had never promised different political arrangements to South Ossetians; they had always offered them autonomy within Soviet Georgia. As a result, South Ossetians could not lobby successfully for separation from Georgia on the basis of this element of Gorbachev's reforms. Only in the context of conflict escalation did South Ossetians later transform their campaign into an effort to secede from the increasingly independent-minded Georgia.

### **III. Mountainous Karabagh: Confident of Change**

The organizers of the Karabagh Armenian campaign and their followers exhibited a high level of confidence concerning their ability to use Gorbachev's reforms to separate Mountainous Karabagh from Azerbaijan. Sergei Mikoyan, historian and son of prominent Communist Anastas Mikoyan, told an interviewer in February 1988 that Karabagh villagers "used to believe that nothing could change" and so the duty of campaign organizers was "to convince them that perestroika is a reality—a reality not only in Moscow but in every part of our country."<sup>11</sup> In another interview that month, author Zori Balayan affirmed this optimism: "I am confident that perestroika will bring in fundamental changes and, most importantly, will be instrumental in our efforts to have...Karabagh reunited with Armenia."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* (Boston), 6 February 1988, excerpted in Gerard J. Libaridian, ed., *The Karabagh File: Documents and Facts on the Region of Mountainous Karabagh (1918-1988)* (Cambridge, MA: The Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), doc. 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 20 February 1988.

Organizers infected the Karabagh Armenian public with this optimism. According to a Soviet news report, during the February protests in Stepanakert, “[r]umors were circulated that Moscow was nearly ‘in favor’ of it, all that was necessary was to voice the demand more resolutely.”<sup>13</sup> Mark Malkasian’s depiction of Stepanakert on February 20, the day of the regional assembly, suggests a similar conclusion:

“Entire families had jammed into Lenin Square....Portraits of Gorbachev, Lenin, and Stepan Shahumyan (Lenin’s special commissar of Caucasian affairs during the Russian Revolution) swayed with the crowd. Banners spoke of unspoiled trust in glasnost.... Above all, there was a belief within the Karabagh Armenian community that the day when past injustices would be redressed was finally at hand.”<sup>14</sup>

#### **IV. The Bolshevik Debate over Mountainous Karabagh**

What accounts for this confidence among Karabagh Armenians? A glance into Soviet historiography does not initially suggest that Karabagh Armenians could make the case that their inclusion in Azerbaijan had diverged from the original Soviet path of state development. Mountainous Karabagh was granted the status of an autonomous region within Azerbaijan already in the second year of Soviet power. On July 5, 1921, the Bolsheviks’ Caucasian Bureau (Kavburo) held a meeting to decide the fate of what had earlier been a disputed territory. In a vote of 4 to 3, the Kavburo declared: “Taking into

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<sup>13</sup> *Izvestia* (Moscow), 24 March 1988, trans. by BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 26 March 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Malkasian, “*Gha-ra-bagh!*”: *The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 5.

consideration the necessity of national accord between Muslims and Armenians and the economic connection of Upper and Lower Karabagh, [and] its continuous connection with Azerbaijan, Mountainous Karabagh will remain within the borders of the [Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic], and will be granted wide regional autonomy....”<sup>15</sup> Two years almost to the day, Soviet authorities published a decree confirming this decision. By their writ, “the Armenian region of Mountainous Karabagh” was proclaimed an autonomous region of Soviet Azerbaijan.<sup>16</sup>

The matter, however, was not so simple as that. In May 1920, a week after the declaration of Soviet power in Mountainous Karabagh, Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs Georgi Chicherin informed the head of the Communist Party’s Caucasus Bureau (Kavburo), Sergo Orjonikidze, that “it is necessary for us to achieve a compromise with the [still independent Armenian] government” that would include the matter of the disputed territories of Karabagh and Zangezur.<sup>17</sup> His efforts were motivated by the desire to establish peaceful relations with Armenia, in the hopes of procuring its subsequent Sovietization (by then, Azerbaijan had already become Soviet).<sup>18</sup>

A few weeks later, Chicherin revealed the nature of the compromise he had in mind. In a meeting with an Armenian delegation responsible for negotiating peace with Soviet Russia, Chicherin stated “that the [Soviet government] was tending toward

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<sup>15</sup> V. A. Mikayelian, ed., *Nagorny Karabakh v 1918-1923 gg. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Mountainous Karabagh, 1918-1923: A collection of documents and materials) (Yerevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armenii, 1992), doc. 451. Also see D. Guliev, ed., *K istorii obrazovaniia Nagorno-Karabakhskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti Azerbajjanskoi SSR, 1918-1925: Dokumenty i materialy* (Towards a history of the formation of the Nagorno-Karabagh autonomous district of the Azerbaijani SSR, 1918-1925: Documents and materials) (Baku: Azerbajjanskoi gosudarstvennoe isdatel'stvo, 1989), 92.

<sup>16</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, doc. 472; Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 52-53.

<sup>17</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, doc. 331.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, docs. 352, 360.

recognizing Zangezur and Nakhichevan [a third disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan] as integral parts of the Armenian republic, whereas Mountainous Karabagh would be regarded as disputed, with its ultimate fate decided by plebiscite.”<sup>19</sup> By Chicherin’s words, Soviet Russia was promising the delegation all that Armenia desired, including, after popular referendum, even Mountainous Karabagh.

Such an offer, however, was not to last. Bolsheviks based in the Caucasus were adamantly against it. Orjonikidze, Narimanov (the head of the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Committee, or Revkom), and even Armenian Bolsheviks rejected Chicherin’s ambitions for the peaceful Sovietization of Armenia and consistently lobbied the central government to immediately occupy it, as well as neighboring Georgia, by force.<sup>20</sup>

With regards to the disputed territories, the Caucasian Bolsheviks insisted that two of the three, Karabagh and Zangezur, become part of Soviet Azerbaijan. Some days after Chicherin offered the Armenian delegation his suggestion for the disputed territories, Orjonikidze maintained that “Azerbaijan simply cannot make do without Karabagh and Zangezur.”<sup>21</sup> Later, Orjonikidze told Lenin, Stalin, and Chicherin that he was certain “that in order to strengthen Soviet power in Azerbaijan and to preserve for us Baku it is necessary to unite Mountainous Karabagh” to Azerbaijan. He added that any other position “compromises us in the eyes of the [Azerbaijani] masses.”<sup>22</sup> Stalin informed Orjonikidze of his consent: “it is impossible to avoid taking sides indefinitely, it

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<sup>19</sup> Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vol. 4, *Between Crescent and Sickle: Partition and Sovietization* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), 52.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, 56-62.

<sup>21</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, doc. 351; Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Orjonikidze reiterated this position at least twice more that month, once in a discussion with Narimanov and once in writing to Chicherin. See Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 33-34.

is necessary to support one of the sides, in the given case, of course, Azerbaijan with Turkey.”<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, a group of Caucasian Bolsheviks, including Narimanov and the Georgian Bolshevik Budu Mdivani, strongly urged the Soviet government not to “prevaricate,” insisting that the declaration of Karabagh and Zangezur as even neutral territories, let alone Armenian, would be interpreted by the Azerbaijani population as an act of “betrayal, Armenophilia, or weakness,” any of which could promote great disaffection with the Soviet regime and, possibly, spark revolt.<sup>24</sup>

Given this resistance, Chicherin offered Armenia a revised compromise at the end of June. Up to this point, he had expressed his frustrations with the “lack of discipline” of the Caucasian Bolsheviks who “wreck compromises, reject the conclusion of an agreement with Armenia as demanded by [central authorities],” and insist on annexing disputed territories to Azerbaijan. He had also lashed out at “those who were “[indulging] the annexationist aims of Muslim nationalists.”<sup>25</sup> Now, however, he informed the Armenian delegation that Nakhichevan would likely go to Armenia while Zangezur would be regarded as disputed until the wishes of the local population could be ascertained. Karabagh, on the other hand, was to be given outright to Azerbaijan.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the hardening of Chicherin’s stance, the split between the Foreign Commissar and the Caucasian Bolsheviks persisted. Despite initial objections by Chicherin, a Red Army detachment pressed forward from Karabagh into Zangezur at the

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<sup>23</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 363a.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., docs. 365, 367; Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 55-56. A similar group of Caucasian Bolsheviks (Narimanov, Mdivani, and two Armenians) reiterated this position in a telegram to Chicherin and Orjonikidze. Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 355.

<sup>26</sup> Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 4, 55, 62; Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 373-74, 378; Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 56-57; *Kommunist*, 20 July 1920, reprinted in Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 57-59.

start of July. Less than two weeks later, Red Army troops were dispatched to Nakhichevan, at the time under the *de facto* control of local Azerbaijanis.

Chicherin and the Caucasian Bolsheviks interpreted this extension of Soviet power in different ways. Chicherin insisted that the occupation would enable Russia to mediate effectively between Armenia and Soviet Azerbaijan. Several days before the Red Army moved into Zangezur, Chicherin told Orjonikidze that the three disputed territories could neither be united to Armenia or Azerbaijan but, instead, had to come under direct occupation.<sup>27</sup> He later informed Lenin that this action would reflect an “absolutely objective and impartial” policy towards the disputing states.<sup>28</sup> On August 10, the Armenian government assented to a peace agreement that accepted Russian occupation of the disputed territories but affirmed that such occupation did not “predetermine” the outcome of negotiations.<sup>29</sup>

For the Caucasian Bolsheviks, the military occupation of the disputed territories meant victory for Azerbaijan. Narimanov told Orjonikidze that he was in “complete agreement” with him—Chicherin was “hopelessly confused” regarding the significance of the Red Army occupation. As long as “Soviet power” and “our troops” are in the disputed territories, Narimanov believed, “we will be able to secure these territories for Azerbaijan...No one in the world is in a position to prevent us from pressuring the population of these districts to speak out in favor of unification with Azerbaijan....”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 352.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, doc. 360.

<sup>29</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 398. Also see Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 4, 56-62; and Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, docs. 392, 394.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., doc. 400.

The hand of the Caucasian Bolsheviks was strengthened in September 1920, when a Turkish attack on Armenia jeopardized the latter's independence. Uncertain that Armenia would continue to exist at all, Chicherin informed his representative in Armenia, Boris Legran, that the Soviet government had resolved to leave the status of Zangezur and Nakhichevan open; they could no longer be considered probable portions of the Armenian state.<sup>31</sup> On October 28, Legran optimistically concluded a draft treaty with Armenia, even as the Turks continued capturing territory. The treaty stated that Russia and Azerbaijan would "recognize the inviolable right of the Republic of Armenia" to Nakhichevan and Zangezur. In return, Armenia would "unconditionally renounce all claims to...Karabagh."<sup>32</sup> Two days later, the Turks captured the critical fortress town of Kars, making their entry into the heart of Armenia imminent. At the start of November, Stalin and Orjonikidze hastily wrote Lenin and Chicherin to inform them that the draft treaty was not binding and must not be signed.<sup>33</sup>

After further advances into Armenia, Turkey wrested a capitulation from the Armenian government in mid-November that preserved Armenia's independence, but under Turkish domination and with the loss of approximately half the territories it had acquired since the end of World War I. This surrender served as the trigger for Armenia's long-anticipated Sovietization. Four days after the surrender, an Armenian Military Revolutionary Committee was organized in Baku and, at the end of November, the Red Army crossed the border to liberate defeated Armenia. On November 29, the Armenian

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<sup>31</sup> Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 4, 216.

<sup>32</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 416.

<sup>33</sup> Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 4, 235.



Revkom issued a declaration of Armenia's Sovietization; three days later, the government surrendered power to the Armenian Revkom.<sup>34</sup>

## **V. After Sovietization: Mountainous Karabagh Goes to Armenia**

Accompanying the Sovietization of Armenia was an apparent *volte-face* by the Caucasian Bolsheviks regarding the disputed territories. In an infamous declaration of November 30, two days before the Armenian government surrendered power, the Azerbaijani Revkom welcomed Armenia's Sovietization and declared that "henceforth no territorial question can be the cause for mutual bloodletting of two, centuries-long neighboring peoples: Armenians and Muslims. The territory of Zangezur and Nakhichevan districts is an inseparable part of Soviet Armenia, while the toiling peasantry of Mountainous Karabagh is granted the full right of self-determination."<sup>35</sup> As

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<sup>34</sup> For details, see *ibid.*, 289-292, 350-390.

<sup>35</sup> *Komunist* (Baku), 2 December 1920, reprinted in Mikayelian, doc. 419; also see Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 423; and Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 63-66. The declaration was read publically by Narimanov on December 1. There is some confusion regarding a key passage of the declaration. Mikayelian provides two sources: the declaration itself and an account of Narimanov's public presentation of the declaration. The first contains the phrase regarding the inclusion of Zangezur and Nakhichevan into Armenia, while the second does not. Guliev only provides the second version of the declaration, which does not mention the territorial transfers.

I cannot confirm whether the critical passage was actually part of the text of Narimanov's speech, or whether two different versions of the same declaration were printed that day. However, the minutes of the meeting at which the declaration was drafted (which Guliev's compilation includes) state that "Zangezur goes to Armenia" and that "the mountainous portion of Karabagh is granted the right of self-determination." This would indicate that the territorial transfer of Zangezur, at least, was an element of Azerbaijan's original resolution. One explanation for the discrepancy may be that Guliev deleted the passage regarding Zangezur and Nakhichevan (deletions of key passages exist elsewhere in his collection [see n. 36 and n. 37]) and that Mikayelian unintentionally

compensation for its Sovietization then, Armenia was clearly granted Nakhichevan, as the Caucasian Bolsheviks had themselves consistently promised, and Zangezur, which they had not.

Less clear was the fate of Mountainous Karabagh. Taken in isolation, the Azerbaijani Revkom's promise to grant the population of Mountainous Karabagh the right of self-determination suggested a willingness to permit the region to go to Soviet Armenia as well. However, this may not have been the Revkom's intent. If its members had merely intended to let Mountainous Karabagh join Armenia, then the Revkom could have noted this in the same statement which granted Zangezur and Nakhichevan to Armenia. Instead, the declaration specifically referred to the "right of self-determination," a phrase that could also be construed as implying a right to national autonomy. Indeed, this had been precisely Orjonikidze's plan, if Mountainous Karabagh were to be included within Soviet Azerbaijan, as early as the summer of 1920.<sup>36</sup>

Whatever the Azerbaijani Revkom's intention, Bolshevik authorities used the declaration to also grant Mountainous Karabagh to Armenia. After Narimanov read the declaration at a public meeting on December 1, Orjonikidze grandly addressed those gathered in the hall:

"[Narimanov] has read us his declaration. Zangezur, Nakhichevan, and Karabagh—to Russian ears unfamiliar with the contents of these words, they

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reproduced this second version with the deletion (his collection contains several other documents explicitly attributed to Guliev's collection).

<sup>36</sup> Orjonikidze referred to this idea many times, in dispatches to Lenin, Stalin, Chicherin, and Narimanov. A Red Army commander in the region also indicated in the summer of 1920 that "the most just resolution of the matter is [to grant] wide autonomy to Zangezur and Mountainous Karabagh until the matter is finally resolved." Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 33-34; Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 382.

mean absolutely nothing....[S]o Comrade Narimanov says: ‘Take these for yourself. Take these...lands for Armenia.’ As if Soviet Azerbaijan frees itself from an extra burden. But no! In these districts...lies the crux of the so-called Armenian-Muslim question....And here today the head of the Azerbaijani republic comes out and says: ‘This terrible question no longer exists....There is no longer animosity between Muslims and Armenians....’ The act read here is an act of great importance, it is an historical act which has no equal in the history of humanity.”<sup>37</sup>

The next day Orjonikidze was even more specific, informing Lenin and Stalin that Azerbaijan had declared the transfer of Nakhichevan, Zangezur, and Mountainous Karabagh to Armenia.<sup>38</sup> Stalin hailed the Sovietization of Armenia in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* on December 4 and repeated the claim that Azerbaijan had agreed to transfer Zangezur, Nakhichevan, and Mountainous Karabagh to Soviet Armenia.<sup>39</sup> The claim was repeated once again on Soviet radio on December 5.<sup>40</sup> On December 7, the new Soviet Armenian media organ *Communist* published a second declaration of the Azerbaijani Revkom, also reportedly dating from November 30, which specifically declared that “Mountainous Karabagh, Zangezur, and Nakhichevan are considered part of

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<sup>37</sup> G. K. Orjonikidze, *Stat'i i rechi* (Moscow, 1956), excerpted in Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 422. Guliev also reprints Orjonikidze's speech, albeit without the reference to Nakhichevan, which he replaces with ellipses. See Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 66-68.

<sup>38</sup> *Pravda* (Moscow), 4 December 1920, excerpted in Mikayelian, doc. 424. He may also have told Armenian Bolshevik A. Nazaretian about the decisions (Guliev provides a transcript of one of their conversations which refers to Mountainous Karabagh's "right of self-determination" but, unfortunately, contains ellipses at the point where he would have informed Nazaretian about the transfer of Zangezur and Nakhichevan). See Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 425.

<sup>40</sup> *Slovo*, 7 December 1920, reprinted in Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 426.

the Armenian Socialist Republic.”<sup>41</sup> Subsequently, Legran received word from the Kavburo that the Azerbaijani government had issued a declaration regarding the unification to Soviet Armenia of the three disputed territories. In January 1921, the chair of the Armenian Revkom sent thanks to the Azerbaijani Revkom for assenting to the transfer of the three territories.<sup>42</sup>

This position persisted through June 1921. Early that month, the Kavburo noted that Mountainous Karabagh would belong to Armenia. In a report detailing the borders of the Caucasian Soviet republics, one military officer noted that “by the decree of the Azrevkom, [Karabagh and Zangezur] are to be transferred to Armenia.” On June 12, a declaration of the Armenian government was prepared for publication that stated that “on the basis of the declaration of the [Azrevkom] and an agreement between the governments of [Armenia and Azerbaijan] it is declared that Mountainous Karabagh is henceforth an inalienable part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia.”<sup>43</sup>

For the seven months that followed the Sovietization of Armenia, all evidence points to the fact that the Soviet government, from Orjonikidze up, supported the inclusion of Mountainous Karabagh in Armenia.

## **VI. A Sudden Switch**

This decision began to totter, however, at the end of June 1921. During a meeting of a committee on borders, the Azerbaijani commissar of foreign affairs announced that

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<sup>41</sup> *Komunist* (Yerevan), 7 December 1920, reprinted in Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 420.

<sup>42</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, docs. 421, 428.

<sup>43</sup> See *ibid.*, docs. 439-442.

he “had never heard that Mountainous Karabagh has been left for Armenia and...had not received any instructions regarding this question.”<sup>44</sup> Awaiting clarification from Baku, Orjonikidze and leading Russian Communist Sergei Kirov wired the Azerbaijani government to inform them of their opinion that “in the interests of decisively resolving all frictions...it is necessary to go by the following principle: not one Armenian village should be united to Azerbaijan, nor should any Muslim village be united to Armenia.”<sup>45</sup>

The response of the Azerbaijani government the next day, however, was adamant: they rejected the unification of Mountainous Karabagh to Armenia. “We consider the suggestion to separate places with Armenian and Turkic populations...unacceptable....The question should be resolved [on the basis] of the clear economic gravitation of Mountainous Karabagh to Azerbaijan.” Narimanov informed his commissar on foreign affairs that “if they are relying on my declaration, what it literally said was ‘Mountainous Karabagh is granted the right of free self-determination,’” a formulation that did not exclude autonomy within Azerbaijan. Huseinov expressed some discomfort that they would appear to be going back on their word. Narimanov assured him, however, that Orjonikidze would be won over to his position.<sup>46</sup>

Such optimism was at first unwarranted. At a meeting held on July 4 to discuss the situation, the Kavburo recognized the existence of “two points of view” on the matter and held a series of votes to resolve the situation. The first vote was for Karabagh to remain within Azerbaijan. Three voted in favor (Narimanov, the Georgian Makharadze, and the Armenian Nazaretian) and four voted against (Orjonikidze and three Russians

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., doc. 444.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., doc. 445.

<sup>46</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, docs. 446, 447; Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 87-90.

Miasnikov, Kirov, and Figatner). The former three also voted in the minority to have an intended plebiscite held throughout all of Karabagh (which would imply a Muslim majority that would make it fail), while Orjonikidze and the three likeminded representatives voted to have it held only in Mountainous Karabagh, “i.e., among Armenians.” As a result, the Kavburo resolved: “Mountainous Karabagh will be included within the SSR of Armenia, a plebiscite will be held only in Mountainous Karabagh.”<sup>47</sup> In such a way, the existing decision to place Mountainous Karabagh in Soviet Armenia was upheld.

This, though, was not to be the end of the story. The protocol of the July 4 meeting also recorded an objection to the vote. Narimanov asked that, “given the importance which the Karabagh question holds for Azerbaijan, I consider it essential that we turn the issue over to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party for a final resolution.” The participants agreed. What happened between the end of the meeting and the next day is still unknown. On July 5, however, Orjonikidze and Nazaretian proposed to re-examine the declaration of the day before. A new vote was held and, this time, with a vote of 4 to 3 (presumably the defection was Orjonikidze’s), the Kavburo announced its fateful decision that Mountainous Karabagh would remain within Azerbaijan as an autonomous formation.<sup>48</sup> A day after Mountainous Karabagh had been placed in Armenia, it was transferred back to Azerbaijan.

Not only this but Nakhichevan also went to Azerbaijan. Nakhichevan had been definitively and consistently promised to Armenia, both before and after the latter’s Sovietization, including by Narimanov himself. In March 1921, however, Soviet Russia

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<sup>47</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, doc. 450; Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 90-91.

<sup>48</sup> Mikayelian, *Nagornyi Karabakh*, docs. 450, 451; Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 90-92.

signed the Treaty of Moscow with Turkey which, in addition to confirming the 1920 loss of Armenian territories to Turkey, resolved the Nakhichevan question by granting the region autonomy as part of Soviet Azerbaijan, not Armenia, and forbidding its transfer to any other party (i.e., Armenia) without Turkey's consent.<sup>49</sup> After this, it would have made sense to award Mountainous Karabagh to Armenia as a fair (and, on the basis of ethnic composition, sensible) exchange of disputed territories. This, however, was not to be.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, while Soviet authorities did place Mountainous Karabagh in Azerbaijan already in 1921, this decision only came after a contentious debate that pitted Lenin's Foreign Minister against "Caucasian Bolsheviks" including Stalin and Orjonikidze, a subsequent concession by the Caucasian Bolsheviks to grant the region to Armenia, a vote in the Kavburo upholding that decision, a retreat from that decision by Azerbaijan, and, ultimately, a decisive switch vote by Orjonikidze. While Stalin did not exert a vote himself, he was the Soviet Commissar on Nationalities at the time, and Orjonikidze was

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<sup>49</sup> The Treaty of Moscow was signed in the midst of a revolt by the Dashnaktsutun, the former ruling party of Armenia, against Soviet power less than four months after their surrender. This state of affairs may have encouraged the Soviet government to not push Turkey too hard to assure that its own promise to Armenia regarding Nakhichevan was upheld. Narimanov says as much to Lenin in February: "You already know that Soviet power has already been overthrown in Armenia. Given that, I would suggest, the Armenian question does not have to play a role in negotiations with the Turkish delegation." See Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 4, 405-06; Mikayelian, *Nagorny Karabakh*, doc. 432.

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the only part of the disputed territories that Armenia was ever granted was approximately half of Zangezur, which had been under Armenian control ever since the Red Army had withdrawn from the region under pressure from local partisans just days before Armenia was Sovietized. Soviet authorities turned their attention to the autonomous region five months later, in the summer of 1921. Seeking to disarm the region by negotiation, authorities granted local rebels amnesty and promised them that Zangezur would be incorporated into Armenia, not Azerbaijan. In the end, Zangezur was divided roughly in half, with the western portion going to Armenia and the eastern portion (populated mainly by Kurds) going to Azerbaijan. See Hovannisian, *Republic of Armenia*, vol. 4, 115-22, 405-06; Guliev, *K istorii obrazovaniia*, 70.

his close ally. It is unthinkable that the Kavburo's final decision was made without his approval.

## **VII. Explaining Confidence**

It is now clear why Karabagh Armenians had such high hopes their unification campaign would succeed. If Gorbachev was serious about returning to the Leninist foundations of the Soviet state, how could he ignore their claims? Soviet founders had resolved to give the region to Armenia. The only reason it did not was that Narimanov and Orjonikidze (presumably with Stalin's attendance or approval) had engaged in back-room negotiations to reverse the Kavburo's original decision. For Karabagh Armenians, this outcome was a crime of Stalinism like any other. If Gorbachev was committed to rectifying deviations from Leninist ideals, he was bound to approve of their campaign.

Indeed, the about-face by Narimanov, Orjonikidze, and (presumably) Stalin stood at the center of the rhetoric of Karabagh Armenian separatist organizers. Consistently, they explained that Soviet authorities had originally supported the region's attachment to Armenia. In an interview with an Armenian newspaper, Balayan quoted Narimanov approvingly:

“‘Henceforth not a single territorial issue [between us]....can become a reason for bloodshed between two neighboring peoples....The provinces of Zangezur and Nakhichevan constitute inseparable parts of Armenia, while the laboring peasants of Mountainous Karabagh are given full right of self-determination.’ And was it not Stalin who disrupted and made impossible the realization in the Leninist spirit



of the decision? There are hundreds of documents about this....Who has given us the right to remain silent?’<sup>51</sup>

In later interviews, Balayan argued that the inclusion of Mountainous Karabagh in Azerbaijan was “the result of Stalin’s action,” had occurred “thanks to Stalin,” and came about because “(a) single person called Djughashvili, that is Stalin, took it upon himself to accede to Turkish demands and to put...Karabagh under Azerbaijani jurisdiction and control.” Balayan asked: “Should we still remain silent, now, when the party conference has unanimously raised the Leninist flag which carries the words of the leader of the revolution, ‘Our strength lies in stating the truth’?”<sup>52</sup>

Other organizers’ rhetoric echoed these concerns. The Karabagh Armenian mass petition to the Soviet government to separate from Azerbaijan recalled that in 1920 “the [Azerbaijani] revolutionary committee commissariat for foreign affairs published a government decision that stated, ‘Beginning today Mountainous Karabagh, Zangezur, and Nakhichevan will be part of Soviet Armenia.’”<sup>53</sup> Petitioner Suren Ayvazian noted that this decision was upheld through July 4, 1921, when “at the regional bureau meeting of the Transcaucasian Communist Party...it was decided that Mountainous Karabagh should stay within the borders of Armenia....”<sup>54</sup> In an interview with an Armenian-American newspaper, historian Sergo Mikoyan stated that he had earlier “expressed my opinion in the press that [the decision to put Mountainous Karabagh in Azerbaijan] was a

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<sup>51</sup> *Vozni* (Yerevan), September 1987, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 39.

<sup>52</sup> *Hye Gyank* (Los Angeles), 25 December 1987-19 February 1988 excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, docs. 43; and *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 6 February 1988.

<sup>53</sup> *Droshak* (Athens), 13-14 October 1987, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 48.

<sup>54</sup> *Haratch* (Paris), 3-14 December 1987, excerpted in Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 46.

mistake of the period of the 1920s, and that it was time to rectify it.”<sup>55</sup> During one of the massive late February rallies in Armenia that had accompanied Karabagh Armenians’ mobilization, historian Bagrat Ulubabian, a native of Mountainous Karabagh who had left the region in the 1960s, declared that “Mountainous Karabagh was taken away from Armenia by Stalin’s criminal hands.”<sup>56</sup>

### **VIII. Abkhazia: Soviet and Independent**

Like Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians could also make the case that their autonomous institution deviated from the form of self-government the Bolsheviks had originally granted them. At the start of the Bolshevik occupation of Georgia, Soviet revolutionaries promised Abkhazian political leaders that their earlier efforts to achieve power in Abkhazia would now be rewarded. On February 13, 1921, two days after the initial Soviet uprising in southern Georgia, Kavburo member (and ethnic Abkhazian) A. Sajaia wrote to the leader of the Abkhazian “opposition” faction in Abkhazia, urging him and his supporters to actively support the Bolsheviks: “I hope you...understand that Abkhazia at last has an opportunity for self-determination like the other mountainous peoples...which have been organized under the protection of Soviet Russia.” Sajaia assured him, “I can tell you in advance that Abkhazia has a right to the same free development that Soviet power has granted all small peoples of the former Russian empire.”<sup>57</sup> Three days later, the freshly-established Georgian Revkom upheld the promise

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<sup>55</sup> *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 6 February 1988.

<sup>56</sup> Libaridian, *Karabagh File*, doc. 53.

<sup>57</sup> G. Dzidzaria, ed., *Bor’ba za Oktiabr’ v Abkhazii: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov, 1917-1921* (The struggle for October in Abkhazia: A collection of documents and materials, 1917-1921), new and rev. ed. (Sukhumi: Izdatel’sstvo “Alashara,” 1967), doc.

of Abkhazian self-rule outside of Georgia, declaring that now “[t]he brotherly peoples of Ajara, Abkhazia, and Ossetia are to determine their own fate.”<sup>58</sup>

After the Sovietization of Georgia, local Abkhazian Communists sought to receive what they had been promised. In late February, the Abkhazian Revolutionary Committee noted that “all small peoples have received total autonomy in Soviet Russia. We know that in Soviet Russia there exists independent soviet republics like, for example, the Bashkirian, Tatar, Azerbaijani, Dagestani, etc...”<sup>59</sup> Their expectations still unsatisfied weeks later, the Abkhazian Revkom requested that the Kavburo specify the nature of the relations between the autonomous mountain republics of the North Caucasus and Abkhazia as well as relations between Abkhazia and Georgia. On March 26, the Revkom wrote to Lenin and Stalin to suggest that Abkhazia be declared a Soviet republic directly incorporated into the Russian federation.<sup>60</sup>

Despite this request, Bolshevik authorities were reluctant to completely separate Abkhazia from Soviet Georgia. A month after the Sovietization of Georgia, Orjonikidze explained to a leading Abkhazian Communist, Efraim Eshba, that Abkhazia had to

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181; G. Dzidzaria, *Ocherki istorii Abkhazii, 1910-1921* (Sketches on the history of Abkhazia, 1910-1921) (Tbilisi: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo 'Sabchota Sakartvelo,' 1963), 342-343.

<sup>58</sup> B. E. Sagaria, *Natsional'noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo v Abkhazii (1921-1931 gg.)* (National-state construction in Abkhazia, 1921-1931) (Sukhumi: Izdatel'stvo Alashara, 1970), 24.

<sup>59</sup> Dzidzaria, *Bor'ba za Oktiabr'*, doc. 194

<sup>60</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional'noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo*, 25-26; Levan Toidze, *K voprosu o politicheskom statuse Abkhazii: Stranitsi istorii, 1921-1931 gg.* (Towards the question of the political status of Abkhazia: Pages from history, 1921-1931) (Tbilisi: Samshoblo), 9. Also see Jemal Gamakharia and Badri Gogia, eds., *Abkhazia—istoricheskaiia oblast' Gruzii: istoriografiia, dokumenti i materialy, kommentarii (s drevneishykh vremen do 30-x godov XX veka)* (Abkhazia—a historical region of Georgia: Historiography, documents and materials, commentary [from ancient times until the 1930s]) (Tbilisi: Aghdoma, 1997), doc. 258.

remain an autonomous unit of Georgia. To unite it now to Russia would appear to outside powers to be an annexation of part of Georgia, still formally independent. This was not an appearance Soviet Russia wished to foster.<sup>61</sup>

As a compromise, however, Orjonikidze permitted the Abkhazians to declare their temporary “independence” as a freestanding Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>62</sup> When Abkhazia was granted this independence on May 21, the question of its political relations with Georgia explicitly remained on the agenda.<sup>63</sup> That day, the First Congress of Abkhazian Workers considered the issue of Abkhazia’s political status. Eshba recapped Abkhazia’s futile efforts to achieve autonomy within Menshevik Georgia and announced that with the arrival of the Bolsheviks Abkhazia had now achieved “unvarnished, actual independence.” The Congress approved Soviet Abkhazia’s declaration of independence and expressed its confidence that a joint Georgian-Abkhazian congress would “determine the ultimate form of fraternal cooperation of Abkhazia and Georgia.”<sup>64</sup>

## **IX. The Abkhaz-Georgian Union**

That form emerged in the summer of 1921. In July, another leading Abkhazian Bolshevik Stanislav Lakoba outlined a planned “federation” of Soviet Abkhazia and

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<sup>61</sup> See Avtandil Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki sovremennogo separatizma v Gruzii* (Historical roots of modern separatism in Georgia) (Tbilisi: Tipografia Tbilisskogo universiteta, 1998), 59.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 59-60, 63. Also see Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 116, doc. 258

<sup>63</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’sтво*, 27; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 63; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 13; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 261.

<sup>64</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’sтво*, 29-31; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 63; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 14. Also see Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 260.

Georgia to a session of Abkhazian Party workers. He explained that such federation was logical on the basis of Abkhazia and Georgia's shared "ethnographic, historical, and everyday-life conditions." He also noted that Abkhazia could not "federate" with Russia as it had been separated from that country for several years. Moreover, he insisted, while Abkhazia was currently "independent in agrarian and economic affairs," in political affairs it, like the rest of the Soviet republics, was subordinated to the center via the Communist Party and so it "makes no difference who Abkhazia is federated with. The fact is that the idea of Soviet power is preserved."<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, the session passed a resolution acknowledging that while the "complete independence of the Abkhazian people, declared by the [Georgian Revkom on 21 May] is practically unrealized," the declaration did guarantee "maximum autonomous rights for the Abkhazian people." The resolution went on to say that the workers agree to establish their relations with Soviet Georgia on the basis of "federation and economic unity."<sup>66</sup>

This federation of Georgia and Abkhazia was developed in the fall of 1921. In mid-October, the Abkhazian leadership declared their desire to establish a union with Georgia, given the relative economic powerlessness of Abkhazia, its small population, the common "history and habits" it shares with Georgia, and their economy. The Revkom established a committee to develop the union at the start of November.<sup>67</sup> Finally, on December 21, 1921, Abkhazia and Georgia signed their treaty of "union," described in Chapter Five.

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<sup>65</sup> Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 264.

<sup>66</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional'noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo*, 32-33; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 15-16; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 264 (n. 1).

<sup>67</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional'noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo*, 34-36; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 65; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 16-17; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 119, doc. 271.

This union—formally an equal federation of Georgia and Abkhazia—was not welcomed by many Abkhazians. Bolshevik authorities may have intended Abkhazia’s independence from Georgia to be a temporary measure, but they underestimated the impact this declaration of independence had had on the Abkhazian public. Reflecting on the first weeks of Soviet occupation, Eshba noted that “when we arrived [in Abkhazia] and realized what kind of atmosphere we had landed in, we had to adopt some kind of form of independence for Abkhazia.”<sup>68</sup> Shortly after the New Year in 1922, Lakoba delivered a speech at the first conference of the Abkhazian party organization, in which he found himself explaining to delegates that they had only declared Abkhazia “an independent republic” for “one minute” in order to gain support among the masses for Soviet rule.<sup>69</sup> At the second Party conference in Abkhazia in April, Lakoba was again forced to address the issue. This time, he acknowledged the unintended seriousness with which Abkhazia’s declaration of independence had been received inside the republic. “We said that we are a sovereign state—a Soviet state, true, but an independent one. In this respect we didn’t have to forget, we ought to have said, that these political forms, the declaration of independence and so on were nonsense, it wasn’t necessary to be seduced by this. What we needed was a signboard. We hung [that signboard] up, but we didn’t have to worship [it]....”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’stvo*, 28. Also see Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 59; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 20.

<sup>69</sup> N. A. Lakoba, *Stat’i i rechi* (Articles and speeches) (Sukhumi: Alashara, 1987), 24; Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’stvo*, 38. Also see Toidze, *K voprosu*, 19; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 277; and Giorgi Jorjoliani et al., eds., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. V. Amiranishvili (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1995), 28.

<sup>70</sup> Toidze, *K voprosu*, 19-20; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 280; Jorjoliani, *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects*, 28-29.

Soviet authorities themselves never took Abkhazian independence from Georgia seriously. In early 1921, the Abkhazian Revkom was explicitly directed to obey the orders of the Georgian Revkom. At the start of July, the Kavburo announced the start of work towards unifying Abkhazia to Georgia “in the form of autonomy, entering into Georgia.”<sup>71</sup> Throughout 1921, the Georgian Revkom sent orders to Abkhazia, in the Georgian language, demanding fulfillment, some of which referred to Abkhazia as an autonomous republic. In September, Stalin said in a response to one query that “Abkhazia is an autonomous part of independent Georgia, and thus it does not have nor should have independent representatives in the RSFSR.”<sup>72</sup>

Even after the union of Abkhazia and Georgia was established, Soviet authorities treated Abkhazia not as an equal federal partner but as an autonomous unit of Georgia. Orjonikidze at least twice referred to Abkhazia publicly as an autonomous republic. Even the USSR’s own founding constitution of 1924 explicitly referred to Abkhazia as an autonomous republic.<sup>73</sup> Later, Lakoba derided Abkhazian officials’ 1925 efforts to constitutionally establish clear horizontal relations with Georgia as an exercise in “constitutional stupidity.”<sup>74</sup> Finally, as discussed in Chapter Five, the formal union of Abkhazia and Georgia was dissolved in 1931, when Stalin was already the head of the USSR, with Abkhazia now formally subordinated to Georgia as an autonomous republic.

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<sup>71</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’stvo*, 32; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 65; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 15; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 65, 67; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 15; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, 116-118.

<sup>73</sup> Toidze, *K voprosu*, 21-22; Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposilki*, 72; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, doc. 281 (and n. 2).

<sup>74</sup> Lakoba, *Stat’i i rechi*, 177; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 24; Gamakharia and Gogia, *Abkhazia*, docs. 283, 284.

## **X. Confidence from the Past?**

Admittedly, it is rather unclear how such history could have given Abkhazians hope that Gorbachev would consent to undoing their subordination to Georgia. After Sovietization, no Bolshevik officials above Stalin or below him (including Abkhazian Bolsheviks) ever indicated that Abkhazia would ever be permanently separated from Georgia. Abkhazia's declaration of independence was, as Lakoba had put it, a "signboard" to display to the Abkhazian people as evidence that Soviet power cared about their interests. Even the compromise "union" that was eventually settled upon was not taken seriously by Georgian or all-Soviet authorities. Regardless of its formal status, Abkhazia was informally an autonomous unit of Soviet Georgia for years before it was actually declared as such.

Still, to Abkhazians, it was the earlier declaration of independence that mattered. As far as Abkhazians were concerned, Abkhazia had become an independent Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921, in exactly the same manner that Georgia had been declared an independent Soviet Socialist Republic. Sovietization had brought recognition that Abkhazia and Georgia enjoyed the equal political status they had for years striven for. The union of Abkhazia and Georgia at the end of that year, while bringing the two republics together into a single political unit, signified the establishment of a federation consisting of two equal partners: Abkhazia and Georgia. This federation existed as a formal construct for ten years, erased only after Stalin took power. Regarding the federation, Lakoba once declared that "Abkhazia built its relationship with...Georgia in



strict correspondence with that which the Great October Revolution required.”<sup>75</sup> Whether or not Abkhazians accepted this conclusion, they could at least agree that the Abkhazian-Georgian federation—not Abkhazia’s subordination to Georgia—was the maximum that an adherence to revolutionary ideals could permit.

Thus, Abkhazia’s 1931 subordination to Georgia was, as far as Abkhazians were concerned, a deviation from the Soviet revolutionary path. Even if it accurately reflected the state of relations between Abkhazia and Georgia for the decade before, this does not mean formal institutions of power ought to have been adjusted to conform to reality. Rather, to Abkhazians, efforts ought to have been made to make reality conform to the spirit of the formal institutions. If Abkhazia and Georgia could not establish a distinct, meaningful union of equals within the larger Soviet Union, then they ought to both become independent Soviet Republics, subordinated identically to the central government. If Gorbachev was serious about rectifying deviations from the revolutionary path of state development, he would have to recognize that this demotion from Soviet republic to autonomy had been an aberration.

Indeed, Abkhazian organizers repeatedly justified their movement on this basis. Both the Abkhazian Letter and the memorandum indicated how in 1921 two Georgian Communists, Stalin and Orjonokidze, had originally supported Abkhazia’s subordination to Georgia and that the Kavburo had “mustered all its strength for the incorporation of Abkhazia into Georgia,” ordering that efforts be made to effect the “union of Abkhazia and Georgia.” They argued that Communist authorities went against their word, pointing out that Georgian communists had originally agreed that “the brotherly peoples of Ajaria,

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<sup>75</sup> Sagaria, *Natsional’noe-gosudarstvennoe stroitel’stvo*, 142-143; Toidze, *K voprosu*, 27; (doc. 289).

Abkhazia, and Ossetia [would] determine their own fate” and had welcomed the declaration of an “independent” Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia. Placing this action in a wider context, the Letter noted that Abkhazia “was practically the only republic” to be downgraded in status at a time when other national groups had been receiving higher forms of self-government.<sup>76</sup> Both the Letter and the memorandum then detailed how the 1921 union of Abkhazia and Georgia was rendered meaningless and eventually replaced with the transformation of Abkhazia into an autonomous republic within Georgia.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, and in further support of this chapter’s argument, Abkhazian organizers also appear to have recognized that their case for the *total* separation of Abkhazia from Georgia was not airtight. While the actual petition to the Soviet government stated only that Abkhazians wished to receive the status of Union Republic they had received in March 1921, the Abkhazian Letter more broadly requested that Abkhazia be granted the status that it had “in the first years of Soviet power (1921-1931).”<sup>78</sup> Such phrasing clearly allowed for some kind of federal union with Georgia. Further, in a declaration that followed the March 1989 petition, the Abkhazian movement *Aidgylara* resolved to “consider the act of 1931 that transformed the Abkhazian SSR into

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<sup>76</sup> M. Yu. Chumalov, ed., *Abkhazskii uzel: Dokumenty i materialy po etnicheskomy konfliktu v Abkhazii (vypusk vtoroi: Narodnii forum Abkhazii “Aidgilara” i ego soyuzniki 1989-1990 gg.)* (The Abkhazian knot: Documents and materials about the ethnic conflict in Abkhazia (2<sup>nd</sup> series: the Popular Forum of Abkhazia ‘Aidgilara’ and its allies, 1989-1990) (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniiu mezhnatsional’nykh otnoshenii IEA RAN, 1995), 42, 107-08. The memorandum was originally published in *Sovietskaya Abkhazia* (Sukhumi), 24 March 1989. The petition later notes that of sixteen autonomous republics within the Russian federal republic eleven used to be autonomous districts and that out of the USSR’s fifteen union republics, four of them had been autonomous republics. *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>77</sup> Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 42-47, 107-109.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

an autonomous republic as a political aggression.” It said nothing about the December 1921 treaty of union between Abkhazia and Georgia.<sup>79</sup> This suggests that Abkhazians recognized their ability to get the central government to approve of their separation from Georgia had limits—set by what could be considered within the legitimate boundaries of Soviet revolutionary state formation. This may have included a federation of Abkhazia and Georgia (whatever that might mean in practice) as well as the total separation of Abkhazia from Georgia. It did not, however, include the final outcome of 1931: Abkhazia’s direct subordination to Georgia as an autonomous republic.

## **XI. South Ossetia: No Chance for Change**

In contrast to their approach in Mountainous Karabagh and Abkhazia, Soviet founders never suggested that South Ossetia would be anything other than an autonomous unit of Soviet Georgia. Some days after the Sovietization of Georgia, North Caucasian military authorities wrote Orjonikidze asking for permission to allow refugees from South Ossetia to return to their homes. Orjonikidze responded:

“Complete freedom of return for [the Ossetian refugees] is automatically resolved with the proclamation of Soviet power in Georgia. There is no longer an Ossetian question....the Ossetians are the complete masters of their fate....Please convey to all Ossetians of South Ossetia that nothing at all prevents them from returning to their homes.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>80</sup> V. D. Tskhovrebov and M. P. Sanakoev, *Yuzhnaya Osetia v period tryokh revolyutsii (1900-1921 gg.)* (South Ossetia in the period of three revolutions [1900-1921]) (Tbilisi:

Strikingly, while Orjonikidze acknowledged that Ossetians were the “complete masters of their fate,” neither he nor any other Soviet authorities gave any indication that South Ossetia was going to be either united to North Ossetia within Soviet Russia or granted “independent” republican status. It was to be subordinated to Soviet Georgia from the start.

In fact, the main debate about South Ossetia in the first years of Soviet power was not whether or not it would be part of Georgia but how large a territory the new autonomous region would encompass. South Ossetians insisted their autonomy include not only the predominantly Ossetian populated highlands but also the lowland town of Tskhinvali, which had relatively few Ossetians living in it, and a number of mixed Ossetian-Georgian and purely Georgian settlements.<sup>81</sup> In 1921 and 1922, local officials received numerous petitions from Georgian villagers demanding that their territories not be included within the South Ossetian autonomy.<sup>82</sup> While some Georgian villages ultimately remained outside the borders South Ossetians had proposed, Tskhinvali became the administrative center of the autonomous region and other Georgian population centers were also included within its borders.<sup>83</sup> Not only did the Bolsheviks

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Metsniereba, 1981), 214; Levan Toidze, *Rogor sheikmna samkhret osetis avtonomiuri olki* (How the South Ossetian autonomous district was created) (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1991), 48-49.

<sup>81</sup> See I. N. Tskhovrebov, ed., *Bor'ba trudyashchikhsya Yugo-Osetii za Sovetskuyu vlast' (Dokumenty i materialy)* (The struggle of the working masses of South Ossetia for Soviet power [Documents and materials], 2nd ed.) (Stalinir [Tskhinvali]: Gosizdat Yugo-Osetii, 1960), doc. 160; Levan Toidze, “Obrazovanie osetinskoi avtonomii v Gruzii (Formation of the Ossetian autonomy in Georgia),” in *Osetinskii vopros* (Ossetian question), eds. A. Bakradze and O. Chubinidze (Tbilisi: Kera-XXI, 1994), 297-302.

<sup>82</sup> See *ibid.*, 303-04, 309-11, 316-18.

<sup>83</sup> A detailed description of South Ossetia's borders can be found in an April 1922 decree on the establishment of South Ossetia reprinted in Toidze, *Rogor sheikmna*, 81-84.

never proclaim South Ossetia to be anything other than part of Georgia, they also granted South Ossetians additional territorial gains for their new autonomy.

Unlike in the case of Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, then, autonomy for South Ossetians was a reward, not a demotion. South Ossetians had little leverage later, in the Gorbachev era, to push central authorities to support demands for separation.

## **XII. The Ambiguous Strategy of South Ossetians**

Indeed, in stark contrast to Karabagh Armenian and Abkhazian organizers, South Ossetian organizers never made the case that the ultimate form South Ossetian statehood took had diverged from its original Soviet revolutionary path. Instead, they attempted to take the Bolsheviks' entire nationalities policy to task. In the petition describing the goals of the strike campaign, *Adamon Nykhas* and the workers' committees insisted their separatist demands stemmed from "the principles of Leninist nationalist policy." Based on Bolshevik promises, Chochiev told a Georgian interviewer, Soviet leaders should have housed each ethnic group in its own "independent" political unit, not divided and subordinated them to units dominated by other groups. Chochiev told his interviewer that the division of Ossetia into two parts was an indication of "Soviet repression." He called the arrangements the Bolsheviks designed an "injustice" and said that "the Bolsheviks' sermon on the unity and equality of nations turned out to be a fiction, in reality the Bolsheviks remained on the level of feudal thinking."<sup>84</sup> Rather than refer to the particulars of South Ossetia's own situation, South Ossetian organizers insisted that the

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<sup>84</sup> *Komunisti* (Tbilisi), 15 October 1989.

ideal Soviet federation was a “minority-less” one, in which every ethnic group was housed in its own political borders.

Unlike the particular demands of Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, this blanket demand stood little chance of being satisfied. Not only were there were many Ossetians in areas within Georgia but outside of South Ossetia that could never be made part of a pan-Ossetian republic, one-third of South Ossetia’s own population was Georgian, with many of them settled in such a way that they could easily be separated from an Ossetian republic and re-joined to Georgia proper. This is precisely what Chochiev’s rhetoric implied. For that matter, South Ossetian organizers’ universal justification for redrawing administrative borders could apply to practically every corner of the USSR. This was not an argument that could compel Soviet authorities to transfer South Ossetia in its entirety outside of Georgia.

In the end, South Ossetian organizers acknowledged the difficulty of pursuing separation from Soviet Georgia. While not hiding their ultimate goal, they resolved to pursue neither unification with North Ossetia (akin to Karabagh Armenian mobilization) or even full republican status (like the Abkhazians). The stopgap measure they proposed was the transformation of South Ossetia into an autonomous republic within Georgia. They attributed this modest goal to the “prematurity and unpreparedness” of Ossetian society “for even raising this question at the given moment” and expressed a need to develop “necessary conditions for the [proper] socioeconomic and political mood.”<sup>85</sup>

Ultimately, Georgians themselves provided the “necessary conditions” to prepare South Ossetian society for a full-fledged separatist campaign through their own efforts to

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<sup>85</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia* (Tskhinvali), 14 November 1989; *Sabchota Oseti* (Tskhinvali), 2 August 1989.

impose authority in South Ossetia and, eventually, move to independence. Only in the context of conflict escalation—and the increasing support of the Soviet government against independence-leaning republics—did South Ossetians take their campaign to its logical conclusion.<sup>86</sup>

### **XIII. Opportunity, Separatism, and Autonomy: A Comparative Assessment**

The argument outlined above helps explain variation in the perestroika-era goals of regional groups not only in the South Caucasus but throughout the USSR. At the regional level (i.e., below union republic), mass mobilization in favor of undoing a group's territorial subordination was initially restricted *only* to Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians. Two other groups from Soviet Moldova—the Transnistrian Russophones (a group including Russians, Ukrainians, and some ethnic Moldovans)<sup>87</sup> and the Gagauz—eventually mobilized in favor of separation from their union republic but, like the South Ossetians, only after they failed to get Moldova to recognize an upgraded autonomous status. In Russia proper, the Volga Tatars and Chechens also eventually mobilized to leave their republic entirely but only after the August 1991 coup, once it became clear

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<sup>86</sup> The South Ossetian case thus provides an example of how variation in timing in any given cluster of activity—in this case, secessionist declarations—can best be explained by emphasizing different causes: to borrow from Mark Beissinger, on the one hand pre-existing structural conditions and the weakening of institutional constraints (in the case of the Karabagh Armenian and Abkhazian declarations) and imitation and triggering “events” on the other (in the South Ossetian case). See Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>87</sup> I borrow the classification of Transnistrian “Russophones” from Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 129. For a theoretical justification of the classification of “Russian-speakers” as their own ethnic group, see David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1998), chap. 10.

that the USSR was falling apart (although the Tatars had issued a declaration of state sovereignty in 1990, in the absence of mass mobilization, that was ambiguous regarding its intentions to remain part of the Russian Federation or pursue separate union republic status).<sup>88</sup> Most regional groups in the USSR did not pursue any sort of institutional change at all (see Table 6.2).<sup>89</sup>

In some cases, this failure to seek institutional change may be explained by a simple absence of motivation. Some regional groups may not have had concerns about economic competition—either because their economic position was secure or because they had little experience with such competition and republican governments were doing nothing to generate new fears among them.

The Azerbaijanis of southeastern Georgia are a potential case in point. Despite considerable political tension and anti-Azerbaijani demonstrations in 1988 and 1989 (the first following the alleged rape of a Georgian girl by an Azerbaijani, the second after rumors spread that Azerbaijanis had declared autonomy in their region), Azerbaijanis never mobilized in favor of institutional change. A reason for this may be because Azerbaijanis actually benefited from their integration with Soviet Georgia in a way Abkhazians and South Ossetians did not. While local towns suffered from high

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<sup>88</sup> Another two groups, Bashkirs and Tuvinians, also engaged in some mobilization to leave Russia but on an extremely limited level. According to Mark Beissinger's data on separatist demonstrations among forty territorially-concentrated groups in the USSR from 1987-1992, they engaged in, respectively, six and three such demonstrations total, with a cumulative participation of 4,450 and 800. This pales in comparison to the number of separatist demonstrations among Tatars and Chechens (respectively, 55 and 53) and the number of participants (104,383 and 426,547). See Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 210-211.

<sup>89</sup> This is not to say that the elites of many autonomous regions did not introduce legislation to expand their powers of self-rule. Many, in fact, did, but these never went beyond pushing for the expansion (or introduction) of autonomous powers and were not accompanied by the mass mobilization of their populations.



unemployment like many other urban areas in the Soviet periphery, reports from 1986 and 1987 indicate that Azerbaijanis in the surrounding countryside were making “a fantastic profit” selling privately grown produce in nearby Tbilisi (and another city of Rustavi).<sup>90</sup> Moreover, Georgian Azerbaijanis had little reason to consider that this profitable agrarian commerce would decline in an increasingly sovereign Georgia, even if a new government passed discriminatory language legislation or imposed other measures that would favor ethnic Georgians in other economic sectors.<sup>91</sup>

The example of the Georgian Azerbaijanis aside, Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians were hardly the only three regional groups in the Soviet Union that had concerns about losing jobs and resources if union republics successfully wrested power away from the center. A focus on motivation alone cannot explain the lack of mass mobilization among other groups with similar motivations.

The Armenians in the southern Georgian region of Javakheti, for example, also did not engage in mass mobilization in favor of institutional change. By all accounts, the Javakh Armenians had similar—if not greater—economic concerns than Abkhazians or South Ossetians. Less Javakh Armenians spoke Georgian than either Abkhazians or

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<sup>90</sup> See Elizabeth Fuller, “Marneuli: Georgia’s Potential Nagorno-Karabakh?” *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin* 477/88 (18 October 1988), citing *Zarya Vostoka* (Tbilisi), 18 March 1986, and *Komunisti* (Tbilisi), 24 March 1987.

<sup>91</sup> In explaining the absence of ethnic conflict in Azerbaijani-populated Georgia, Stuart Kaufman presents an alternative explanation: “The one ingredient that was missing in the Azerbaijani case, and the key reason why scattered ethnic violence did not escalate to ethnic war, was the absence of an Azerbaijani mythology justifying hostility toward Georgians or claiming an Azerbaijani homeland in Georgia.” While Kaufman is correct to note that this mythology was absent, this argument stands in explicit contradiction to his theoretical claim that for ethnic war to occur, only one party to conflict needs to possess a mythology justifying hostility. According to Kaufman, “[t]here does *not* have to be such a well-developed myth-symbol complex on both sides” (emphasis mine). Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 124, 31.

South Ossetians, Georgian nationalists spoke regularly of settling Georgians in Javakheti (an overwhelmingly Armenian-populated region), and the Georgian rhetoric of “hosts” and “guests” applied more directly to them than even to the South Ossetians (Javakh Armenians were historically resident in Georgia only since the nineteenth century).<sup>92</sup> Additionally, an expansion of Georgian sovereignty cast doubt on the future of the Soviet military base in Javakheti, the presence of which contributed to the livelihood of Javakh Armenians (not to mention provided them with a compelling security guarantee against Turkey, a historical enemy). Motivation alone cannot explain mass mobilization.<sup>93</sup>

The variable discussed in Chapter Five—the presence or absence of a political “commitment problem”—might be more predictive of regional mass mobilization in the late USSR than motivation alone. Groups that had not experienced efforts at republican centralization or—as was more often the case in the heavily centralizing Soviet state—groups that had never contested the authority of a titular ethnic group may have been more willing to take the risk of negotiating an autonomous solution to their concerns than those groups that had encountered resistance to local self-rule in the past.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> On Javakheti, see Voitsekh Guretski, “The Question of Javakheti,” *Caucasian Regional Studies* 3:1 (1998) (<http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/crs/eng/0301-05.htm>); Khatchik Der Ghoukassian and Richard Giragosian, “Javakhk: Stability Through Autonomy,” *Review and Outlook*, Armenian News Network/Groong, 26 March 2001 (<http://www.groong.com/ro/ro-20010326.html>).

<sup>93</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg discusses the similar economic motivations of a number of regional groups within Soviet Russia that engaged in varying degrees of mobilization. Another group with similar motivations that engaged only in low levels of political mobilization were the Russians of northeastern Estonia. See Dmitry Gorenburg, “Regional Separatism in Russia: Ethnic Mobilisation or Power Grab?” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51 (1999): 245-274; Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, 181-83.

<sup>94</sup> Further, if regional groups had negotiated decentralization and the titular group had abided by the terms of the agreement, this positive example of negotiations succeeding might have led them to try the negotiating route. In the Soviet context, I have not come across any such examples, however.

We can see this in the case of two minority groups in Moldova: the Turkic (but Christian and Russian-speaking) Gagauz of southern Moldova and the Transnistrian Russophones in eastern Moldova. The Gagauz had similar motivations as the regional groups of the South Caucasus but first pursued only limited measures of political change, like the South Ossetians, and at considerably lower levels of mass mobilization—a series of national congresses that attracted just several hundred delegates each.<sup>95</sup> The Gagauz Khalky (Gagauz Nation) movement held a founding congress in May 1989, at which they called for local autonomy and subsequently mobilized against Moldovan-language legislation. Joined by local officials, delegates of the movement twice proclaimed the establishment of a Gagauz autonomous republic in districts populated by Gagauz (in November 1989 and again in July 1990) but without mass demonstrations or strikes. Only after the Moldovan parliament rejected the Gagauz request for autonomy—and Moldova itself began to move toward independence—did a Gagauz national congress issue a formal declaration that the Gagauz republic was leaving Moldova entirely. One scholar who did research on the issue in the Gagauz region, Charles King, asserts that even this was not a serious declaration of secession but, rather, a tool to gain greater concessions from Moldovan central authorities.<sup>96</sup>

What explains the restrained political activity of the Gagauz and, in general, their overall lack of mass mobilization? A focus on the “commitment problem” suggests that

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<sup>95</sup> Beissinger also records a number of subsequent separatist demonstrations until 1992, but with a total participation of 7,650—far less than the tens of thousands that mobilized in Mountainous Karabagh or Abkhazia. See Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 211. For a discussion of Gagauz motivations, see Vladimir Socor, “Gagauz in Moldavia Demand Separate Republic,” *RFE/RL Report on the USSR* 373/90 (7 September 1990), 9–10. Also see Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), chap. 10.

<sup>96</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 217. Also see Socor, “Gagauz in Moldavia,” 11–12.

the Gagauz were more prepared to take the risk of negotiating a decentralizing solution to their concerns than any of the three regional groups in the South Caucasus that engaged in mass mobilization. The reason for this is that Moldova had never been put to the test. Moldova had not been an independent state, even for a few years like Georgia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, in several decades of Soviet rule (Moldova became part of the USSR during World War II), the Gagauz had never contested union republic authority nor—given their lack of autonomous institutions of governance—did they have an experience of “creeping” centralization to draw upon. As Moldovans pushed for greater sovereignty in the late Soviet period, the Gagauz had no prior reason to believe republican authorities would not respect the terms of an agreement on decentralization if one could only be arranged.<sup>97</sup>

Transnistrian Russophones provide an even better example of the working of the “commitment problem.” Having played a major role in the politics and industry of Soviet Moldova, the Transnistrian Russophones faced a far greater threat to their economic positions than the Gagauz. Their acts of mobilization also involved far greater mass participation than those of the Gagauz movement. Still, unlike Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians, they initially mobilized solely against Moldovan language laws and for the establishment of local autonomy rather than separation from Moldova altogether. Referendums for autonomy were conducted in two Transnistrian cities in December 1989 and January 1990. A regional congress reiterated this decision in June. Only subsequently, after Moldovans issued their own sovereignty declaration, did the

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<sup>97</sup> After gaining independence, the Moldovans in fact granted the Gagauz autonomy—a solution that has been stable to this day. For details, see Vladimir Socor, “Gagauz Autonomy in Moldova: A Precedent for Eastern Europe,” *RFE/RL Research Report* 3, no. 33 (26 August 1994).

Transnistrian Slavs declare full separation from Moldova.<sup>98</sup> Unlike the Gagauz, this declaration was evidently serious. To this day, Transnistria remains the only unsettled territorial conflict in the former USSR outside the Caucasus.

The question remains, however, why did Transnistrian Russophones not push outright for undoing their subordination from Moldova at the start, as Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians had done with regards to their respective union republics? In this case, opportunity—as discussed in this chapter—cannot explain it. Transnistrian Russophones—just like Abkhazians and Karabagh Armenians—actually *could* lay claim to a political status outside Moldova under early Soviet rule. When the USSR was founded, Transnistria was not part of Moldova (at the time itself part of Romania) but, rather, of Soviet Ukraine. In 1924, as part of a strategy to expand power into Romanian Moldova (formerly part of the Russian Empire), Soviet authorities established a “Moldovan” autonomous republic within Ukraine that included the territories of Transnistria. After the USSR occupied Romanian Moldova in 1940, it liquidated this autonomous republic. While the entire area was re-occupied by the Romanians during World War II, after the war the Transnistrian regions of the former autonomous republic were transferred to the new Soviet Moldova, stripped of their autonomous status.<sup>99</sup> Thus, Transnistrian Russophones could make a claim that their placement within Moldova, and with no autonomous status, was a deviation from the original Soviet path of state formation in the region.

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<sup>98</sup> On the Transnistrian movement, see King, *The Moldovans*, chap. 9; Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 145-149; and Pal Kolsto and Andrei Edemsky (with Natalya Kalashnikova), “The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 45 (1993): 973-1000.

<sup>99</sup> For a superb discussion of the Moldovan autonomous republic of 1924-1940, see King, *The Moldovans*, 51-95.

On the basis of opportunity, we lack an explanation for why they did not immediately request their transfer to Ukraine—at the time much further away from independence than Moldova—rather than simply request autonomy within Moldova’s existing borders. Variation in the “commitment problem” suggests one possible explanation. Like the Gagauz, the Transnistrian Russophones had no reason to suspect in advance that the Moldovan government would fail to respect Transnistrian autonomy. They had no experience living under an independent Moldova and had not experienced “creeping” centralization in their regions; if anything, the Transnistrian Russophones had expanded their influence from the periphery to the center. While they could be expected to lose positions of power in the central Moldovan government, autonomy remained a possible—if, from their perspective, far from ideal—solution. It need not have been rejected outright.

In the end, however, the widest net of variation can indeed be captured by a focus on opportunity. In all the above-mentioned cases with the exception of the Transnistrian Russophones, regional groups had no basis for claiming that Soviet founders had ever placed them outside of the union republics they were housed in. The Bolsheviks never considered placing Georgian Azerbaijanis or Javakh Armenians within Soviet Azerbaijan or Armenia. The Gagauz had always been part of Moldova, under both Romanian and Soviet rule, and had never become the subject of a discussion on territorial transfer. Like South Ossetians, none of these groups could point to the history of Soviet state formation to justify claims to separate them from their union republics.

Another case, the Poles of southeastern Lithuania, demonstrates well the importance of opportunity. Unlike the Gagauz and the Transnistrian Slavs, the Lithuanian

Poles had both the right kind of motivation and a history of Lithuanian centralization to contend with.<sup>100</sup> These Poles never went beyond mobilizing for regional autonomy, however, and even this proceeded without the participation of the masses. A number of village councils proclaimed the establishment of Polish “national-territorial units” in mid-1989. Subsequently, one of two Lithuanian districts with a majority Polish population declared itself to be a Polish national district in September 1989 and again in May 1990. In October 1990, Polish delegates from four districts gathered to proclaim the establishment of an even larger Polish autonomous region.<sup>101</sup>

What the Lithuanian Poles lacked was an opportunity to persuade the Soviet government that a request to leave Lithuania was legitimate. When they became part of the USSR during World War II, their territory was never declared anything other than part of Soviet Lithuania.

Indeed, virtually no other regional group in the USSR could make the claim that Soviet founders had originally promised them anything other than subordination to their union republics. Other groups in the South Caucasus—the Lezgin of northern Azerbaijan and the Talysh of southern Azerbaijan—had never been promised a political status outside of Azerbaijan. In Central Asia, the Karakalpaks of Uzbekistan and Pamiris of Tajikistan had never been promised their own independent republic or to be housed in

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<sup>100</sup> On the Lithuanian Poles, see Stephen R. Burant, “Polish-Lithuanian Relations: Past, Present, and Future,” *Problems of Communism* 40 (July-August 1991): 79-80; Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), chap. 6; and Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), chaps. 3-5.

<sup>101</sup> Burant, “Polish-Lithuanian Relations,” 80.

another Soviet republic.<sup>102</sup> The Uzbek populations in southern Kazakhstan, southwestern Kyrgyzstan, and eastern Turkmenistan had never been promised to Uzbekistan. The exception to this rule are the Uzbeks of northern Tajikistan, who *had* been part of Uzbekistan in the early years of Soviet rule and were transferred to Tajikistan only in 1929. According to the argument of this chapter, they had an opportunity to seek to separate from Tajikistan and join Uzbekistan. Why they did not requires further investigation into their motivations and the political “commitment problem.”

Even the great number of ethnic minorities in Soviet Russia—in Siberia, the Urals, and the North Caucasus—were also never promised any status outside of the Russian Federation. Intriguingly, the Volga Tatars, one of two groups within Russia that eventually mobilized for their own Soviet republic, did have an earlier promise from Bolsheviks that they would be granted their own Tatar-Bashkir Soviet Republic, seemingly on the level of other Soviet union republics (although formally within the Russian Federation).<sup>103</sup> Soon after, however, the Bashkirs were given their own autonomous republic and the Tatars were downgraded to autonomous status as well.

This argument on opportunity not only has relevance throughout the USSR, it also poses a challenge to a frequent assertion regarding the role of institutions in promoting separatist mobilization in the Soviet Union.<sup>104</sup> In the most well-developed account of this assertion, Svante Cornell has observed the evidently compelling fact that in Georgia and Azerbaijan, high levels of mass mobilization were observed only among autonomous

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<sup>102</sup> The Pamiris, like the Tajiks, used to be part of Uzbekistan, but as part of the Tajik autonomous republic that was later upgraded to full republican status in 1929.

<sup>103</sup> Admittedly, this argument fails to explain the Chechens’ substantial nationalist activity, particularly compared to its neighbors in the North Caucasus.

<sup>104</sup> For references, see Chapter One (n. 48).



groups. Non-autonomous groups—the Armenians and Azerbaijanis of Georgia and the Lezgin and Talysh of Azerbaijan—engaged in virtually no mobilization whatsoever. We can add to this the above observation that when non-autonomous groups mobilized, like the Transnistrian Russophones, the Gagauz, and the Lithuanian Poles, their first (and, in some cases, final) goal fell short of full separation.

In the end, however, the fact that these latter groups mobilized at all poses a puzzle for the common explanation of how autonomous institutions promote mobilization. Of the six attributes of autonomy Cornell has suggested are critical for mobilization—borders, identity formation, state institutions, leadership, mass media, and external support—the first four readily apply to non-autonomous groups like those mentioned above.<sup>105</sup> Transnistrian Slavs, Lithuanian Poles, and Gagauz all could “imagine” the borders of their future autonomous regions, all had identities distinct from the titular groups in their republics, and all had at least district-level institutions and leaders they could employ. External support, too, was extremely relevant for the Transnistrian Russophones (i.e., Russian support) and could have been relevant for the Lithuanian Poles, if the Polish government itself had chosen to make an issue of it.<sup>106</sup> The availability of mass media is the only attribute that we could expect autonomous groups to possess an advantage over non-autonomous groups, although there is no reason why district authorities could not similarly produce and control influential district-level media organs.

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<sup>105</sup> See Svante Cornell, “Autonomy as a Source of Conflict: Caucasian Conflicts in Theoretical Perspective,” *World Politics* 54 (2002): 253-256.

<sup>106</sup> On Poland’s response to the Lithuanian Polish movement, see Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, chaps. 12-13.

At the same time, an autonomy-based explanation also provides no answer to two other questions. It does not explain why South Ossetians initially pursued a lesser extent of institutional change than their two “autonomous” peers (particularly Karabagh Armenians, who possessed the same, lower level of autonomy that South Ossetians did). It also does not satisfactorily explain why so many groups that had autonomy in the USSR did not support mass mobilization in favor of institutional change.

Focusing on the opportunity-based argument presented in this chapter suggests that autonomy may have been epiphenomenal with regards to the question of mass mobilization among regional groups in the USSR. Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians had autonomy and engaged in mass mobilization in favor of undoing their subordination to union republics. At the same time, however, they were groups who had been promised preferable institutional forms in the Soviet past. By contrast, most other regional groups in the USSR that had autonomy and did not mobilize—plus virtually all groups in the USSR that did not have autonomy—had not been promised preferable institutional forms in the past. The former groups believed they had an opportunity to push for political change. The latter groups—regardless of whether or not they had autonomy—did not.

**Table 6.1**  
**Historical Promises and Political Goals**

	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b>	<b>Abkhazians</b>	<b>South Ossetians</b>
<b>Opportunity (Bolshevik Promise)</b>	<b>Separation: Unification with Armenia</b>	<b>Separation: Union Republic or Horizontal Union with Georgia</b>	<b>Autonomous Republic of Georgia</b>
<b>Initial Goal of Mobilization</b>	<b>Separation: Unification with Armenia</b>	<b>Separation: Union Republic or Horizontal Union with Georgia</b>	<b>Autonomous Republic of Georgia</b>

**Table 6.2**  
**Presence/Absence of Mass Mobilization**

	<b>Economic Motivation</b>	<b>Evidence that Negotiations would be Futile</b>	<b>Soviet-Historical Legitimacy</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b> <b>Abkhazians</b> <b>South Ossetians</b> <i>Georgian Armenians</i> <i>Moldovan Gagauz</i> <i>Moldovan Russophones</i> <i>Lithuanian Poles</i> <i>Many Others</i>	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b> <b>Abkhazians</b> <b>South Ossetians</b> <i>Lithuanian Poles</i>	<b>Karabagh Armenians</b> <b>Abkhazians</b> <i>Moldovan Russophones</i>
<b>No</b>	<i>Georgian Azerbaijanis</i>	<i>Moldovan Gagauz</i> <i>Moldovan Russophones</i>	<b>South Ossetians</b> <i>Georgian Armenians</i> <i>Moldovan Gagauz</i> <i>Lithuanian Poles</i> <i>Many Others</i>

## ***Chapter Seven***

### **A Wider War**

#### **I. Introduction**

Parts Two and Three have identified the factors that led regional groups to engage in acts of mass mobilization. To further explain why these acts led to conflict, however, requires that we assess the reaction of Azerbaijanis and Georgians to these acts. Republican governments or nationalist movements could have sought to negotiate with regional groups, diminishing the prospects for conflict. Instead, state officials or other group members took actions that resulted, directly or indirectly, in violence, thus exacerbating the basic disputes.

This chapter assesses why Azerbaijanis and Georgians responded to the regional campaigns through escalation rather than negotiation. The motivations expressed by those who directly contributed to the escalation of conflict, as well as the sentiments of group members who did not but who sympathized with their position, reveals a common pattern underlying Azerbaijani and Georgian responses to the three regional campaigns. To wit, Azerbaijanis and Georgians did not perceive the campaigns to be authentic reflections of regional groups' demographic and economic concerns. They interpreted them instead as unprovoked attacks on their land that also endangered the welfare and safety of individual Azerbaijanis and Georgians.

Such an interpretation was credible because Azerbaijanis and Georgians did not identify regional, relatively weak groups as the true organizers of their campaigns but as “tools” of more traditional adversaries: Armenia (for Azerbaijanis) and Russia (for Georgians). Though all housed within a single Soviet state, Azerbaijanis and Georgians saw these countries as external threats. With Azerbaijanis and Georgians perceiving themselves as potential victims, they did not recognize—or refused to admit—how their own past policies, or regional groups’ anticipation of future policies, could set the stage for the latters’ campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Escalation over Mountainous Karabagh: The Motivations of a Mob**

The Azerbaijani response to the Karabagh Armenians’ unification campaign consisted of both threats and uses of force. As Karabagh Armenians prepared to petition the Soviet government to separate Mountainous Karabagh from Azerbaijan in February 1988, republican officials urged them to desist with threats of force (see Chapter Three). Two days after the regional assembly issued its February 20 request, a group of Azerbaijanis from the nearby town of Agdam engaged in a riotous march to the region. Days later, organized mob violence in the distant city of Sumgait led to the deaths of at least 26 Armenians.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For classic treatments of such starts to “conflict-spirals,” see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 3; and Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security* 18, no. 4 (1994), reprinted in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Michael E. Brown et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 26-60.

<sup>2</sup> The official count was twenty-six Armenians dead and six Azerbaijanis, the latter all presumably killed either by Armenians in self-defense or by the Soviet troops who were called in to quell the attacks. At the time, Armenians reported a much greater number of dead, but no confirmation of these greater casualties has, to my knowledge, ever been

While the early threats of authorities were clearly meant as a signal to deter Karabagh Armenians from carrying their campaign any further, an explanation for the march from Agdam and the atrocities of Sumgait is more complex. At least two explanations for these events exist. The first is that, through force, Azerbaijanis now sought to compel Karabagh Armenians to retract their petition. The second, however, is that Azerbaijani participants were less responding to the petition than reacting to the belief that Armenians were physically harming local Azerbaijanis and would commit further acts of aggression if they were not stopped.

Armenian accounts of the march from Agdam portray the event as a simple display of compellance. They insist that without any provocation a “group of Azerbaijani extremists and nationalists” led a mob of several thousand into the region towards Stepanakert, overrunning local militia and vandalizing factories along the way.<sup>3</sup> Near the town of Askeran, in Mountainous Karabagh, the mob clashed with a group of local Armenians. Soviet troops from a nearby garrison were called in to separate the two sides. During the clash, two Azerbaijani youths were killed, but “[a]s the investigation would later show, one was shot by an Azerbaijani policeman, while the circumstances surrounding the death of the other could not be established.”<sup>4</sup> In this version of events,

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produced. ITAR-TASS, 21 March 1988; Elizabeth Fuller, “Nagorno-Karabkh: The Death and Casualty Toll to Date,” *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin* 531/88 (2 December 1988).

<sup>3</sup> V. B. Arutiunian, *Sobyitiia v Nagornom Karabakhe: Khronika Chast' I (Fevral' 1988 g.-Ianvar' 1989 g.)* (Events in Mountainous Karabagh: A chronicle, vol. 1, February 1988-January 1989) (Erevan: Izdatel'stvo AN ArmSSR, 1990), 39-40. Also see “A test of change explodes in Soviet Union,” *New York Times*, 11 March 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Samvel Shahmuratian, ed., *The Sumgait Tragedy: Pogroms Against Armenians in Soviet Azerbaijan*, vol. 1, *Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Steven Jones (New Rochelle, NY and Cambridge, MA: Aristide D. Caratzas and Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research & Documentation, 1990), 3. This account probably stems from the report of a Russian correspondent who says he interviewed the brother of one of the victims. The interviewee told the correspondent that his brother had been shot by an Azerbaijani police

Azerbaijanis were simply responding with force to the Karabagh Armenians' peaceful petition to join Soviet Armenia.

A second version of the Agdam march, however, provides a different explanation. This version—put forth by Soviet correspondents—claims that the mob from Agdam set off only *after*, and in response to, the deaths of two Azerbaijani youths earlier that day. Correspondents from the Moscow-based *Komsomolskaya pravda* stated that earlier in the week “[s]ome Azerbaijani families from [Mountainous Karabagh had] turned up in Agdam. Their appearance there aggravated the situation. Rallies began.”<sup>5</sup> According to journalist and author Yuri Rost, “several hundred” Azerbaijani youth then departed for Stepanakert “to watch the demonstrations there....[A]s they approached Askeran,” two were killed, although “[t]he circumstances of their deaths and even how they were killed remain a mystery.”<sup>6</sup> The correspondents from *Komsomolskaya pravda* claimed that the deaths occurred “[d]uring a skirmish along the border.” Both accounts concur that after hearing of the two deaths a mob of thousands “set off for Askeran ‘to teach [the Armenians] a lesson.’”<sup>7</sup> The mob was reportedly stopped in its tracks by the impassioned plea of an Azerbaijani collective farm chairwoman, who threw her headscarf down in

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officer during a fight. The officer was accompanied by another policeman from Agdam and, after the shooting, both left the scene. “Tucha v gorakh,” *Avrora*, No. 10, 1988, reprinted in V. A. Atajanian, ed., *Pravda o Nagornom Karabakhe* (The truth about Mountainous Karabagh) (Stepanakert: Izdatel'stvo “Artsakh,” 1989), 69-83.

<sup>5</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Moscow), 27 March 1988, trans. in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 40, no. 14 (4 May 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Yuri Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, trans. Elizabeth Rogers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.



front of the crowd in a traditional gesture to avoid violence, and the crowd turned back without incident.<sup>8</sup>

If this version of events is more accurate than the first version, then we have two elements to consider as potential causes of the Azerbaijani escalation: the unification campaign itself and the accusation that Karabagh Armenians had killed two Azerbaijanis and, possibly, driven out others.

An analysis of the next stage of escalation—the pogroms in Sumgait (February 27-29)—supports the argument that *both* motivations were, in fact, at play. These attacks occurred after a number of Azerbaijanis from the Kafan (Ghapan) district of Armenia

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<sup>8</sup> *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 27 March 1988; Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, 17. Thomas de Waal's account of the Karabagh conflict parallels the chronology in the text above, although he includes a report, on the basis of a KGB memoir, that the second Azerbaijani who died "appears to have been the victim of an Armenian hunting rifle." See Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003): 15, 300 (n. 11).

Some accounts of the march from Agdam inadvertently weave together these two distinct versions of the incident. Liz Fuller and Stuart Kaufman state that the mob set out in response to "rumors" that Azerbaijanis had been killed "in Stepanakert" and that a subsequent clash resulted in the death of two *more* Azerbaijanis. Kaufman and Mark Malkasian state, without supporting evidence, that the "headscarf" maneuver was not successful. Malkasian notes that while "Azerbaijani women threw down their headdresses....[s]ome in the crowd heeded the traditional admonishment to avoid conflict and return home [while others] continued onward." Kaufman says that "while the move had worked in previous incidents in recent days, this time only part of the mob turned back." Elizabeth Fuller, "The Death and Casualty Toll to Date"; Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 63; Mark Malkasian, "*Gha-ra-bagh!*": *The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 52.

Azerbaijani accounts of this incident do little to clarify which version is more accurate. They refer only to the deaths of the two Azerbaijani youths, without mentioning the mob. See B. Gaibov and A. Sharifov, *Neob'yavlennaiia voina* (Undeclared war) (Baku: Izdatel'stvo Kommunist, 1991), n.p.; and Azad Sharifov, ed., *Proriv informatsionnoi blokadi* (Breaking the information blockade) (Baku: Izdatel'stvo Yazichni, 1992), 4, 180.

arrived in the town after passing through other Azerbaijani cities and towns.<sup>9</sup> They and local residents held a rally on February 26 protesting the Karabagh Armenians' campaign, as well as alleged atrocities committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis in Kafan. The rally was initially attended by "[r]elatively few people" and proceeded without incident.<sup>10</sup> The next day, however, the Deputy General Procurator of the USSR appeared on Baku television to report on the earlier incident near Askeran, indicating that "as a consequence of...disorders, two inhabitants of Agdam Rayon...fell victim to murder," stating the names and ages of the two Azerbaijani youths who had died. Without specifying who was to blame, the deputy procurator vaguely attributed the youths' deaths to the actions of "isolated hooligan elements [who] resorted, obviously for the purpose of provocations, to acts that violated public order."<sup>11</sup>

At that day's rally, "thousands" gathered in Sumgait's main square; after this speech was broadcast, the atmosphere worsened considerably. Demonstrators, inflamed by the news of the deaths, called for the eviction of Armenians from Sumgait and even their death. That night beatings, vandalism, and harassment of the Armenian population of Sumgait (approximately 18,000) began. The next day, February 28, yet a third rally of "hundreds of people" gathered. The mob for a time marched away from the center of town, following the lead of the First Secretary of the Sumgait City Party Committee (who later claimed he was seeking to divert the crowd from carrying out its murderous aims). Groups of young men broke away from the crowd, however, and "commenced the attacks

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<sup>9</sup> On the route of the bus convoy from Kafan, see Ludmilla Alexeyeva, "Unrest in the Soviet Union," *Washington Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1990), 70; and "Tensions build as ruling on Soviet region nears," *Washington Post*, 21 March 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Shahmuratian, *Sumgait Tragedy*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Baku television, 27 February 1988, trans. in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 1 March 1988.

on Armenian apartments,” in which at least sixteen Armenians were killed, others raped and beaten, and still others robbed and their property destroyed.<sup>12</sup> Although Soviet troops arrived in Sumgait that evening, at least ten other Armenians were killed on the evening of February 29, before order in the city was fully restored. News of the pogroms stunned Armenian and Soviet society, and made headlines around the world.

A simple explanation for the horrific events at Sumgait is difficult to provide. In part, the attacks stemmed from popular indignation against the Karabagh Armenians’ campaign. One witness, an Armenian worker who said he had been working near Sumgait’s central Lenin Square on February 26<sup>th</sup>, stated that “a group of people...told Muslimzade [the City Party Secretary] that they wanted to organize a demonstration and announce that Karabagh belonged to them. They wouldn’t give up Karabagh.”<sup>13</sup> Another resident, a Georgian married to an Armenian but conversant in Azerbaijani, observed the rallies over the weekend. He reported that at the first demonstration, on February 26<sup>th</sup>, protesters were “shouting ‘Ka-ra-bagh! Ka-ra-bagh! We won’t give Karabagh to the Armenians.” The next day, the witness said, the Second Secretary of the City Party Committee Bayramova declared at the rally that “[t]here is no need to kill the Armenians [!]. Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev said that no one is taking Karabagh away, no one is going to encroach upon the territory of Karabagh, the territory was and will remain Azerbaijani.” He also said that Muslimzade repeated similar words later in the afternoon, after which the crowd “started shouting again, ‘Ka-ra-bagh! Karabagh!’” Yet another witness, an Armenian schoolteacher, said that at that second rally, one speaker declared that “Karabagh is my soul. How can you tear out my heart?....It’s our territory, the

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<sup>12</sup> Shahmuratian, *Sumgait Tragedy*, 5.

Armenians will never see it”. Witnesses also reported that even the mobs which roamed the streets on the 27<sup>th</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup> shouted calls like “Slay the Armenians! Karabagh is ours!” and waved banners which read “Karabagh will remain ours!” and “Karabagh is ours, we won’t give it to Armenia, it was part of Azerbaijan and so it will stay!”

At the same time, it is impossible to explain the atrocities without reference to the alleged crimes in Kafan. Shahmuratian, the compiler of the Armenian testimonies, himself accepts the importance of the alleged atrocities in inciting violence: “Apparently, reports of the Armenians’ ‘intentions to occupy foreign soil’ were not enough in and of themselves to fan the anti-Armenian hysteria to the necessary pitch: something more substantive was needed to make people lose their equilibrium entirely and render them capable of any actions.”<sup>14</sup> This conclusion stems from the testimonies Shahmuratian compiled. According to the Armenian worker, the unrest in Sumgait began with the arrival of “several hundred Azerbaijanis” from Kafan who had horrific stories to tell regarding the mistreatment of Azerbaijanis there.<sup>15</sup> The Georgian witness paraphrased one speaker, who he described as their “leader,” at the first rally on the 26<sup>th</sup>: “Fellow Muslims, I came here from Kafan, and my compatriots have come with me. In Kafan they sliced up my wife’s brother, my wife’s husband, my mother, and several of my relatives and friends.” According to this witness, the “leader” repeated the same story twice the next day, adding the flourish that in Kafan “there is a dorm for Azerbaijani girls, and Armenians broke in there and raped all the girls and cut their breasts off”.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 221. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from 75, 77, 78, 143, 188, 248, 269.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 221. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from 76, 223-224, 143, 282, 23, 191. Another rumor mentioned was that an Armenian bus driver “had recently thrown a

Another witness stated that “[a] man was speaking, he was 40 or 42, who kept repeating that in some district in Armenia an Azerbaijani settlement had been razed and that we should eliminate the Armenians, they should be killed.” The schoolteacher mentioned above reported that demonstrators “spoke over the microphone about what had happened in Kafan a few days earlier” and that: “a woman went up on stage.... introduced herself as coming from Kafan, and said that the Armenians cut her daughters’ breasts off, and called, ‘Sons, avenge my daughters!’” A fourth witness reported that he saw a woman shouting at the rally on the 28<sup>th</sup> that “[t]hey’re stripping, raping, and killing our people. Aren’t you men? They’re killing our people and you’re here not doing anything!” Coming in the midst of these horrible accounts, the deputy procurator’s report of the two Azerbaijani deaths earlier that week was incendiary. “It was right after that that they became so angry,” said one Armenian witness. Another elaborated: “And when he said that...you know how bees sound, have you heard how they buzz? It was like the buzzing of millions of bees....”

The pogromists themselves justified their actions by reference to the alleged atrocities. One witness said his family was confronted by a murderous gang whose leader explained that what they were doing was a response to the fact “that we [the Armenians] were raping their sisters in Stepanakert.”<sup>16</sup> The above-mentioned schoolteacher reported that when a mob broke into her house, one of them announced that “we’re going to do the same thing to you and your children that you Armenians did in Kafan. They killed our women, our girls, our mothers, they cut their breasts off, and burned our houses...” Another victim reported that a gang reacted angrily to an Azerbaijani family who was

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small Azerbaijani child off [a] bus” after which “[t]he crowd started to rage: ‘Death to the Armenians! They must be killed!’” Ibid., 143.

sheltering her and her child, telling them “that Armenia had insulted the Azerbaijanis of Kafan and that they had come to Sumgait seeking revenge.”

Whether (and, if so, why) atrocities against Azerbaijanis in Kafan occurred and the precise identity of the bussed-in Kafan residents and their “leader” are questions that have never been satisfactorily answered. At the time, official media organs in both Armenia and Azerbaijan admitted that Azerbaijanis had left Kafan but hotly denied any violence had occurred there.<sup>17</sup> One speaker at the Sumgait rally (subsequently shouted down by the crowd) reportedly confirmed that “[h]ardly anything the refugees have told you here today is true.”<sup>18</sup> Azerbaijani writings that discuss the Kafan migrants do not state explicitly, let alone offer any evidence, that violence occurred in Kafan, leaving it an open question why residents left.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, assuming all the bussed-in Azerbaijanis were victimized residents of Kafan, why they would travel across Azerbaijan to promote violence against innocent Armenians in Sumgait is not clear. According to victims’ testimony, the “leader” of the “refugees” rallied locals to the mob by shouting into his megaphone: “Comrades, the Armenian-Azerbaijani war has begun!” When attacking Armenians, “refugees” in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 89. Subsequent quotations are from 119, 270.

<sup>17</sup> *Kommunist* (Yerevan), 1 March 1988, trans. in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 40, no. 9 (30 March 1988); *Bakinskii rabochii* (Baku), 2 March 1988, trans. in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 40, no. 9 (30 March 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Rost, *Armenian Tragedy*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> In a collection of writings called *Refugees*, one writer refers to an Azerbaijani journalist who encouraged residents of Kafan to return home, saying that no one could hurt them but, the writer laments, “the journalist was mistaken.” Another contributor spoke derogatorily of Azerbaijanis who denied that anything had occurred in Kafan or other Armenian districts, without saying for himself what actually happened. Even de Waal, who notes that Azerbaijanis “had fled Kafan as a result of interethnic violence,” only produces evidence that Azerbaijanis actually left Kafan, not that atrocities or violence had been committed. Idayat, ed., *Byezhentsi* (Refugees) (Baku: Izdatel’sstvo Gyanjlik, 1992), 29, 25; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 18-19.

mob explained to locals that they had not “come here to leave [the local Armenians] alive. We came here to burn or kill them all. We won’t let them out of here.”<sup>20</sup> Even more unusual for “refugees,” their convoy had stopped in Baku before going to Sumgait, making three demands to government officials there unrelated to their plight: to make the Azerbaijani town of Agdam the capital of the Karabagh region, to deport the Karabagh Armenians, and to fire the authorities who allowed the dispute to continue.<sup>21</sup> None of this is behavior one would expect from downtrodden refugees from Armenia.

Whatever the exact composition and origins of the individuals who came to Sumgait shouting for blood<sup>22</sup>, it would also be patently unfair to treat the mob violence as a simple reaction of local Azerbaijanis, whether in affront to the Karabagh campaign or the alleged atrocities. By all accounts, the mob violence was organized by the outsiders. These were reportedly assisted mainly by local criminals, drunks, and drug abusers (including at least one individual who was half-Armenian himself).<sup>23</sup> From the testimony of Armenian witnesses and victims, a great number of Sumgait Azerbaijanis who had Armenian friends or close neighbors went out of their way to protect them.

Nonetheless, the combination of Karabagh Armenian separatism and the accusations of atrocities against Azerbaijanis provided the context that enabled the Sumgait demonstrations to occur and eventually turn violent. The local Party First

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<sup>20</sup> Shahmuratian, *Sumgait Tragedy*, 110, 160.

<sup>21</sup> *Washington Post*, 21 March 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Erik Melander has provided a useful outline of the various suspects—agents of the central government, the Azerbaijani republican government, an autonomously operating KGB, representatives of Azerbaijani organized crime, and—a popular Azerbaijani claim—extremist Armenian nationalists themselves. See Erik Melander, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited: Was the War Inevitable?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 2 (2001): 59 (n. 28).

Secretary clearly gave permission for the original demonstrations to be held, with the provision that there be “no discussion and no verbal abuse.” While this could imply official naiveté of what was to come, it cannot explain the behavior of the city leadership once the protests began. An Armenian schoolteacher reported that on February 27<sup>th</sup> “[t]he director [of the school] came into my classroom and said that I should let the children out, that there had been a call from the City Party Committee asking that all teachers gather for a meeting at Lenin Square....”<sup>24</sup> While by then, the protests were rife with the sort of “discussion and verbal abuse” Muslimzade had warned against, the protests were not only not disbanded, officials asked schoolteachers (and, presumably, other state employees) to be present.

Moreover, for officials who presumably desired a peaceful demonstration, the city leadership expressed an astounding sense of solidarity with rally participants. While both the first and second party secretaries decried the calls to physically harm Armenians, they nonetheless encouraged their eviction: “[l]et the Armenians leave Azerbaijani soil freely, give them the chance to leave”, “[b]rothers, we need to let the Armenians leave the city freely; once this kind of feud has started, once national issues have been opened up, strengths awakened, we need to let the Armenians leave....”. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, the First Secretary, by his own account, sought to co-opt the crowd, by *leading* them in a march, bearing an Azerbaijani flag, away from the city center.<sup>25</sup> Rather than dampen emotions—whether by cracking down on the increasingly dangerous protests or by berating participants for their anger—the local leadership *legitimized* them (encouraging the

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Alexeyeva, “Unrest in the Soviet Union,” 71; Shahmuratian, *Sumgait Tragedy*, 3, citing *Sotsial’naia Industriia* (Moscow), 27 March 1988; Shahmuratian, *Sumgait Tragedy*, 221.

<sup>24</sup> Shahmuratian, *Sumgait Tragedy*, 221, 143.



evacuation of Armenians from Azerbaijan as a positive goal) even while seeking to deflect the worst excesses of the mob.

The behavior of the local police during the pogroms also reveals official tolerance of the attacks. Numerous reports indicate that the local police did nothing to put a halt to the pogroms. One witness claimed that “about 20 to 25 policemen...stood there smoking cigarettes” about half a mile “from the place...where the excesses had taken place....” A victim reported that a police car that he had run towards while fleeing from a mob hastily departed just as he reached the door. Another victim dialed the city’s emergency line to report that a mob had broken into her home only to have the operator ask “What do you want us to do about it?” A third victim claimed that when he reported the local police’s inactivity to a Soviet official that later arrived on the scene, the commander of the Soviet troops who quelled the disorders supported him: ““Alexander Mikhailovich was correct regarding what he said about the police. When I arrived in Sumgait there were 850 policemen concentrated here. Eight hundred fifty! And no results whatsoever! The entire police force had scattered.””<sup>26</sup> While the inactivity of the local police does not imply that local government officials actually instigated the violence, it at least suggests local police were ambivalent to the mob’s activities and government officials powerless to enforce their intervention.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 75, 77, 299-300.

<sup>26</sup> Later, the local police force was put under investigation and more than ten officers were dismissed. Ibid., 230, 38, 45, 299; *Moskovskiye novosti* (Moscow), 22 May 1988, trans. in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 40, no. 23 (6 July 1988).

<sup>27</sup> While noting the inaction of local Sumgait officials, Kaufman adheres to the argument that the pogroms were caused more by “official incompetence than to careful planning.” While this may be correct with regards to the Sumgait leadership, the evidence suggests that the pogroms *were* planned; we just do not know by whom. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 64.

Most strikingly, witnesses reported that some local Azerbaijanis who did not participate in the mob violence nonetheless expressed an empathy for their violent actions. An Armenian hairdresser who went to work on February 27th “told the other women what I had seen, and there were some Azerbaijani customers sitting there, and they said: ‘What do you want? Look at what you Armenians are doing in Nagorno Karabagh, demanding our land...’”<sup>28</sup> Another mentioned a neighbor who, “[w]hen she saw the demonstration headed by the city leaders, you know, she welcomed it, saying, ‘That’s right, they’re doing the right thing.’” The last day of the pogroms, the 29<sup>th</sup>, another witness said that “I took the No. 6 bus to work, and [the] Azerbaijanis on the bus were saying that Karabagh was putting forth demands, and that the Azerbaijani population in Armenia was being oppressed. One woman said that beating the Armenians was the right thing to do, that the Armenians had done worse to our people.” Even Armenians who had been given shelter by Azerbaijani neighbors heard from “[o]ur neighbors’ daughter...that that’s right, that’s what the Armenians deserve, because in Stepanakert...people were being killed, 11 girls from Agdam had been raped.” Finally, one Armenian rape victim reported that the doctor who examined her asked why she seemed so troubled: “You don’t know what your people have been doing, [they] did even worse things.”

Even local Armenians who survived the attacks expressed an understanding of the Azerbaijanis’ attitude towards the events occurring in distant Karabagh. One Armenian student whose Azerbaijani friends risked their own lives by protecting her from the mob reported how she had earlier beseeched her friends: “‘You guys, if we’re such good

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<sup>28</sup> Shahmuratian, *Armenian Tragedy*, 306. Subsequent quotations are from 260, 303, 13, 99.

friends that I wasn't afraid to come on this trip with you, let no one accuse me of those events in Karabagh or reproach me for being an Armenian.””Another Sumgait Armenian made a similar point in her testimony: “[Nagorno Karabagh] has its own demands, they affect the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabagh, and in no way should reflect on us, at least. *If we had held rallies in support of Nagorno Karabagh I could understand how they would start to hate us* and want to seek vengeance, but no one had any idea...” (emphasis mine).<sup>29</sup>

### **III: After Sumgait: The Enemy Within**

After the violence of Sumgait, Azerbaijanis still refused to acknowledge that the Karabagh Armenians' mobilization might have stemmed from particular local grievances. Instead, they argued that it reflected the intentions of an aggressive Armenian expansionist movement based outside the republic. In a television program in Baku that aired in March, a number of guests discussed the situation in Mountainous Karabagh. These guests, members of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia, identified the roots of the problem not in Mountainous Karabagh proper, but in the ambitions of a powerful Armenian nationalist movement, based in Armenia and abroad. One indicated that “[r]ecent books and articles published in Armenia have advanced unfounded territorial claims on Azerbaijan.” Another said “that the local Armenians are not responsible for the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 205, 263.

events which took place,” instead attributing them to “foreign extremists” and asserting that it was “obvious that the events in the NKAO were...being financed from abroad.”<sup>30</sup>

Additional testimony from 1988 reveals a belief in the aggressively expansionist nature of this movement. Already in February two senior members of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia considered the Karabagh Armenian campaign solely from the perspective of Armenian irredentism, accusing outside proponents of the campaign of “want[ing] to gather everything in their own hands.”<sup>31</sup> In a March interview with the *New York Times*, an Azerbaijani writer (and deputy director of the republic’s Literary Institute) said that the Armenians “have better connections” and that “[l]ately, the Armenian nationalists, including some influential people, have started talking again about ‘greater Armenia.’” Expressing a certainty in their vast ambitions, he went on to say “[i]t’s not just Azerbaijan. They want to annex parts of Georgia, Iran, and Turkey.”<sup>32</sup> Another scholar, in a booklet published in Baku in November 1988, lamented that “[d]espite the adventuristic character of the worn-out slogan ‘Great Armenia’, the contemporary Armenian elite, trying to widen the borders of the Armenian SSR, are acting with old dishonorable methods.”<sup>33</sup>

Given such a belief, support on the part of Azerbaijanis for an escalation of conflict, rather than negotiation, is comprehensible. Linked to an aggressive Armenian expansionist movement and coinciding with accusations of anti-Azerbaijani atrocities, the

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<sup>30</sup> *Information Bulletin Glasnost*, January 1989 (excerpt. and trans. from *Glasnost* [Moscow], May 1988, no. 17), 29.

<sup>31</sup> “From the Editors’ Mail Box,” *Azerbaijan* (Baku), no. 2 (1988), trans. Audrey J. Alstadt in the *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 2 (July 1988): 429-434, at 434.

<sup>32</sup> “A test of change explodes in Soviet Union,” *New York Times*, 11 March 1988.

<sup>33</sup> Igrar Aliev, *Nagornyi Karabakh: istoriia, fakti, sobytiia* (*Mountainous Karabagh: history, facts, events*) (Baku: Izdatel’stvo Elm, 1989), 98.

Karabagh Armenian campaign was considered by Azerbaijanis to be a declaration of war against Azerbaijan (“Comrades, the Armenian-Azerbaijani war has begun!”). In the face of this declaration, Azerbaijanis prepared to defend themselves, their compatriots, and their land against the Armenian “aggressors.”

#### **IV: Escalation over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: The Georgian Response**

A similar picture, albeit with a lower level of violence, emerges with respect to the Georgian responses to Abkhazian and South Ossetian mobilization. Like the Karabagh Armenian campaign, the Abkhazian campaign led to a series of counter-demonstrations. On March 25, 1989—the day after the Abkhazians published their appeal to the Soviet government to upgrade the status of their autonomous republic—Georgians gathered in the Abkhazian cities of Sukhumi and Gali, as well as Tbilisi, to protest their campaign. A week later, more Georgians rallied in northwestern Abkhazia, home of a concentrated population of Georgians. This was followed by a larger demonstration in Abkhazia as well as in Tbilisi on April 4.<sup>34</sup> While this last demonstration originated as an extension of the protests in Abkhazia, demonstrators rapidly broadened the scope of their demands, calling for the removal of Soviet “occupying troops,” and, ultimately, for

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<sup>34</sup> See *Sovietskaya Abkhazia* (Sukhumi), 13 April 1989; G. Lezhava, *Abkhazia: anatomia mezhnatsional'noi napriazhennosti* (Abkhazia: anatomy of international tension) (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniiu mezhnatsional'nykh otnoshenii IEA RAN, 1999), 179-81; M. Yu. Chumalov, ed., *Abkhazskii uzel: Dokumenty i materialy po etnicheskomy konfliktu v Abkhazii (vypusk vtoroi: Narodnii forum Abkhazii “Aidgylara” i ego soyuzniki 1989-1990 gg.)* (The Abkhazian knot: Documents and materials about the ethnic conflict in Abkhazia (2<sup>nd</sup> series: the Popular Forum of Abkhazia ‘Aidgilara’ and its allies, 1989-1990) (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniiu mezhnatsional'nykh otnoshenii IEA RAN, 1995), 154-55. Also see *Izvestia*, 1 April 1989, trans. by the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 4 April 1989; and Agence France Presse, 2 April 1989.

Georgia's independence from the USSR. The demonstration ended on April 9, when Soviet troops forcibly broke up the demonstration, killing twenty and sending shockwaves throughout the country.

A next stage of escalation also ended tragically. Georgian students of the Abkhazian State University in Sukhumi, who had been boycotting the university since April 4, now called for the creation of a separate Georgian-language institute of higher education in Abkhazia. Georgian faculty members supported them, and in mid-May the Georgian government resolved to create a branch of the central Tbilisi State University in Sukhumi.<sup>35</sup> The Abkhazians objected to this decision, considering it a move to strengthen the central Georgian government's hand in the autonomy's affairs.

Indeed, for Abkhazians, the university issue was inseparable from the issue of increasing Georgian nationalism. The spat over the local university coincided with preparations among local Georgians to commemorate the May 26 holiday commemorating the restoration of Georgian statehood in 1918. Speakers at an Abkhazian rally in mid-May condemned the Georgian government's decision to divide the university and also demanded that these celebrations not be held in Abkhazia.<sup>36</sup> The official republican newspaper *Soviet Abkhazia* drew an explicit connection between the university issue and May 26, noting that the estimated ten thousand demonstrators at the commemorative demonstration prominently included large numbers of participants from the Abkhazian State University, or "more accurately that part which now calls itself the branch of the Tbilisi State University."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See *Molodezh' Gruzii* (Tbilisi), 12 August 1989, which contains a detailed account of the July Days, including official records of the Abkhazian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

<sup>36</sup> *Sovietskaya Abkhazia*, 17 May 1989.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 May 1989.

The likelihood of confrontation increased as the Georgians refused to back down. At the end of June, Abkhazia's ruling organs resolved that the division of the Abkhazian State University was "inappropriate" and requested Soviet authorities to intervene. Several days of Abkhazian protests in support of this decision followed, ending in the arrival of an investigative commission from the USSR Supreme Soviet. On July 7, as that commission was conducting its inquiry, the Georgian-language version of *Soviet Abkhazia* published an announcement affirming the new Tbilisi State University branch's intention to hold entrance examinations. Abkhazians met this announcement with new protests and called for the Soviet government to impose direct rule over the region. The central commission concluded that it would be best to consider the Georgian government's decision to split the university as a "temporary" measure that had been designed to ensure the peaceful conclusion of the school year but which had now "outlived" its purpose.<sup>38</sup>

However, the Georgians insisted on moving forward with the examinations, thereby sparking confrontation. On July 13, small numbers of Georgians and Abkhazians engaged in a series of protests seeking to, respectively, publish and prevent the publication of a new announcement in the Georgian-language version of *Soviet Abkhazia* affirming the Tbilisi State University branch's intention to hold entrance exams. Abkhazian demonstrators warned that unless the entrance exams were canceled they would take measures into their own hands. The next day, Georgian factory workers demonstrated against the final decision not to issue the announcement, as well as against an act of vandalism the night before (a public memorial stand with photos of the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 27 June 1989, 8 July 1989; *Molodezh' Gruzii*, 12 August 1989; Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 187-93.

Georgian victims of April 9 had been taken down). In response, a delegation of Abkhazian elders delivered another warning to republican authorities that if appropriate measures were not taken, Abkhazians would blockade the building where the entrance exams were to be held. True to their word, several hundred Abkhazians gathered around the building that evening demanding that exams be canceled and the branch shut down. Georgian staff refused these demands, insisting on staying put as long as the Georgian government did not abolish the branch.<sup>39</sup>

Violence began on July 15. As the Abkhazian crowd swelled to several thousand, an estimated 1,500 Georgians gathered in a nearby park where clashes began.<sup>40</sup> Shortly thereafter, it appears, Abkhazian demonstrators stormed the branch building and beat members of the examination committee.<sup>41</sup> This was followed by more clashes around Sukhumi and the mobilization of Abkhazians and Georgians throughout the republic, including efforts to seize weapons from militia posts (mainly hunting rifles that had been confiscated earlier in anticipation of conflict). The victims of these “July Days,” as they became known, numbered at least sixteen—nine ethnic Georgians, five Abkhazians, and two military conscripts (a Russian and an Armenian).<sup>42</sup> Emergency rule was declared on July 18. Over the next few weeks, as conflict subsided, authorities reclaimed more than 3,000 weapons, mainly rifles.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Molodezh' Gruzii*, 12 August 1989; Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 190-93.

<sup>40</sup> Kaufman reports, without evident citation, that the clashes in the park began after an Abkhazian photographer who tried to take a picture of the Georgian crowd was set upon and beaten. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> See *Molodezh' Gruzii*, 12 August 1989. Chumalov indicates that one of the committee members died. Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 186.

<sup>42</sup> *Molodezh' Gruzii*, 12 August 1989.

<sup>43</sup> *Sovietskaya Abkhazia*, 20 July 1989, 12 August 1989.



A few months later, South Ossetians issued their request to upgrade South Ossetia's autonomous status. By then, Georgians were not in the mood to negotiate. On November 22, twelve days after the South Ossetians issued the formal request to upgrade their autonomous status, Georgian informal organizations issued an appeal for the public to march on Tskhinvali. An estimated thirty thousand Georgians responded, in a convoy of personal vehicles and state-owned buses. Ossetian residents of Tskhinvali mobilized to blockade the entry of such a large number of demonstrators into their town (itself home to only 42,000 people) and were assisted by republican internal ministry troops that divided the two sides for more than a day. While most of the arriving crowd subsequently dispersed, several armed attacks were reported and for the next two months South Ossetians suffered from a blockade of armed Georgian irregulars, the so-called "Legion of Georgian Eagles," who remained in the region. Three weeks after the protest march, opposition leader (and future Georgian president) Zviad Gamsakhurdia acknowledged that "some people remained [in South Ossetia] and...continue to be there today...."<sup>44</sup> These armed formations stopped cars on the road to South Ossetia, confiscated food and supplies, and intimidated and harassed Ossetian residents of the region.<sup>45</sup>

## V. Understanding Georgian Escalation

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<sup>44</sup> *Sakartvelo* (Tbilisi), 15 December 1989.

<sup>45</sup> See *Sovietskaya Osetia* (Tskhinvali), 28 November 1989; *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 4 January 1990, citing *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 27 December 1989. Also see the accounts in *Yuzhnaia Osetia: I krov', i pepel* (South Ossetia: Blood and ashes) (Vladikavkaz: Assotsiatsia tvorcheskoi i nauchnoi intelligentsia 'Ir,' 1991). A detailed account of the events of November 1989-January 1990 can be found in a report compiled by a committee of the South Ossetian district council in *Sovietskaya Osetiya*, 30 August 1990.

Georgian acts of escalation consisted of a qualitatively different kind of violence than that of the Azerbaijani escalation in Sumgait. In Abkhazia, escalation consisted of peaceful demonstrations—which, on April 9, resulted in violence against *Georgians*—and a relatively mundane administrative order affecting higher education. Blame for the “July Days,” in which more Georgians died than Abkhazians, can be assigned to both sides. While the march on Tskhinvali more closely resembled the buildup to Sumgait, it did not produce a mob attack aiming to collectively kill members of a minority. Only a handful of isolated fatal incidents were subsequently reported (including against Georgians).<sup>46</sup>

At the same time, the logic that underpinned Georgian determination to reject Abkhazian and South Ossetian claims was similar to that of the Azerbaijani response. Instead of acknowledging that regional campaigns were manifestations of legitimate group concerns, Georgians were dismissive. In an effort to calm Georgian demonstrators during the April protest, Georgian authorities affirmed that “a change in the status of [Abkhazia] is impossible and not justified, not from a historical, legal, or any other point of view.”<sup>47</sup> At the end of June, seventeen leading Georgian academics issued a collective document, published in three parts, in response to the Abkhazian Letter. The document thoroughly rebutted many of the points made in the Abkhazian Letter concerning Abkhazian history and alleged attacks by Georgians on Abkhazian language,

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To the best of my knowledge, neither the Georgian government nor the opposition ever offered a rebuttal to this report.

<sup>46</sup> One observer indicated six dead and a few hundred wounded. Igor Dzantiev, “Svobodu naroda zadushit’ nevozmozhno (The freedom of the people is impossible to strangle),” in *I krov’, i pepel*, 53.

<sup>47</sup> *Zarya Vostoka* (Tbilisi), 9 April 1989, reprinted in *Sovietskaya Abkhazia*, 11 April 1989. Also see Chumalov, *Abkhazskii uzel*, 156.

historiography, and culture.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, it ignored the more fundamental complaints of the Abkhazians regarding how Georgians had achieved near-majority status in Abkhazia and the implications of that fact on Abkhazians' ability to protect their economic and political interests. At the March 1989 demonstrations, a Georgian nationalist leader was characteristically more blunt: "let [the Abkhazians] say thank you, that they live on our land."<sup>49</sup>

The reason for such belligerence was that, like Azerbaijanis, Georgians considered the Abkhazians' rallies to be an expression of aggression against them. Demonstrators in the March 25 protest in Sukhumi issued a manifesto in response to the Abkhazian campaign, complaining of discrimination *against Georgians* in Abkhazia, the falsification of *Georgian* history, and, in general, "naked anti-Georgian propaganda." On this basis, they demanded the "restoration" of what they considered to be the previously deprived "constitutional rights" of the Georgian population. At the end of April, the Georgian students who left the Abkhazian State University justified their actions by insisting that the university had become "a nest of the anti-Georgian movement" and that its rector consistently trampled on the "national and personal dignity of Georgian students and faculty."<sup>50</sup> Subsequently, Georgians began to consider that the Abkhazian campaign posed a physical threat after a mob attacked two buses of Georgian demonstrators (one of local students, the other from outside Abkhazia) who had traveled to northwest Abkhazia

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<sup>48</sup> *Zarya Vostoka*, 28, 29, 30 June 1989.

<sup>49</sup> Reported in *Edinenie* (Sukhumi), 25 October 1989, cited by Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 103.

<sup>50</sup> *Molodezh' Gruzii*, 12 August 1989.

to support protests, and several individuals were wounded.<sup>51</sup> It was on the heels of this violence that the April demonstrations in Tbilisi began.

Moreover, this aggression had external roots. Where Azerbaijanis perceived Armenia's hand behind the Karabagh separatist campaign, Georgians viewed the Abkhazian campaign as something whipped up by Russian enemies of Georgia. Demonstrators did not blame the Abkhazians for their separatist campaign but, rather, the "provocational interference of Russian chauvinists." Attributing Abkhazian separatism to the Kremlin's design, demonstrators threatened Moscow that "all attempts to separate [Abkhazia] from her motherland will...place on the agenda the question of Georgia's separation from the USSR..." In the April demonstrations in Tbilisi, Georgian nationalist leader Merab Kostava insisted that "Russia has an appetite for Abkhazia dating back to Khushchev's time." After the July Days, the Georgian Popular Front issued an appeal that claimed that "the real instigators of those events are reactionary external forces which for decades artificially created the Abkhazian question and set the Abkhazian people against the Georgian."<sup>52</sup>

The Georgian response to the South Ossetian campaign was even more dismissive of South Ossetians' concerns. South Ossetians, as Chapter Five discussed, feared that Georgians were planning to abolish their autonomy. In their response to the South Ossetian campaign, Georgians did little to dissuade them of this notion. In response to the South Ossetians' request to upgrade their autonomous status, the Georgian First Party Secretary used particularly dismissive language, noting that "[a]ll separatist ideologies

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<sup>51</sup> *Sovietskaya Abkhazia*, 13 April 1989; *Molodezh' Gruzii*, 12 August 1989.

<sup>52</sup> Lezhava, *Abkhazia*, 180, 186; *Zarya Vostoka*, 23 July 1989, cited in Svetlana Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia, and the Russian Shadow*, trans. Ariane Chanturia (Glastonbury, UK: Gothic Image Publications, 1994), 69.

and movements, that set peoples that have lived from ancient times in brotherhood against each other are politically mistaken and criminal. It doesn't matter who carries them out, from whom and where they are inspired."<sup>53</sup> Outside of official circles, Georgians avoided mention of South Ossetia's autonomous status at all, instead referring to the region on the basis of Georgian geographic or feudal notations: Inner Kartli and Samachablo.<sup>54</sup> The announcement of the march to Tskhinvali, for instance, called on Georgian citizens to convene in "Samachablo" or the "so-called" South Ossetian Autonomous District.<sup>55</sup> One participant in the march on Tskhinvali indicated that they were going to Tskhinvali to "teach these Ossetian newcomers a lesson" and that if they didn't "settle down even after this," the Georgians would "throw them out."<sup>56</sup> At a rally that fall, Georgian nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia declared that "[i]f [the Ossetians] don't want to live peacefully with us, then let them leave Georgia."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Sovietskaya Osetia*, 19 November 1989.

<sup>54</sup> "Samachablo" is the name of a feudal estate that had once belonged to the (Georgian) Machabeli family. As feudalism was abolished in Georgia in the nineteenth century, however, and since historical Samachablo comprised less than half of the South Ossetian autonomous district's territory, the use of "Samachablo" when referring to South Ossetia is grossly inaccurate. See the maps in Vakhtang Itonishvili, "Yuzhnaia Osetia—v tsentral'noi Gruzii?! (South Ossetia—in central Georgia?!)," in Akaki Bakradze and Omar Chubinidze, eds., *Osetinskii vopros* (Tbilisi: Kera-XXI, 1994), 11, 14.

<sup>55</sup> *Sakartvelo*, 22 November 1989.

<sup>56</sup> Aleksandr Mineev, "Vspominaya Noiabr' 89-go (Recalling November 1989)," in *I krov', i pepel*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Zarya Vostoka*, 8 December 1990. The quotation comes from the publication of Gamsakhurdia's interview with an American correspondent. When the correspondent quoted the above, citing date and location, Gamsakhurdia acknowledged the statement as his own. A similar quotation from this time allegedly stems from an interview Gamsakhurdia gave to a Dutch newspaper, *Zaterdag Bijvoegsel*, on 3 February 1990: "[W]e wanted to convince the Ossetians to give up....The Ossetians were afraid and this is completely logical, since they are criminals....Ossetians are uneducated, wild people. Intelligent people can easily govern them." *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 31 January 1991; Dzantiev, "Svobodu naroda zadushit' nevozmozhno," 53.

Moreover, as with Abkhazia, Georgians interpreted the South Ossetian campaign as an act of aggression against Georgia and Georgians. One Georgian intellectual argued in January that to transform the South Ossetian autonomous district into an autonomous republic would be a “direct violation of the sovereign rights of the Georgian people” and constitute legal recognition of “the occupation of Georgian territory” by migrant Ossetians. A participant in the Tskhinvali march put it more colorfully: “If someone came to you as a guest and, having spent some time in your home, declared that he wants to live in your rooms, sleep with your wife and, in general, that it is his house, how would you act?” When, after further discussion, his conversation partner indicated he might actually try to negotiate with the Ossetians, the individual responded: “I see you hate Georgia.”<sup>58</sup>

Like Azerbaijanis, a belief in the aggressive nature of the movement extended to the belief that Ossetians were, or might, physically harm Georgians. The announcement of the march on Tskhinvali noted that it was being “held at the initiative of local Georgians” and that, in addition to addressing the “national problems of the Georgian people” and the “normalization of interethnic relations,” a major goal of the rally was to defend “the national and human rights of Georgians living on the historical land of Samachablo.”<sup>59</sup> Gamsakhurdia later explained that after the march Georgian irregulars “spread out into the villages to defend the Georgian population.”<sup>60</sup> At the start of January, a group of Georgian petitioners—making no reference to the fact that armed Georgians had penetrated South Ossetia—complained that “Ossetian extremists” had recently engaged in a series of aggressive actions against Georgians in South Ossetia, including

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 54; Mineev, “Vspominaya Noiabr’ 89-go,” 14.

<sup>59</sup> *Sakartvelo*, 22 November 1989.

“insults, rape, killings, murder, [and] banditry” and referred to the tragic death of an infant that occurred during a “routine pogrom of a Georgian family.”<sup>61</sup>

Finally, Georgians also expressed a belief that the South Ossetian campaign was externally motivated, i.e. a product of Russian imperialist aims. Jaba Ioseliani, a leader of the Georgian irregulars, told a Russian correspondent during the mobilization in South Ossetia that the region’s autonomy was a “pure invention of the Bolsheviks,” which had as its goal to keep Georgia under permanent threat of disintegration. He noted that Georgian lands had to be defended from separatists and their “Kremlin protectors.”<sup>62</sup> Other participants of the march referred to the South Ossetians as “dancing to the tune of the Kremlin” or as “Kremlin agents.”<sup>63</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

Azerbaijanis and Georgians perceived separatist campaigns in the context of broader “interstate” conflicts in which they, not regional groups, were the primary victims and targets of violence. This explains why they escalated conflict, rather than seek to negotiate with regional groups. This escalation did not lead inexorably to ethnic war. For this outcome to occur, new acts of escalation had to happen and both sides had to develop the opportunity—via the collapse of central state power—to prepare for and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 15 December 1989.

<sup>61</sup> *Zarya Vostoka*, 5 January 1990. Reports indicated that the baby was the child of a Georgian father and an Ossetian mother. For similar accusations regarding bands of armed Ossetians and Ossetian “terrorists,” see *Sovietskaya Osetiya*, 31 March 1990, citing *Akhalgazrda Iverieli* (Tbilisi), 27 March 1990.

<sup>62</sup> Mineev, “Vspominaia Noiabr’ 89-go,” 15.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 6-7, 14.

engage in war. To understand why these wars occurred, however, requires that we first understand the underlying differences of perception that gave rise to them.



## *Chapter Eight* **Implications for Conflict Resolution**

### **I. Introduction**

Seventeen years have passed since the territorial troubles of the South Caucasus began. The three disputes eventually degenerated into violence and armed conflict, and from there into uneasy stalemates that have outlasted the Soviet Union's collapse by more than a decade. Separatist regions survive with the attributes of mini-states, heavily dependent on Russian and Armenian patrons. Azerbaijan and Georgia consider the unresolved conflicts basic sources of national insecurity and injustice.

Taking a look around the world, it is evident these conflicts can remain unresolved for some time. Ignoring long-running conflicts like those over Israel/Palestine, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka, unrecognized states like Taiwan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus highlight the potential lasting power of illegitimate state formations. Under the right conditions, such entities can survive for decades and, as the case of Taiwan demonstrates, even prosper. Writing in 2002, one scholar suggested that the unrecognized states of the South Caucasus could last for another ten years.<sup>1</sup> It would not be too bold to suggest they could survive for far longer than that.

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<sup>1</sup> Dov Lynch, "Separatist states and post-Soviet conflicts," *International Affairs* 78, 4 (2002): 831-848. The completion of this dissertation coincided with the publication of another study by Dov Lynch on "de facto" states and conflict resolution in Eurasia. See

Why have these conflicts been so impervious to resolution? In Chapter Eight, I argue that in the context of “conflict resolution” neither side in any of the three conflicts has been forced to surrender its bargaining position and, therefore, has held out for a more preferable settlement than their opponent is willing to offer. While outside actors have encouraged states and regions to reach mutually acceptable solutions, parties to conflict have been willing to accept compromises only if they provide clear commitments to the protection of the interests that launched them on the path to conflict in the first place. As Chapters Three and Four demonstrated, these commitments do not pertain solely to guarantees of physical security. Regional groups hold out for solutions that provide commitments to demographic and economic security and, ultimately, political power. This suggests the need for horizontal political settlements (i.e., the creation of new states comprised of equal federal units) rather than vertical, autonomous arrangements. States, by contrast, hold out for solutions that provide commitments to their territorial integrity—something horizontal solutions do not provide.

This deadlock—in which sides refuse to negotiate settlements as long as they have the space to hold out for more favorable permanent-status arrangements—will, barring a renewal of armed conflict, last until one of two developments occurs. The first is that the perceived balance of power between opponents tips sufficiently toward *regional groups* that states shift their expectations regarding the prospects of coercing or persuading them to accept autonomous settlements. The second is that the perceived balance of power tips sufficiently towards *states* that regional groups shift their expectations regarding their ability to withhold agreement to an autonomous

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Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflicts and De Facto States* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004).

compromise, or their interest in doing so. Without such tips in the balance of power, we can expect opposing sides to continue holding out for institutional solutions that provide ironclad commitments to the protection of their interests but not those of their opponents.

The following section addresses the conventional post-conflict concern regarding security commitments. I then discuss the continued functioning of the “political” commitment problem discussed in Chapter Five and explain why autonomy does not satisfactorily address the concerns of at least two of the regional groups in conflict (Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians). Third, I explain why states find the preferred compromise of regional groups, horizontal settlements, to be unsatisfactory. I conclude by returning to a discussion of opportunity—namely, how shifts in the balance of power might break the existing deadlock and how outside actors can promote these shifts.

## **II. The First Step: Committing to Security**

In a popular study of how civil wars end, Barbara Walter has argued that opponents tend to end conflict only when a peace agreement provides a credible commitment both to their physical security, in the form of third-party guarantees, and to the protection of their political interests, via the establishment of institutionalized power-sharing systems in the post-conflict state.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Also see James D. Fearon, “Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict,” in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, eds. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)

Walter's first condition—third-party security guarantees—applies to the three cases of South Caucasian conflict. In each of them, wars were fought and atrocities committed. Physical security guarantees are, of course, most important to regional groups. These groups number in the tens of thousands, while titular groups can draw upon populations fifty to seventy times their size. While regional groups all have mountainous territory they can retreat to in order to fight wars of attrition, only the Abkhazians have a single, defensible land border (although they have a long and vulnerable coastline).<sup>3</sup> There are multiple points of entry into Mountainous Karabagh and South Ossetia. For Karabagh Armenians, the need for a security guarantee is the clearest, as a peace agreement will entail the elimination of their existing security guarantee, a buffer zone of occupied Azerbaijani territory to the west and south of Mountainous Karabagh.

As part of any negotiated settlement, regional groups will thus require third-party security guarantees. While such guarantees are not easy to come by, they are not impossible. The most obvious candidates—who would be trusted by regional groups and have sufficient interest to supply the appropriate commitment—are Russia (or a multinational force in which Russia plays the leading role) and, for Karabagh Armenians, Armenia.

Regional groups are not the only ones with security concerns, however. In Mountainous Karabagh and Abkhazia, Azerbaijanis and Georgians were themselves victims of ethnic cleansing, and, in the case of Mountainous Karabagh, additional

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<sup>3</sup> On the importance of mountainous territory to fight separatist wars, see James Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, 1 (March 2003): 80, 81, 85.

Azerbaijani territories were occupied. All this leads to Azerbaijani and Georgian security demands for returnee populations.

For Georgia and Azerbaijan, however, these third parties are not neutral actors. As Chapter Seven discussed, Georgians and Azerbaijanis interpret regional conflicts as elements of broader wars with Russia and Armenia. For Georgians, a Russian security presence on the Abkhazian and South Ossetian borders will imply the perpetuation of insecurity, not its alleviation. CIS (basically Russian) peacekeepers already stand at these borders. Institutionalizing and increasing these contingents, or giving Russia the right to intervene if Abkhazians and South Ossetians were militarily threatened, is not something to which Georgia will readily assent. The Azerbaijani perception of conflict also precludes the signing of an agreement that would permit troops of the Armenian state to serve on the Karabaghi border in the capacity of a third-party guarantor.

At the same time, imagining a breakthrough on security guarantees is not impossible. In connection with a broader (and credible) peace agreement with Russia, Georgians might swallow the bitter pill of a predominantly Russian-backed security guarantee. In early negotiations with Armenia (which failed because the former Armenian president was thrown out by his own officials, who did not support the courses negotiations), Azerbaijanis reportedly conceded to granting Armenia the right to intervene if Karabagh was threatened militarily.<sup>4</sup> Presumably, such an external guarantee could be revived in new talks. Alternatively, Azerbaijanis might tolerate the insertion of a Russian-dominated peacekeeping force. While the Russians also pose a potential security threat to the Azerbaijanis (not least because they are the Armenians' main military allies),

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<sup>4</sup> See Arman Grigorian, "The EU and the Karabakh conflict," *The South Caucasus: a challenge for the EU*, Chaillot Papers, no. 65 (December 2003), 134.

a Russian presence on Azerbaijani soil would understandably provoke less of an Azerbaijani objection than an Armenian one.

### **III. The Commitment Problem of Decentralization**

Let us imagine that agreements could be devised which supply security guarantees to regional groups and which are also acceptable to Azerbaijan and Georgia. Even then, the issue of institutionalizing a power-sharing system between states and regions would remain. In Walter's argument on peace agreements, she does not make a distinction between different kinds of institutional power-sharing arrangements—autonomous regions, federal regions, and other types of state constructions. In the South Caucasus, however, both historical precedent and the small size of regional groups suggest that regions should be granted autonomous status within Georgia and Azerbaijan—albeit with greater rights than those they enjoyed in the Soviet past, both formally and in fact.

The analysis in earlier chapters, however, suggests that autonomous political arrangements may not necessarily provide the kind of political guarantees regional groups desire. Now, years after conflicts began, regional groups' original fears have not disappeared. In the event of a resolution to conflict, Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians would continue to worry about sharing power and resources with titular groups.

Certainly, regional groups' concerns have not been alleviated through war and the uneasy peace that has followed. In the course of conflict, Azerbaijan and Georgia

constitutionally abolished the autonomous status of Mountainous Karabagh and South Ossetia. While they have reserved the restoration of autonomy as a bargaining chip to use in negotiations, this does nothing to persuade Karabagh Armenians and South Ossetians that Azerbaijan and Georgia are prepared to commit to the preservation of their autonomy in the future.

Moreover, these concerns will not necessarily disappear even with the granting of autonomous status. Azerbaijan and Georgia can “grant” regions autonomy, but they will do so under the assumption that the autonomous regions are “part” of the Azerbaijani and Georgian states. In the event that conflicts are resolved, central governments will retain—or at least perceive that they retain—a right of last resort to interfere in regional affairs when necessary. While Azerbaijan and Georgia might be willing to concede power-sharing formulas by way of autonomy for now, there is no guarantee they will refrain from altering these formulas in the future towards further state centralization.

Azerbaijanis and Georgians also steadfastly insist, at least publicly, on the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to Mountainous Karabagh and Abkhazia. While Georgia never abolished Abkhazian autonomy, its vision of Abkhazian self-rule is a decidedly civic one—in which an Abkhazian minority (together with Abkhazia’s local Armenian and Russian populations) share power with a Georgian near-majority. In both Mountainous Karabagh and Abkhazia, returnees threaten to turn into local political forces (most assuredly in the case of Abkhazia), become allies in future central government efforts at centralization, and, in the worst case scenario, promote further increases in regional in-migration. This last could someday deal a fatal demographic blow to group claims to the right to rule locally as well as vis-à-vis the central state.

All three regional groups have little reason to believe their interests will be protected if they voluntarily accept autonomous status. South Ossetians still fear their autonomy could one day be abolished. Karabagh Armenians fear this and also worry that if their autonomy is preserved it will lead to obligations—whether explicit or otherwise—to allow IDPs to return in sufficient numbers that they find themselves facing the same challenges they had when they originally engaged in their separatist campaign. For Abkhazians, the demographic fear is even starker—an autonomy settlement will require Abkhazians to accept, at least in principle, a recognition of their own minority status.

In the South Caucasus, making a commitment to power-sharing is not as simple as it might seem. Promises of autonomy are insufficient when groups have reason to believe that what the state gives, the state might again take away—either the autonomous institution as a whole or specific powers of that institution. They are also insufficient if regional groups cannot control regional demography.

#### **IV. Institutionalizing Commitment**

What must be done in order to fully take regional concerns into account? For regional groups to willingly accept compromise settlements, these settlements must include both credible guarantees that institutions of self-rule will be preserved and—at least for Mountainous Karabagh and Abkhazia—an explicit right to control in-migration.

In practice, this suggests forms of state construction that are based not on vertical arrangements, with autonomies embedded within states, but horizontal arrangements in which Mountainous Karabagh is federally united to Azerbaijan, and Abkhazia and South



Ossetia are federally united to Georgia. Such constitutional arrangements will imply that Azerbaijan and Georgia do not—and never will—have the right to abolish regions’ federal institutions and that these federal states have the right to control migration across their border. The model is roughly that of a federal Belgium or a potentially federal Cyprus—i.e., with two or more equal units (Azerbaijan *and* Mountainous Karabagh, Georgia *and* Abkhazia). For detractors who would consider such lopsided federations unprecedented, a number of models come to mind: from the loose state union of Serbia and Montenegro (the former with a population of eight million, the latter 650,000)<sup>5</sup> to Tanzania, in which the state was originally the product of the horizontal unification of two distinct entities: mainland Tanganyika (now with a population of 36 million) and the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba (with a combined population of less than a million).

For IDPs, such political settlements would suggest a need to orient more towards integration than return. Taking a cue from ongoing Israeli-Palestinian discussions regarding the Palestinian “right of return,” the principled right of displaced persons to return to their homes could be acknowledged, but IDPs would have to be offered the alternative of financial compensation for their lost property and resettlement assistance.<sup>6</sup> Agreements could be made that allow for the return of a certain number of IDPs, particularly to the regions of Gali (where many IDPs have already returned) and Shusha.

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<sup>5</sup> For the text of Serbia and Montenegro’s “constitutional charter,” see [http://www.mfa.gov.yu/Facts/const\\_scg.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.yu/Facts/const_scg.pdf). Also see Bruno Coppieters et al., “European institutional models as instruments of conflict resolution in the divided states of the European periphery,” Working Document No 195, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels, 2003, 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the text of the joint Israeli-Palestinian Geneva Accord, at [http://www.fmep.org/documents/Geneva\\_Accord.html](http://www.fmep.org/documents/Geneva_Accord.html).

Diplomats tasked with conflict resolution in the region have recognized the importance of political equality and migration control to regional groups. After two failed efforts that would have granted just autonomous status to Mountainous Karabagh, the OSCE Minsk Group produced a detailed memorandum at the end of 1998 on the “principles of a comprehensive settlement of the Nagorno-Karabagh armed conflict,” which embraced the so-called “common state” approach uniting Mountainous Karabagh to Azerbaijan on an explicitly horizontal basis.<sup>7</sup> This agreement provided for the return of Azerbaijani IDPs to the region, but only to Shusha.<sup>8</sup> Later negotiations veered away from the “common state” towards, however, the further separation of Mountainous Karabagh from Azerbaijan in exchange for a land corridor in Armenia’s south (for more, see below).

The international approach to Abkhazia nears recognition of the problem of credible political commitment but ultimately falls short. The United Nations’ “Boden document,” produced in late 2001, calls upon Georgia and Abkhazia to establish a “Federal Agreement” that specifies Abkhazia’s “special status” and “broad powers.” At the same time, the document does not go nearly as far as the 1998 Minsk Group document. Rather than accept that Abkhazia and Georgia will explicitly form a new “common state” within Georgia’s internationally recognized borders, it holds that Abkhazia will be located “within” Georgia, perpetuating Abkhazian concerns that Georgia will use the agreement in the future to promote further state centralization.

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<sup>7</sup> See Liz Fuller, “OSCE Karabakh Peace Proposals Leaked,” *RFE/RL Caucasus Report* 4, no. 8 (23 February 2001).

<sup>8</sup> For the text of the agreement, see Michael Emerson, “Caucasus Revisited,” CEPS Policy Brief 34, Brussels, June 2003, Annex B, 18-23.

More problematically, the document does nothing to address the Abkhazians' concern regarding the Georgian IDPs' return. Wisely, the document does not require the return of IDPs, but it does note that "[n]othing in the...Constitution of Abkhazia shall infringe upon the unconditional right of all refugees and displaced persons to return to their homes in secure conditions in accordance with international law."<sup>9</sup> While the United Nations could not be expected to pronounce otherwise, such language leaves a gaping hole regarding IDP return that must be resolved before the Abkhazians agree to unite with Georgia.

For the South Ossetian case, there is nothing like the Minsk Group or Boden document to sketch out a plan for South Ossetia's unification to Georgia. This may be due to the perception that obstacles to resolving this conflict are less severe, especially given South Ossetians' relative lack of concern about their demographic situation. Still, even if South Ossetians are less worried about demographic trends, we can expect they will demand a constitutional clause that unambiguously forbids the central government from abolishing or restricting their powers of self-rule under any circumstances.

## **V. Through the Looking Glass: The Perspective of the State**

There is, unfortunately, at least one significant problem with the "common state" proposal. If horizontal proposals with limited IDP repatriation promise credible guarantees for the protection of regional interests, they do not provide similar guarantees to Azerbaijan or Georgia.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, Annex A, 17.

Azerbaijanis, for their part, do not consider a common state to be the first stage in an evolutionary process of Mountainous Karabagh's re-integration with Azerbaijan. Instead, they view it as the institutionalization of an unjust and insecure status quo. Even if an agreement were to include the return of occupied Azerbaijani territories outside Mountainous Karabagh, to Azerbaijanis this would still mean the separatists won and that Azerbaijan—to their mind, the wronged actor in the conflict—received little other than symbolic affirmation that territorial borders cannot be altered without a state's consent. Given the substantial rights afforded to Mountainous Karabagh in a horizontal unification, Azerbaijan also cannot be certain that Karabagh Armenians will not seek secession again in the future, or pursue policies in tandem with its Armenian neighbor that threaten the interests of Azerbaijan. While a horizontal arrangement might represent a credible commitment to Karabagh Armenians, it does not provide a similar commitment to Azerbaijanis that the agreement will not be used in ways that further weaken the Azerbaijani state.

Past negotiations reveal the difficulty Azerbaijanis have with the “common state” approach. 2001 negotiations in Key West, Florida—heralded as a potential opportunity for settlement—were carried out in secrecy. What reportedly was on the table, however, was a spectacular Azerbaijani concession: the surrender of Mountainous Karabagh entirely in exchange for a road link through southern Armenia that would connect the isolated Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan to Azerbaijan proper. In his account of the Karabagh conflict, Thomas de Waal presents the best explanation for this assent: “Aliev

was basically a control freak: ‘He either wants Karabakh back properly or not at all.’”<sup>10</sup> In the end, however, no other Azerbaijani figure supported such a move, and the proposal was dropped. Subsequently, negotiations brought the sides no closer to an agreement, and Azerbaijanis returned to demands that Mountainous Karabagh join Azerbaijan on a subordinate, autonomous basis.

Similarly, a compromise that would provide for Abkhazia’s (not to mention South Ossetia’s) horizontal unification with Georgia is difficult for most Georgians to accept. As with Azerbaijanis, a horizontal solution that provides for only a limited number of IDPs is not Georgia’s idea of compromise. While the Abkhazians have refused to acknowledge the Boden document as a basis for negotiations, the Georgians have expressed their approval as it leaves open the possibility for the IDPs to return to Abkhazia and specifies that Abkhazia is part of Georgia, not united to it as a separate entity. Like the Azerbaijanis, Georgians are reluctant to sign a different kind of agreement that would permanently surrender Georgian aspirations to govern Abkhazia, either from the center or (with the return of the IDPs) in Abkhazia proper. Such a solution would imply both an unjust and—for Georgians—potentially dangerous victory for the separatists and their Russian patron.

## **VI. Breaking the Deadlock**

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 267-68.

As long as sides have room to negotiate, they will seek solutions that provide them with far greater guarantees of their original interests than their opponents are prepared to offer.

What needs to happen, short of war or forced partition, for this deadlock to be broken? I suggest two possibilities, the first a perceived shift in the balance of power towards *regional groups*; the second a perceived shift in the balance of power towards *states*.

### ***Shifting Power Away From States***

The first development that could break this deadlock is a sufficiently large shift in the perceived balance of power towards *regional groups*. Currently, both Azerbaijanis and Georgians expect their military power will increase—whether due to the strategic utilization of oil revenues (for Azerbaijan) or international military cooperation and assistance programs (for both). This expectation encourages them to avoid negotiating a final settlement until they build militaries capable of coercing regional groups into compliance. At the same time, Azerbaijanis and Georgians continue to hope they will eventually develop strong enough economies that regional groups will reconsider their original rationales for avoiding integration.

Such outcomes depend not only on whether Azerbaijan and Georgia will be able to develop strong militaries and economies, but also on whether or not regional patrons, Armenia and Russia, retain the interest and ability to defend the status quo. While Armenia, under its former president Levon Ter-Petrossian, was prepared to back down and support an autonomous political solution for Mountainous Karabagh (albeit with

appropriate security guarantees), the government that subsequently consolidated control in Armenia has consistently demonstrated a far greater resolve to keep Mountainous Karabagh from reverting to autonomous status (the current president of Armenia is not only a Karabagh native, he is the former president of the breakaway republic). Similarly, other than ritually affirming the sanctity of Georgia's territorial integrity, the Russians have shown no indication they are prepared to pressure the Abkhazians to accept subordinate status within Georgia.

If Azerbaijanis and Georgians ever come to believe that the Armenian and Russian positions are inviolable, that their military support to the regions will always be more than a match for their own military forces, and that NATO or their United States—their main partners for international military cooperation—will not risk confrontation with Armenia and Russia in order to help push for autonomy-based settlements, they may be more accepting of horizontal, “common state” settlements. Similarly, if they ever come to accept that their economies will never be vibrant enough to entice regional groups to accept autonomous settlements, they might be more willing to consider accommodating regional interests via horizontal solutions.

### ***Shifting Power to States***

Alternatively, regional perceptions regarding a shifting balance of power in favor of *states* could also tip negotiations towards resolution. If the Armenians or Russians were to signal a fundamental shift in their position and indicate they were prepared to push for autonomy-based solutions, regional groups might be more likely to concede to autonomous settlements, as they would no longer be certain they could deter a military

confrontation with Azerbaijan or Georgia, or adequately defend themselves in the event of armed conflict—always a possibility as long as disputes remain unresolved.

Similarly, Mountainous Karabagh's ties with Armenia and access to diaspora-based assistance, Abkhazian and South Ossetian ties to Russia, and—at least prior to Georgia's "revolution of roses"—the latter two's ties to smuggling rings and corrupt officials within Georgia, have made regional groups believe the status quo is, if not ideal, then at least a plausible basis for economic development (or, at least, enrichment of particular elites).<sup>11</sup> If such hopes were dashed due to the withdrawal of patron support and, for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a sustained Georgian commitment to reform, regional groups would be more likely to take on the potential risks of an autonomy-based settlement—especially if such a settlement came with the promise of clear-cut economic gains.

### ***Conflict Resolution?***

If shifting perceptions of power are necessary to break this deadlock, where does this leave practitioners of conflict resolution? One choice is the default option: remain neutral (at least overtly) and wait for shifts in power to gradually occur. Assuming the proper management of external support—in the form of military assistance, economic aid, and investment—Azerbaijan and Georgia will eventually be powerful enough to try to compel or persuade the breakaway regions to accept autonomous settlements (although support to Armenia—and via Armenia, Mountainous Karabagh—counters this trend in

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<sup>11</sup> For the best depiction of the economic interests that sustain the status quo in the conflict zones, see Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics* 53 (July 2001): 524-552.



that particular case).<sup>12</sup> Without altering a strategy focused fundamentally on the building of state capacity, conflict resolution practitioners can forgo making unpleasant choices to openly support one or the other side in conflict. Instead, they can continue to promote confidence-building measures that, one can hope, will deepen reservoirs of trust that will someday make it easier for either regional groups or states to contemplate political settlements that do not offer the kind of ironclad guarantees they have traditionally sought.

If outside actors wish to produce a final settlement in speedier fashion, however, they have to acknowledge that adopting a position of neutrality is not the way to do so. Sides must be taken. One, albeit unorthodox, approach is for outside actors to accept the status quo and support the independence of regions. While making it clear that legal transfer of the disputed regions to Armenia or Russia will never be recognized, outside actors could exert pressure on Azerbaijan and Georgia—coupled with appropriate incentives to sweeten the sacrifice—to permit regions to hold referendums that would compel them to choose whether they wish to be independent states or autonomous entities. The international community would then have to be prepared to recognize at least Mountainous Karabagh and Abkhazia as independent states (given the threat of blockade from the south, South Ossetians—accustomed to trade and freedom of movement with Georgia proper—might very well elect to retain their autonomous status). Outside actors would also need to hope that Armenia and Russia would not take advantage of these arrangements to advance their own territorial goals. They would also

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 549.

have to expect a substantial loss—at least in the short- to medium-term—of credibility and support in Azerbaijan and Georgia.

A more traditional approach is to extend more explicit support to states. External actors can unambiguously communicate to regional groups and their patrons that autonomy is the only solution the international community will accept. They can provide aid to states in ways that explicitly encourage the development of credible military power and the creation of economic incentives tailored to regional development (but contingent on regional groups' willingness to accept autonomy).

While obviously more tempting than the first approach, there remain difficulties with this position. The first is that there is no guarantee that regional patrons—Armenia and Russia—will consent to pressuring regions to choose autonomy. External actors will need to get the support of patrons or risk an increase in regional tension or even military conflict. Second, there is no guarantee that regional groups, even isolated from their patrons, will select the “rational” course of accepting a dignified compromise rather than risk a fight with a superior opponent or reject obvious economic gains. Finally, and most fundamentally, there is no guarantee that Azerbaijan and Georgia will, in fact, not get carried away with their imbalance of power and attempt to implement measures to overturn or subvert autonomy agreements once the international community stops watching.

The middle ground between these two approaches, if not entirely neutral, is to lean on Azerbaijan and Georgia to accept horizontal solutions with a limited repatriation of IDPs. This option is not favored by either U.S. diplomats or many regional conflict experts (Charles King, for example, has argued that the “common state” model is not “a

viable option for new, fragile, and allegedly democratizing states.”<sup>13</sup>) It is, however, one that regional patrons—Russia and Armenia—could both tolerate. They would still need to be convinced to lend their support to such solutions, and Azerbaijan and Georgia would have to be convinced that external actors will accept no other solution but are prepared to provide appropriate guarantees of national security. Finally, the peculiars of Georgia’s situation would have to be worked out. Would Abkhazia and South Ossetia enjoy the same equal status vis-à-vis Georgia, or could such an arrangement pertain solely to Abkhazia (since South Ossetian interests might be adequately protected by an autonomous settlement)?

Given the balance of power that has existed in the South Caucasus to date, sides to conflict have been unable to reach a negotiated agreement. If this balance changes, states and regions might eventually be prepared to reach agreement by themselves. If it does not, outside observers will have to do more than facilitate negotiation if they hope to produce solutions.

## **VII. Implications for Conflict Prevention and Resolution**

If this study promotes a sense of frustration regarding the ability of outsiders to facilitate resolution to conflicts in the South Caucasus, it should also produce a sense of optimism regarding the prospects of such conflicts breaking out elsewhere.

Admittedly, the fundamental economic and demographic motivations for regional mass mobilization are common enough throughout the world. If fears of physical

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 551.

insecurity and cultural extinction had been the sources of conflict, we could relax our guard, on the assumption that such threats rarely exist. The motivations of regional groups who mobilized in the South Caucasus, however, were far more conventional. They are likely to be shared by other regional groups who confront state-sponsored efforts to promote the interests of titular groups. So long as groups have such motivations, the foundation for future waves of state-regional conflict remains solid.

At the same time, the strategic calculations that affected regional groups' decision-making in the South Caucasus elsewhere rarely point towards mass mobilization. Many regional groups that confront new efforts at state centralization have not experienced past efforts by state authorities to eliminate or render impotent institutions of local self-rule. In the absence of such experience, they do not necessarily presume the centralizing efforts of the state are non-negotiable. Unlike Karabagh Armenians, Abkhazians, or South Ossetians, such groups could be expected to leap at the opportunity to negotiate an agreement on decentralization, even if they knew there was a chance the state could later seek to subvert the agreement.

The most important word in the previous sentence, however, is "opportunity." The cases this study has investigated were doubly unique—Karabagh Armenians and Abkhazians not only uniquely believed they could "piggy-back" onto central reforms, the fact that they had a potential patron in the form of the central government was unusual. Most regional groups confront a central state directly and are not likely to believe they can get central governments to grant them autonomous institutions at all, let alone permit them to separate from the state entirely. In order to protect their interests, these groups have no choice but to push for more conventional forms of democratic political change,

either via government decentralization or central legislation guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities to group members.

Conflict prevention practitioners thus should not necessarily apply lessons regarding autonomy and federalism suggested here indiscriminately in order to limit the prospects of territorial conflict arising elsewhere. Where regional groups have no reason to believe states will not abide by their agreements or have little hope of pressuring them to provide greater powers of local government, conflict prevention efforts need not—and should not—seek to promote new autonomous or federal solutions. Instead, efforts ought to be made to accommodate the interests of regional groups within existing institutional frameworks.

On the other hand, where regional groups do have reason to believe states will not abide by their agreements and that they can be pressured to offer greater powers of self-rule, non-negotiable demands for autonomy or border changes are likely to arise. Outside of the Soviet South Caucasus, in other multiethnic states emerging from dictatorship—like post-invasion Iraq and postwar Congo—federalism may be the only alternative to imposing central state order by force.

Where conflict prevention efforts do seek to grant more political power to regional populations, however, they must be careful to take into consideration the insecurities of states. If states identify regional populations as potential “fifth columns,” their reaction to regional political demands will be negative. The law of unintended consequences could then kick in: a negative reaction from the state, coupled with a perception of support from external actors, could give rise to new strategic calculations among regional groups regarding the necessity of—and opportunity for—political

change. As regional groups act on these calculations, they threaten to set new spirals of conflict into motion.

This study thus comes full circle. Understanding the origins of conflict-spirals in the South Caucasus has been the focus of this study. Practitioners of conflict resolution should understand why these conflicts began in order to better think about resolving them, as well as similar conflicts elsewhere. At the same time, practitioners of conflict prevention must be careful not to adopt measures for preventing conflict elsewhere that could lead to the very conflict-spirals they hope to avoid. Building trust that states will protect regional groups' interests, while limiting regional groups' opportunity to pursue institutional change, is the key to maintaining peace between states and regions.

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