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INTRODUCTION



Who wanted the TDFR? The making and the breaking of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic

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During the brief period between 22 April and 26 May 1918, the leading Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian political forces of the early twentieth century, having established the shared federative structures of the Transcaucasian Commissariat and the *Seim* in the preceding months, declared an independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) (see [Figure 1](#)). Emerging as it did from the ruins of an imploding tsarist empire and the still glowing embers of the First World War, and facing the imminent threat of invasion from the Ottoman army and the power ambitions of incipient Soviet Russia, the TDFR seemed both to the actors at the time and to later scholars of the region to be unique, contingent, and certainly unrepeatable. For Noe Zhordania, for example, who as leader of the Georgian Social Democratic Party played a key role in the creation of the TDFR and the founding of the Georgian Democratic Republic, declaring independence was entirely contingent upon the political developments in Russia and the designs of the Ottoman Empire towards those territories that it had lost in the 1878 Russo-Ottoman War. This sense of contingency could be felt in his speech to the Transcaucasian *Seim* shortly before the declaration of independence, entitled “On the Independence of Transcaucasia,” in which he stated that such a political union could achieve independence only if a democratic Russia abandoned it, even though Transcaucasia would have to face the Ottomans on its own (1919, 76). The hopes of Zhordania and many others for the emergence of a democratic Russia failed to materialize, while an Ottoman invasion did, forcing the main Transcaucasian political forces, primarily the Georgian Social Democrats and the National Democrats, the Armenian Dashnaktsutyun (or Dashnaks), and the Azerbaijani Musavatists, to agree to declare the independence of the Transcaucasus/Transcaucasia.¹

While the TDFR appeared to these historical actors, as well as to later historians and scholars of the region (more on this below), as a unique political phenomenon that resulted from happenstance, how the TDFR emerged, what the political discourses were that sustained or contested it, and what the positions of the main political actors and interested parties/states towards it were have not been studied systematically. This set of questions and others were addressed in the contributions of historians and specialists on the region and its surrounding areas at an international conference on the centennial of the TDFR that was organized at Charles University in Prague on 24 May 2018.² Building on the contributions from the only international academic event to mark this centennial, this special issue offers to readers interested in the region a comprehensive and multi-perspective historical account of the TDFR. It does so via a few guiding questions, namely:

what was the TDFR, who created it and how, and who among the relevant political powers actually wanted the TDFR? Whose interests did it serve?

These questions are posed in a context in which full and direct accounts are lacking – though the larger historical background and the causes for its collapse have been discussed at some length – either in Western historical scholarship or in the respective national historiographies of the region (Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani). It is clear that institutionally the TDFR relied for its brief exercise of foreign policy (such as negotiating a peace deal with the Ottoman government) and its domestic governance (maintaining public order and land and labour reform policies) on the Regional Centre of Soviets, the Transcaucasian Commissariat and the *Seim* at the “federative” level, while at the “national” level on the three political institutions comprised of the main nationalities, the Azerbaijani, Armenian and Georgian national councils. These institutions emerged as necessary responses to the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in Petrograd in November 1917. The Regional Centre of the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies, established on 8 November, together with the executive committees of the Social Democratic and Socialist Revolutionary parties called for the “preservation of order and unity of revolutionary democracy” in the Caucasus. Eight days later, the Regional Centre of Soviets delivered another resolution calling for the establishment of a government to be comprised of representatives from the many existing parties, and as well as for the creation of a Constituent Assembly. Aimed at strengthening the powers of the democratic forces and halting anarchy and averting civil war, the goals of this resolution came to fruition



Figure 1. Boundaries of the TDFR from April 1918 and the new states as they came into existence in May 1918. Note: Map created by Vladimer Shioshvili.

swiftly four days later, with the establishment of Transcaucasian Commissariat. Comprised of three Georgians, three Azerbaijanis, three Armenians and two Russians, this “caretaker government” struggled to administer internal order and oversee issues such as education, industry, commerce, transportation, food supplies and social welfare, as well as to deal with the continuing war. This was not only because of the lack of a clear programme for implementing all of these policies, but also because, as the Commissariat’s President, Evgeni Gegechkori, later stated, this government was “weak and inefficient,” largely because it had to rely on the respective National Councils and could not implement its decrees on its own (Kazemzadeh 2009 [1951], 54–58). In the meantime, the need to make peace with the Ottomans at the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations then taking place between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers (Germany, Austro-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire), as well as the urgent necessity for a strong regional government to maintain order and implement reforms prompted the Regional Centre of the Soviets to establish the *Seim* on 23 February 1918, with the Georgian Social Democrat Nikolai Chkheidze as its chairman (Hovannisian 1967, 125; Dokumenty 1919, 28).

Indeed, in Western scholarship the very few discussions of the TDFR are brief and tend to underscore its uniqueness. The British historian Stephen F. Jones, for instance, in his comprehensive study of the rise of the Georgian Social Democratic Party in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, views the TDFR as “the first and last attempt at an independent Transcaucasian union” (2005, 279). The British expert Thomas de Waal, in his panoramic survey of the modern histories and cultures of the Caucasus region, mentions the TDFR as “the only instance in history of a shared state for an entire South Caucasus” (2010, 62). The American historian Michael Reynolds, in his account on the last battles between the Ottoman and Russian armies in the Caucasus, devotes a section to the causes of the emergence of the TDFR, in which he echoes Zhordania’s sentiment that it was only the Ottoman military threat that “forced [the peoples of the TDFR] to be free” (2009, 166). The more detailed and extensive discussions of the TDFR, found in the very few books about Transcaucasia, such as Firuz Kazemzadeh’s *Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921* (2009 [1951]), Werner Zürrer’s *Kaukasien 1918-1921. Der Kampf der Großmächte um die Landbrücke zwischen Schwarzem und Kaspischen Meer* (1978), Luigi de Matteo’s *L’Italia e la Transcaucasia, 1919-1921: Alla Ricerca di Materie Prime e Novi Mercati nella Crisi Postbellica* (1990), and Kaya Çağlayan’s *British Policy Towards Transcaucasia 1917-1921* (2010), touch upon TDFR only in passing.

In these accounts the details of the TDFR are “buried” in larger narratives about the historical and geopolitical situations in “the region of the Caucasus” between 1917 and 1921, while the sequence of historical events – the onset of the “Caucasus Campaign” between tsarist and Ottoman armies in the First World War; the Bolshevik October revolution/coup of 1917; the establishment of the Transcaucasian Commissariat, the *Seim* and the TDFR, and then the latter’s collapse; Georgia’s, Armenia’s and Azerbaijan’s declarations of independence from Russia in May 1918; and these states’ subsequent conquest by the Soviet Red Army in 1920–21 – are familiar to most readers of this region’s history. In this light, Kazemzadeh’s *Struggle for Transcaucasia* offers a glimpse at the causes of the TDFR’s collapse, highlighting the lack of unity among the republics and their inability to collectively defend their territory from the Ottoman Army (2009 [1951], 120). Zürrer’s *Kaukasien 1918-1921*, on the other hand, does not offer much about the TDFR, aside from focusing on how the Great Powers shaped “the future of

the strategically important Transcaucasia” (Gaworek 1979, 1141). The perspectives of Matteo’s *L’Italia e la Transcaucasia, 1919-1921* and Çağlayan’s *British Policy Towards Transcaucasia 1917-1921* (2010) are similar to those of Zürrer, with particular emphasis on Italian and British intentions and ambitions and assessing their impact in the context of these four tumultuous years. Meanwhile, the Russian historian Vadim Mukhanov views the TDFR as “a transitional bridge from the imperial past to an independent present”, one fated for dissolution because of the contradictory views as to the future of the region on the part of its constituent nationalities (2017, 72). The lack of systematic analysis of the TDFR seems to have resulted from these historians’ desire to tell larger stories about the region and their view of the TDFR as an afterthought, and an “unsuccessful bid for a post-imperial region” (Brisku 2013, 42)

There is also a marked absence of a full account of why the TDFR emerged, of who wanted it and who did not, in the three respective national historiographies. In these historical narratives, the TDFR appears either as an insignificant moment or, at best, as a springboard to the establishment of the three independent republics (Mkhoyan 2017, 911). Quite tellingly, while numerous activities were organized during May 2018 in each of the region’s contemporary states (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), and other countries, to mark the centenary of these republics’ first declarations of independence, no such event – expect for the International Conference in Prague on which this special issue is based – was held to mark the centenary of the TDFR. In this light, in some of the recent entries in the historical literature by Azerbaijani authors on Azerbaijani political history published by Western academic presses, the TDFR is either not mentioned or the main events – which clearly took place during the time of the Transcaucasian *Seim* and the TDFR – are narrated only as a part of the Azerbaijani nation-state building process. For instance, Suha Bolukbashi in his *Azerbaijan: A Political History* (2011) – a survey of country’s modern political development – when referring to the period surrounding the TDFR writes only that “the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution enabled Azerbaijan to have independence from May 28, 1918 to the Bolshevik invasion in April 27, 1920” (2011, 7). Jamil Hasanli’s account of the First Azerbaijani Republic’s foreign policy, particularly when narrating the sequence of events between the “national awakening” of the late-nineteenth century and “the Azerbaijani Republic, which appeared on the stage of world history in 1918” (2011, 2), offers little on the TDFR. Instead of treating the two key events related to the existence of the Transcaucasian *Seim* and the TDFR, the Trabzon (March–April 1918) and Batumi³ (May 1918) peace conferences with the Ottoman Empire, as attempts to achieve a lasting peace with the Ottomans and in so doing to forge a common Transcaucasian foreign policy, the author narrates them as “Azerbaijan’s first diplomatic steps towards independence” (2011, 30).

In the accounts of modern political history in Armenian historiography, references to the TDFR vary between detailed descriptions of the events and dilemmas surrounding “Transcaucasia” – as provided by the prominent American-Armenian historian Richard G. Hovannisian in his book *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918* (1967, 106–215) – and other contributions that discuss it as “something in passing” (see Mikayel Zolyan’s article in this issue). Georgian historical scholarship, too, mentions the TDFR briefly, either as an unsustainable project of regional political unity that collapsed under external pressures and internal disunity (Vachnadze and Guruli 2000, 107–108), or as a prelude to Georgian political actors envisaging themselves as independent of Russia,

indeed “as a first instance among Georgian parties to have established a democratic republic, independent of Bolshevik Russia” (Nodia and Scholtbach 2006, 92).

This special issue therefore addresses such shortcomings by offering a systematic and multi-perspectival account of the making and breaking of the TDFR through reconstructing some of the main perspectives of the TDFR’s constitutive nationalities, of the Great Powers involved prior to, during, or after its existence, and crucially of the other regional *de facto* states/entities that sought to cooperate with and perhaps even join the TDFR. It also draws on new archival research conducted in Berlin, Grozny, Istanbul, London, Paris and Tbilisi. In addition to addressing the central questions of this special issue, these perspectives also tackle a series of questions about the geopolitical, military, historical and ideological contexts in the region; about the volatile circumstances in which each of the political entities found themselves and the political vocabulary articulated by the actors of the time; about how the concept of federalism/federation emerged and how it competed with concepts such as nationality, nationalism and the nation-state; about what actually happened in the Caucasus between the Bolshevik revolution/coup and the declarations of independence of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and how these events affected the positions of the actors; about the reasons behind the TDFR’s collapse, and what became of its legacy in the succeeding years; and, crucially, about how the TDFR was perceived, defended or dismissed by the main political actors of its three constituent nationalities, the Great Powers, and the regional entities surrounding or interacting with it.

To begin with, Mikayel Zolyan argues in his article that from the Armenian perspective the TDFR was seen as a traumatic experience for the Armenian political parties and people in general, because it was understood as the outcome of military threats coming from the Ottomans, and because it was an experience that highlighted the complicated relations that the Armenians had with the other main nationalities in the region. Nonetheless, Zolyan asserts that while these political parties – first and foremost the Dashnaks – were opposed to the independence of the TDFR, once it came to pass they were equally reluctant to move towards an independent Armenian nation-state. Similarly, Georges Mamoulia, reconstructing the Azerbaijani perspective on the TDFR in the larger context of the period, argues that while Azerbaijani political forces were not initially as enthusiastic as their Georgian counterparts about the independence of the federation, they became more so with its declaration. They sought to preserve it, Mamoulia argues, because Transcaucasian integration was in their economic interest and it was in their political interest to cooperate, especially with Georgians, and not to find themselves subordinated to the Ottomans. Ottoman objectives *vis-à-vis* the TDFR in particular changed the calculus of the Azerbaijani parties about alignment with the Ottomans, and hence about maintaining sovereignty over the city of Baku and the Baku governorate.

Adrian Brisku’s article on the Georgian perspective towards the TDFR underscores the immense conceptual and political clout that the main political groupings, particularly the Social Democrats, had prior to and following the establishment of the federative structures and their direct role in both the TDFR’s declaration of independence and its subsequent dissolution. As the TDFR came into being, as was the case with the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians, the Georgians were reluctant to then dissolve it. Rather, they sought to ensure that it succeeded in progressing from the status of a *de facto* state to that of an internationally recognized one. In his speech on the occasion of the declaration of Georgia’s independence, Zhordania saw the breaking up of the

TDFR as “tragic”, and contemplated its “resurrection” several times during the existence of Georgia’s First Republic in 1918–1921.

Aside from these divergent and convergent positions among the three constitutive nationalities of the TDFR, the Great Powers fighting on both sides in the First World War, the Central Powers and the Allies, had their own perspectives. Both sides were keen to pursue their war goals in the Caucasus. In some cases, these ambitions coincided with the conception of an independent TDFR and of federation in general as a framework for the region in the period following their victory in the war. With this in mind, Stefano Taglia’s article on the perspective of the Ottoman Empire, which was a key player in the Caucasus among the Central Powers, argues that Ottoman support for an independent TDFR was based on purely pragmatic and expedient considerations, despite the fact that, based on their internal debates about imperial political reform, the Ottoman leadership did not consider a federal framework for a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state to be feasible. Rather, they supported the independence of the TDFR because they considered it to be an asset – “a minor partner to be pushed around” – that could serve as a buffer zone between their dominions and Russia, free of the potential presence of Russian or British military forces. Supporting such a federation would be less expensive than occupying the region, while at the same time it would allow them to exert influence.

Regarding the Imperial German perspective, Lasha Bakradze in his contribution shows that given the alliance between Germany and the Ottoman Empire, the former had delegated the responsibility for the war effort in the Caucasus to the latter, and hence had paid little direct attention to the region. At the same time, Germany began supporting national groups, often among émigrés in Germany, such as the Committee of Georgia’s Independence, which did not consider a structure such as the TDFR to be viable. This had the implication for the TDFR that while Germany agreed (albeit unsuccessfully) to mediate a peace deal between the Ottoman Empire and the TDFR, it was the German backing – coordinated through that Committee – for Georgian independence that led directly to the dissolution of the TDFR. Nonetheless, Bakradze concludes, Germany considered that through using independent Georgia as an anchor, a “Caucasian bloc” could be established under German patronage.

Beka Kobakhidze in his contribution argues that following Russia’s withdrawal from the war, the Allied Powers (Great Britain, the USA, France and Italy) remained distant observers of the military and political developments in the Caucasus in general and of the TDFR in particular. Yet as they became more involved, the British in particular saw advantages in the abilities demonstrated by Transcaucasian political elites in uniting the TDFR politically. Then following the end of the First World War, not only Great Britain but also the US and Italy began to conceive of the region as a “Caucasian package”, with the British in particular advising the local political leaders of the independent republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to create once again a federation or a confederation. Meanwhile, as Timothy Blauvelt argues in his contribution, the Bolsheviks, one of the most important emerging geopolitical players in Transcaucasia, but who were politically weak in the region due to the Russian Civil War and the weakness of the indigenous proletarian movement, sought to undermine the TDFR. The Bolsheviks considered themselves to be the rightful heirs to Transcaucasia, and they viewed the TDFR as a separatist enterprise. Focusing on the political thought and deeds of Vladimir I. Lenin’s Commissar Extraordinary for the Caucasus, the Bolshevik theorist Stepan Shaumyan,

and his ultimate failure to provide a Soviet alternative to the TDFR and the nationalist paradigm in the region, Blauvelt suggests that Shaumyan's failures along with the TDFR experience, served as lessons for the Bolsheviks, and influenced how they conceived of and implemented their later nationality policy in the region.

In addition to its internal challenges and interactions with the Great Powers, the TDFR also dealt with other regional entities whom its leaders considered important to win over to its side. Blauvelt and Stanislav Tumis with their article on Ukrainian perspectives, offer a comparative account of the similar events between taking place in the Transcaucasian and Ukrainian theatres of war underscoring at the same time their similar dilemmas in dealing with the Germans and Bolsheviks as well as the close interactions between the independent Ukrainian governments and the Transcaucasian *Seim* and TDFR. Insightfully also they point out that while there were such interactions (military support) the leaders of the Ukrainian Central Council recognized the vulnerability of the TDFR, and became increasingly indifferent towards it. This was not the case, however, for the main representatives of the Union of the Allied Mountaineers (UAM) of the Northern Caucasus, according to Sarah Slye in her article. Underscoring that the UAM warmed up to the Transcaucasian *Seim* only in the early spring of 1918, Slye demonstrates that they soon came to believe in the viability of the independent TDFR. So much so, in fact, that they declared their own independence in preparation for joining the TDFR. Thus, for the UAM, the TDFR was not an ephemeral state structure, but rather one in the making.

This special issue unpacks all of these perspectives in succinct detail in the pages below. In addition to the emphasis in existing literature on the uniqueness and contingent nature of the TDFR, what the accounts here essentially reveal, however, is that all of the sides/parties/powers (the local actors and the Great Powers) for their own reasons and motivations, and at various times, wanted the TDFR and/or its federative and confederative framework because a larger and politically unified region was seen as more viable (geo)politically, developmentally and ideologically than its constituent parts. Yet while the appeal of the TDFR at the beginning of the twentieth century emerged in the context of the geopolitical earthquake that was the First World War and the ensuing Bolshevik revolution/coup and the impact that these had on the larger region of the Caucasus, as well as in the context of the vibrant and contested contemporary political vocabulary of nationalism, liberalism, socialism, nation-state and supra-national state/empire, its valence for the fractured Caucasus at the onset of the twenty-first century remains to be seen.

Notes

1. These terms are used interchangeably in the articles in this special issue to refer to the region that currently corresponds with the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; the latter three are also referred to more commonly in the post-Soviet period as the South Caucasus.
2. This conference could not have taken place without the generous financial support of the Institute of International Studies (Q18 Program) at Charles University, and that of a good friend, David Bouck, and his company, The Charnwood Company s.r.o.
3. In most of the articles in this special edition, the name of this town will be used with the Georgian appellation, Batumi, except for the article on the Ottoman perspective, in which it is referred to in the Ottoman (and also pre-revolutionary Russian) version as Batum.

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