

CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES SERIES

From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus

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

Arsène Saparov



From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus

This book is the first historical work to study the creation of ethnic autonomies in the Caucasus in the 1920s – the transitional period from Russian Empire to Soviet Union. Seventy years later these ethnic autonomies were to become the loci of violent ethno-political conflicts which have consistently been blamed on the policies of the Bolsheviks and Stalin. According to this view, the Soviet leadership deliberately set up ethnic autonomies within the republics, thereby giving Moscow unprecedented leverage against each republic.

From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus questions this assumption by examining three case studies – Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh which are placed within the larger socio-political context of transformations taking place in this borderland region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It examines demographic, social and economic consequences of the Russian colonization and resulting replacement of traditional societies and identities with modern ones. Based on original Russian language sources and archival materials, the book brings together two periods that are usually studied separately – the period of the Russian Civil War (1917–20) and the early Soviet period – in order to understand the roots of the Bolshevik decision-making policy when granting autonomies. It argues that rather than being the product of blatant political manipulation this was an attempt at conflict resolution. The institution of political autonomy, however, became a powerful tool for national mobilization during the Soviet era.

Contributing both to the general understanding of the early Soviet nationality policy, and to our understanding of the conflicts that have engulfed the Caucasus region since the 1990s, this book will be of interest to scholars of Central Asian studies, Russian/Soviet history, ethnic conflict, security studies and international relations.

Arsène Saparov received a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics, UK, in 2007. He now teaches Russian/Soviet and Caucasian history at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. His research focuses on ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus, and Russian and Soviet history.

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For my parents:

Karen Sergeevich Saparov (1936–2010)

Elisabeth Mikhailovna Miasnikian (1937–92)

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Note on transliteration and place-names

The Library of Congress system of transliteration is used in the text, except for names for which there are commonly accepted English forms. The spelling of some geographic terms presents a problem, as there are not always established English terms for place-names. The term Transcaucasia (*Zakavkaz'e*), which reflects the vision from Moscow (both imperial and Soviet), is currently being replaced by the more neutral South Caucasus. However, in some cases Transcaucasia is employed to refer to some instances of the official usage during the tsarist and Soviet periods. For example, the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Republic – *Zakavkazskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Federativnaia Sovetskaia Respublika* (ZSFSR) cannot be translated as South Caucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. In some cases the name used in the nineteenth century was spelled differently from the twentieth century accepted usage. Examples are: Tiflis and Tbilisi, Erevan and Yerevan, Batum and Batumi, Kutais and Kutaisi, etc. I use both spellings for corresponding periods. A number of geographic terms became the subject of hot political debate as conflicting parties proposed their own versions (often completely different). To avoid taking political sides, the geographic terms used in the Soviet Union are employed when dealing with the Soviet or post-Soviet periods.

Abbreviations and terms

AONK	<i>Avtonomnaia Oblast' Nagornogo-Karabakha</i> (Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh); since 1936 changed to NKAO.
ChKa	<i>Chrezvychainaia Kommissia</i> – Extraordinary Commission – Soviet Secret Service and predecessor of the GPU, OGPU, NKVD and KGB.
Kavburo	The Caucasian Bureau was a representative of the <i>TsKa RKP(b)</i> in the Caucasus. It was created on April 8, 1920 in place of the KKK. Initially its members included Ordzhonikidze, Kirov, Nazarpetian, Orakhelashvili, Smilga and later Stalin. It functioned until February 22, 1922, when it resigned its powers to the <i>Zakraikom</i> (Transcaucasian Regional Committee).
KKK	<i>Kavkazskii Kraevoi Komitet</i> was the Bolshevik primary policy- and decision-making body in the Caucasus. It was superseded on April 8, 1920, by the <i>Kavburo</i> .
Korenizatsiia	An affirmative action policy of indigenization implemented within the USSR in the 1920s.
MVD	<i>Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del</i> – Ministry of the Interior.
Narkomat	<i>Narodnyi Kommissariat</i> (People's Commissariat); early Soviet term for “ministry.”
Obkom	An acronym of <i>Oblastnoi komitet</i> – Regional Party Committee.
OZAKOM	The <i>Osobyi Zakavkazskii Komitet</i> (Special Transcaucasian Committee) was created on March 22 (9), 1917 [new and old calendar style – Russia changed its calendar system after the February revolution so during 1917–18 two dates are used] by the provisional government, to function as a local government. After the Bolshevik coup in October/November 1917, OZAKOM was replaced by The Transcaucasian Commissariat on November 28 (15), 1917.
Raikom	<i>Raionnyi komitet</i> – District Party Committee.
Raion	District – the lowest level administrative division within the USSR.
Revkom	Revolutionary Committee, an extraordinary unelected authority responsible for establishing Soviet power and acting as a temporary government.

<i>Revvoensovet</i>	<i>Revoliutsionnyi Voennyi Sovet</i> – Revolutionary Military Council.
RKKI	<i>Raboche-Krest'ianskaia Inspeksiia</i> – Worker-Peasant Inspectorate.
<i>Uchastok</i>	Tsarist administrative unit, sub-division of <i>uezd</i> .
<i>Uezd</i>	Tsarist administrative unit, sub-division of <i>gubernia</i> (province).
VAK	<i>Vysshaia Attestatsionnaia Komissii</i> – the Soviet academic body that approved the award of candidate and doctorate degrees.
<i>Zakraikom</i>	The <i>Zakavkazskii Kraevoi Komitet</i> (Transcaucasian Regional Committee) was elected at the First Congress of the Communist Organizations of the South Caucasus to replace the <i>Kavburo</i> in February 1922. Its main functions remained the same as those of the <i>Kavburo</i> – to oversee the implementation of Moscow's policies in the region.
ZSFSR	<i>Zakavkazskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Federativnaia Sovetskaia Respublika</i> (Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic) – a Federation of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia from 1922 until 1936.

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Introduction

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 was accompanied by a series of violent ethno-nationalist conflicts in the Caucasus. Witnessing these events first hand stimulated my interest in understanding the roots of such conflicts. After all, nationalism in the Caucasus replaced the dominant Soviet ideology of the friendship of people with inconceivable ease. What is also noticeable is that the large-scale violence occurred only in the autonomous territories of the South Caucasus. Despite the fact that according to the 1926 Soviet Population Census the Caucasus was home to more than 100 different ethnic groups, violent conflicts occurred only in Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia – all three of them autonomous regions. Why were other ethnic groups not involved in this violence? Is there any particular reason why these autonomies were created? These are the questions that have held my attention in the two decades that followed the Soviet collapse. In my search for answers I eventually turned to early Soviet history, during which time the state structures were shaped. However, hardly anything has been written about the construction of the Soviet state in the South Caucasus. This book is to a very large extent a product of a personal quest to understand and explain these conflicts and attempt to fill existing gaps in the current historiography.

A good place to start this inquiry would be to look at how the Soviet historians themselves addressed this question. History works that deal with the Soviet Union are sharply split by the Cold War divide into a Western historiography, and a Soviet one. The Soviet historians were writing within an authoritarian system and were subjected to strict ideological and censorship controls. The Soviet leadership saw history as an important social science discipline which was fulfilling an essential ideological goal. Soviet historians had to write under the auspices of the Marxist school of thought. The entire world history was to be studied through the prism of class struggle. Traditional nineteenth century emphasis on the history of great men and great deeds was abandoned in favor of what was essentially a social history. However, Soviet enactment of this social history was rather peculiar. Not only was Marxist theory the only theoretical tool of inquiry available to Soviet historians, at the same time they had to confine themselves to the nuances of the internal ideological climate.

The period of history from the Bolshevik revolution onwards was particularly affected. If historians of previous periods had been comparatively free to inquire

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into the social and political forces, as long as they remained within the Marxist discourse, then from October 1917 those limits became more rigid. The depiction of social and political events had to convey the unconditional support of the masses for the Bolshevik revolution. The leading role of the Bolshevik leadership had to be constantly highlighted. Because the set of leading personalities at the top of the Soviet Union hierarchy was constantly changing, historians had to carefully select facts that would express social support by workers, peasants and soldiers for the Bolsheviks, while at the same time avoiding discussion of instances when these very same social groups turned against the leadership. With Soviet historians having to distort the basic facts to fit the accepted discourse is it worth considering their works at all?

There are two periods when, despite all the associated shortcomings, the Soviet works provide valuable source material. The decade of the 1920s is extremely important as at that time numerous debates took place within the Soviet system which would disappear in the 1930s. On the one hand, there were frequent discussions of the constitutional organization of the Soviet state that shed light on the fluidity of state structures in the early period. On the other hand, this period saw the publication of a number of memoirs by recent participants in the revolution and the civil war. A careful contextualized reading of these sources can reveal a great deal about the internal workings of the Soviet decision-making system.

The relatively liberal first decade of Soviet rule was closed off in the 1930s – with only sterile works appearing thereafter until the death of Stalin. The other period when valuable sources reappeared was during the thaw under Nikita Khrushchev. He embarked upon a de-Stalinization campaign, liberalizing the system, allowing a limited public debate, and encouraging a revision of the previous excesses. Part of this campaign was publication of works critical of Stalinist errors. The Stalinist excesses in the Caucasus often occurred in the area of nationality policy; redressing these issues inevitably involved addressing existing minority grievances and invoking concessions to nationalist sentiments. From this point onwards the latent elements of nationalism remained embedded in the cultural production emerging from the region. The works from this period serve as a useful source of inquiry into the subtle development of nationalism within the USSR. The use of academic publications in the Caucasus as tools of nationalist mobilization was aptly shown by Viktor Shnirel'man (2001, 2003).

The other aspect of Khrushchev era publications is their direct value as a source of documents and decisions hitherto unknown to the general public. In order to pave the way for the desired changes within nationality policy a number of documents were published that demonstrated the wrongdoings of the Stalinist epoch. Abkhaz historian Sagariia (1970) was the only one who addressed directly the question of the creation of the autonomous formation in the South Caucasus. His writing was carefully positioned within the Soviet official discourse, and he always stopped short of showing Abkhaz grievances, but his presentation of documents and various decisions by Soviet authorities left no doubt that such decisions could only be seen as injustices of the nationality policy. The

Ossetian historians writing at the same time were also able to publish controversial early Soviet documents that richly illustrated their grievances. Unlike Abkhazia or South Ossetia, Nagorno Karabakh was lacking any publications dealing with the formative years of the Soviet Union. By Soviet standards, where every autonomous *oblast'* published numerous mandatory volumes on the struggle to establish Soviet power, the Karabakh case stands out as a clear anomaly. However, the absence of publications emerging from Karabakh was compensated for by those emerging from the Armenian SSR. It is from this period that we learn about Stalin's role in the decision to grant the disputed Karabakh region to Azerbaijan (Kharmandarian 1969). Stalin's role was probably purposefully exaggerated to highlight the illegality of the decision. In the same manner, Armenian historians published Soviet decrees revealing that Karabakh had been granted to Armenia on several occasions – all of which was intended to show the illegitimate nature of the final decision to grant Karabakh to Azerbaijan. But despite the challenging statements behind them, all such publications remained within the permitted discourse.

But though publications containing documents and facts from the early Soviet period continued to be published, sporadically, for several years after the ousting of Khrushchev, they had completely dried up by the early 1970s. Until the commencement of *perestroika* no more revealing publications emerged from Soviet historians.

Overall the Soviet historical works remained ideologically conditioned and severely limited in their ability to openly address various issues. Yet, despite these obvious shortcomings, some aspects of the Soviet historical publications remain underestimated. They often contain a wealth of material hidden among ideological pulp that point at the subtle fissures appearing in the foundations of the Soviet state. Their careful use and contextualization can still enrich our understanding of Soviet history.

In striking contrast to the Soviet historians, their Western colleagues had the benefit of working in an ideologically unrestricted environment and were free to explore any aspect and theme of Soviet history. Their creative freedom was limited only by the inaccessibility of Soviet archives, especially in the early years of the Soviet studies discipline.

Soviet studies as a discipline came to prominence immediately after the Second World War. The international political environment seems to have had a profound impact on the direction the discipline took. It was a period when the USSR emerged as the main rival of the West, replacing the defeated Nazi ideology. Ideological differences between the West and the Soviet Union were tremendous – while one supported private property, capitalism, democratic elections and the protection of privacy, the other was its complete opposite – rejection of private property, the building of communism, and massive invasion of privacy through the state surveillance architecture. Expansion of the Soviet Union into Eastern Europe was perceived as part of a greater expansionism aimed at global domination through the overthrow of capitalism. It is little surprise that the main approach dominating the field in the formative years of Soviet

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studies was the so-called totalitarian school. The Soviet Union was seen as a monolith; an essentially Russian state in which a Communist elite enjoyed total control over its population. Against this set of premises about the USSR it is no wonder that all attention was focused towards the center; the periphery, society and minorities were justifiably excluded from consideration since within a totalitarian state they became voiceless objects of the policies initiated by the center.

But despite such an overwhelming focus on the center, the question of nationalities was brought into focus very early on. One of the influential early authors on the subject was Richard Pipes, whose 1954 work *The Formation of the Soviet Union* provided a sweeping account of the civil war and the establishment of the Soviet Union, covering nearly the entire Soviet periphery. His explanation for the Soviet success was that the Bolsheviks were able to win the civil war by skillfully manipulating to their own advantage the nationality question. The Bolsheviks never intended to make good on their civil war time promises to minority groups. The disparity between the stated ideological goal and actual nationality policy was interpreted as political maneuvering rather than any genuine shift in the ideology; it was designed exclusively to win the support of national minority groups and undermine the position of the white forces. It was a clever decoy to fool minority groups at the periphery of the tsarist empire; the Bolsheviks never intended to fulfil their promises.

These early studies firmly established a framework through which the Soviet nationality policy was viewed for decades to come. The Soviet nationalities were, as one of the early studies suggested “captive nations” (Smal-Stocki 1960), while the Soviet Union itself was a nation-killer or nation-breaker as another study put it (Conquest 1972, 1991).

The Khrushchev era saw a departure from the extreme totalitarian view of the Soviet Union. More attention was now devoted to the Soviet nationalities – the 1960s and 1970s saw numerous monographs published, dealing with particular case studies. The focus remained on the nationalities within the Soviet Union. They highlighted existing tensions within the Soviet system, but allowed little agency to the minority groups (Simmonds 1977; Azrael 1978; Benningson and Broxup 1983).

Particularly important were the works of French scholar Helen Carrere d’Encausse (1979, 1991). In these two books she focused on the nationalities problem in Central Asia and predicted the collapse of the USSR – albeit as a result of the demographic changes in the Soviet Muslim population of Central Asia. The general mood of Western scholarship remained pessimistic about the possibility of a strong national movement within the USSR. The steady decline in the number of different ethnic groups from nearly 200 in the 1926 census, to just 90 in 1979, was seen as an evidence of assimilationist policies.

This brief analysis of Soviet era Western scholarship reveals that in the absence of the same rigid ideological constraints that were to be found in the Soviet Union, the historical discourse in the West demonstrated a large degree of flexibility, and it fluctuated significantly. What is interesting, however, is the degree to which it closely followed and adjusted to political developments, if not

political needs. But the absence of censorship did not prevent Western scholarship from following the mainstream political discourse of the West. At the outset of the Cold War, Western studies presented the Soviet Union as an imperial power bent on territorial expansion. Stalinism, with its purges, had uninterrupted links with Leninism and showed a close resemblance to defeated Nazism. This view of the Soviet Union fitted well into the confrontational politics that characterized the beginning of the Cold War. With the death of Stalin and the relaxation of the Soviet system under Khrushchev the academic discourse also changed – it allowed for more flexibility in internal Soviet affairs and recognized some of the achievements of the Soviet nationality policy. It was now accepted that Moscow did not exercise total control over the lives of the Soviet population, which made it possible to take into account the Soviet periphery and ethnicities. This close correlation between the political climate of the day, on the one hand, and the historical works on the other, continued into the late Soviet period and is evident also after its collapse. When the *glasnost* campaign resulted in a surge of nationalism that quickly spiraled out of control and led to the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union, everyone was caught by surprise. Several authors predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union but none foresaw that reform initiated from the top would lead to the crumbling of the entire edifice. This can probably be explained by the legacy of totalitarian theory that portrayed the Soviet leadership as being in total control of the country. Subsequently, it was difficult to imagine the extent of ignorance among the top levels of Soviet leadership.

The old view of the Soviet Union as a unitary authoritarian state was inadequate in explaining the unexpected rise of nationalism and Soviet disintegration. A new paradigm emerged in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse that challenged the established Cold War view of the Soviet Union and offered a new interpretation of Soviet history that accounts for the rapid rise of nationalism.

Ronald Suny (1993b) was the first to suggest that the Soviet Union was willingly creating nations among its peripheral minority groups, and that policies in support of this were not merely a farcical smokescreen for concealing the truth behind an authoritarian reality. The Bolsheviks, armed with a scientific analysis of historical development, genuinely believed that nationalism was a by-product of capitalism and that it would disappear naturally with the advance of socialism. As such it was an unavoidable part of human development; it was futile to struggle against it. Instead, by encouraging the development of national cultures the Bolsheviks hoped to speed up the historical process. In their view such policies would create a short-cut to socialism by leapfrogging an unfortunate but unavoidable phase of human development. This argument was carried on by Yuri Slezkine (1994) and others, who pointed out that the first decade of Soviet rule was characterized by a *korenizatsiia* campaign – a genuine attempt to develop national cultures and celebrate ethnic diversity. This policy was pursued at the time as a way to overcome the grievances caused by Russian imperialism. Even though the *korenizatsiia* project was over by the early 1930s – even the word *korenizatsiia* altogether disappeared from the Soviet vocabulary, dictionaries and encyclopedias – it nevertheless made a long-lasting impact on Soviet politics.