

## Turning towards unity: a North Caucasian perspective on the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic

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# Turning towards unity: a North Caucasian perspective on the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic

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## ABSTRACT

This article traces the efforts of the Union of Allied Mountaineers (UAM) to uphold the indigenous North Caucasians' right to self-determination from March 1917, when the organization hoped for Russia's restructuring as a federal republic wherein the Mountaineers (*gortsy*) would enjoy full political autonomy on their own territory (national-territorial autonomy), to May 1918, when the Mountaineer leaders attempted to join the Transcaucasian Federation. After the Bolshevik coup d'état in October 1917, the Mountain leaders declared the autonomy of the Provisional Mountain Government on 2 December 1917 and later the independence of the Mountain Republic on 11 May 1918 – in order to join the newly independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR). Since the UAM had been resistant to the idea of administrative unity with Transcaucasia for most of 1917, this article clarifies the logic behind the Mountain leadership's reorientation away from Russia and towards Transcaucasia in early 1918. And considering the Mountain Republic declared independence at the very moment when the anti-separatist Terek People's Republic insisted that it represented the political will of both the settler and native populations of the North Caucasus, this article also evaluates these two rival republics' claims to popular legitimacy among the autochthonous Mountaineers.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

In early 1918<sup>1</sup>, native North Caucasian political leaders strove to bring their region into a confederative union with the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR), a transient state lasting from 9 April through 26 May 1918.<sup>2</sup> On 11 May 1918, representatives from the Union of Allied Mountaineers (UAM)/Mountain Government declared independence from Russia in the form of the Republic of the Union of Mountaineers of the North Caucasus and Dagestan (better known as the Mountain Republic), specifically to join the newly established Transcaucasian Federation – only to see the latter disintegrate before this could happen. While it may be tempting to interpret the Mountaineer (*gortsy*) politicians' attempt to join the TDFR simply as an expression of the native North Caucasians' longstanding desire to rid themselves of Russian domination through the creation of an independent, united Caucasian state, the reality was more nuanced and complex.

Firstly, in 1917 the UAM was the most influential political organization among the *gortsy*, and for most of that year it was opposed to administrative unity with Transcaucasia, baring its teeth any time Tiflis tried to extend its jurisdiction northwards. Secondly, at the very moment when the Mountaineer leaders were declaring the independence of the Mountain Republic at the Batumi Peace Conference, which opened on 11 May 1918, their legitimacy as the spokesmen for the indigenous North Caucasians was being challenged by the recently proclaimed Terek People's Republic. The latter asserted that it alone represented the will of the *gortsy* masses, who allegedly opposed separation from Soviet Russia and considered the politicians in Batumi to be traitors and swindlers.<sup>3</sup> Given these factors, this article begins by examining why the UAM resisted unity with Transcaucasia in 1917 and the question of which entity, the pro-Soviet Terek People's Republic or the separatist Mountain Republic, better reflected the political will of the indigenous North Caucasians during the hazy period of the first stirrings of the Russian Civil War in the Caucasus. It then concludes with a reconstruction of the Mountaineer politicians' efforts to form a regional confederation with Transcaucasia in spring 1918.

### March–December 1917: self-assertion

Tsar Nicholas II's abdication on 2 March 1917 created a power vacuum in the old Russian Empire. At this time the prevailing view in Russian society was that political legitimacy rested in the people's will and this could best be expressed through the popular election of delegates to a representative body – the Constituent Assembly – which would gather to vote on the structure of a new state and government for Russia and resolve other pressing issues such as land reform. The Provisional Government set up to replace the tsarist administration was meant to be an interim government tasked with organizing the Constituent Assembly and managing the country until it could convene. While generally accepted as Russia's central authority, the Provisional Government was simultaneously considered by many to be a tool of the propertied classes and *intelligentsia*. Thus, the Petrograd Soviet and its associated network of local soviets (councils) emerged as an alternative but fairly cooperative authority structure for the underprivileged and revolutionary elements.

This pattern of *dvoevlastie* (dual-power) in Russia's capital was reflected throughout the country, including the Caucasus, where the region's ethnic and religious diversity added layers of complexity. To replace the Caucasian Viceroyalty, the Provisional Government appointed commissars to the region. The Special Transcaucasian Commission (*Ozakom*) was established for Transcaucasia and Dagestan, and individual commissars were also appointed to the Dagestan, Terek and Kuban *oblasts* (regions) and to the Black Sea Governorate. However, these commissars lacked clout and had to work with local forces to accomplish anything. In the Caucasus, the *oblast' ispolkoms* (executive committees) and city dumas which appeared in the wake of the March events reflected coalitions of elite groups, including socialist representatives. Lacking popular legitimacy in the strict sense, they were nevertheless viewed as temporarily authoritative and had the approval of the Provisional Government (Oreshin 2015, 82–87). A network of soviets also appeared in the region. In Transcaucasia, the Tiflis and regional soviets tended to dominate the political scene and represented a broad swath of the population. In the North Caucasus, soviets appealed mainly to the *inogorodnye* (non-native, non-

Cossack residents, usually settlers from inner Russia). The soviets were comparatively weak in the Terek and Dagestan *oblasts* because there were fewer *inogorodnye* in those regions than Cossacks and *gortsy*.

### **The Mountaineers organize**

The Terek Cossacks and native Mountaineers began organizing their political life with great enthusiasm (Borisenko 1930, vol. I: 112, 155–156; vol. II: 31–32; Oreshin 2015, 79–87; Perović 2018, 106–107; Takho-Gody 1927, 1–5). The small Mountaineer *intelligentsia* was remarkably proactive, excited about the chance for the *gortsy* to finally enjoy political representation in a democratic Russia. On 5–6 March, a group of professionals and scions met in Vladikavkaz to form the Union of Allied Mountaineers Provisional Executive Committee. The Vladikavkaz Committee's first act was to demand representation on the Terek *oblast' ispolkom*. Its members then helped organize elections to the smaller *okrug ispolkomy*, which, thanks to the pattern of population distribution, took on the character of national councils for the different *gortsy* nationalities. Over the following months, in the Terek *oblast'* the Vladikavkaz Committee cooperated closely with the Provisional Government's appointed commissar, *oblast' ispolkom* and elected Terek Cossack Ataman Mikhail Karaulov. Working with the *okrug* (district) *ispolkoms*, the committee also organized democratic elections to the First Mountain Congress held in May (Karmov 2014, 7–9, 54; Korenev 1967, 66–67; Muzaev 2012, 10–16, 18–28, 40–42, 405–408; Sheripov 1990, 125–126).<sup>4</sup>

It was at the First Mountain Congress (1–7 May 1917) that the Union of Allied Mountaineers of the North Caucasus and Dagestan (UAM) was formally established with the adoption of its preliminary constitution. The UAM was not created as a political party or an administrative authority, but rather it was envisaged as a decentralized political organization for defending the collective and individual interests of the mountain peoples during the confusion of the revolution and process of establishing a new democratic order in Russia. At the First Mountain Congress, the delegates elected a permanent Central Committee to handle the management of the UAM, pursue its declared aims and ensure harmony among its members – no small task considering the UAM's highly decentralized structure and the UAM Central Committee's lack of coercive power (Muzaev 2012, 92–93, 433–434).

### **“Decentralists” vs. “centralists”**

One of the main responsibilities given to the UAM Central Committee was implementing the union's political programme, which called for cooperation with other parties and organizations in Russia that favoured the fallen empire's reconstitution as a federation wherein each sovereign national group would enjoy maximum political (including judicial and economic) autonomy on its own lands. Being proponents of national-territorial autonomy, the UAM leaders were “decentralists” as opposed to “centralists”, who – broadly speaking – wanted to see Russia as a unitary state rather than a federation and opposed administrative decentralization along national-territorial lines. In their effort to cooperate with other decentralists, at the all-Russia level, the UAM representatives joined the Petrograd Bureau of Federalists, where they worked alongside Ukrainian

Social Democrats, Polish socialists and Georgian Socialist-Federalists. In the North Caucasus, the UAM Central Committee worked closely with the Terek Cossack Ataman Mikhail Karaulov not only because the union's leading members believed that doing so would help maintain order and prevent ethnic conflict between the settler and native populations but also because Karaulov shared aspects of their political vision and showed a steady respect for the *gortsy* right to self-determination.<sup>5</sup>

In the Caucasus region, the UAM, Azerbaijani Musavat Party and Georgian National Democrats and Socialist-Federalists constituted an informal and mutually supportive bloc of “decentralists”. It was the “centralists”, however, who dominated the political scene in Transcaucasia, a loose alliance of Social-Democrats (mainly Georgian Mensheviks), Socialist Revolutionaries (mostly Russian soldiers), the Dashnaktsutyun (Armenian nationalists with a socialist veneer) and other smaller parties.<sup>6</sup> During most of 1917, the Caucasian decentralists wanted full political autonomy for each nation on its own defined territory within a Russian federation voluntarily constructed from below to above. They also thought each nation should have direct ties to a weak federal centre without an intermediate regional level, in order to concentrate the maximum possible authority at the national level. By winter 1917, the destabilization of the political situation in Russia prompted Caucasian decentralists to begin considering an independent regional confederation without Russia (*ert'oba* 1918a; Karmov 2014, 55–56, 79–82, 95–98; Jones 2005, 249–259; Muzaev 2012, 47, 272; *sak'art'velo* 1917a, 1917b, 1917c, 1917d, 1917e, 1917f, 1917g, 1917h).<sup>7</sup> In contrast, centralists in the Caucasus – regardless of their position on other issues – generally wanted to see Russia as a unitary state with a relatively strong centre that could implement reforms from the top down and enforce security. They also favoured regional autonomy, broad local self-governance – which in certain areas could even correspond to ethnic settlement patterns – and cultural and linguistic autonomy (*ert'oba* 1917a, 1917b, 1917c; *Kavkazskoe slovo* 1917a; *Molot* 1917a, 1917b, 1917c; *sak'art'velo* 1917i; *Znamia truda* 1917a, 1917b, 1917c, 1917d). After the Bolshevik coup in Russia, it was centralists who took the lead in declaring regional autonomy for Transcaucasia, but this was considered a practical measure and not a move towards separatism (Karagëzian 2015, 46).

### ***The Mountain leaders and Transcaucasian authorities in Tiflis***

Although in 1917 the Mountain leaders cultivated close and friendly ties with the South Caucasian decentralists, they had a strained relationship with the *Ozakom* and the revolutionary Tiflis and regional soviets effectively controlling the *Ozakom* (Karagëzian 2015, 45–46; Kazemzadeh 2008, 37–38; Jones 2005, 252–254). This tension stemmed at least in part from a combination of disagreements over the boundaries of Transcaucasia's administrative jurisdiction and the *gortsy* taking offense at what they perceived to be an imperious and condescending attitude on the part of Tiflis. There are several incidents that illustrate this claim. In each case, Tiflis attempted to expand its jurisdiction into the North Caucasus and the UAM leaders would react by complaining about such mistrustful treatment or threatening to retaliate. In May 1917, for example, the *Ozakom* issued a decree for disarmament that led to a power struggle in Dagestan (where there were two commissars, one appointed by the Provisional Government and one by the *Ozakom*). The UAM Central Committee accused the *Ozakom* of adopting the old

regime's distrustful attitude towards Muslims and declared the *gortsy* would rather give up their souls than their guns in such dangerous times when soldiers could assault them at any time. The committee then announced that after trying very hard to get the *Ozakom* to listen to it, it had finally given up on the *Ozakom* "hearing its voice" and would have to ask the Russian authorities to look into the matter (Muzaev 2012, 32–33, 107–109, 428–430; *sak'art'velo* 1917j). As another example, in reaction to the late-August Kornilov affair, Georgian Social-Democrats (Mensheviks) spearheaded the creation of the ephemeral Provisional Caucasian Revolutionary Committee (*Revkom*), which presumptuously declared itself the highest authority on both sides of the Caucasus mountain range (Hovannisian 1967, 83–85; Jones 2005, 273–275; Muzaev 2012, 207–210; *sak'art'velo* 1917k, 1917l, 1917m, 1917n). The Mountaineers rejected the *Revkom*, calling it "a contradiction of the democratic principle of administrative decentralization" that exceeded the bounds of Georgian Menshevik authority and ignored the fact that the political life of the *gortsy* was managed entirely by the UAM. The UAM Central Committee also stated that it perceived in the *Revkom* "an element of distrust towards the democratic organizations in the North Caucasus" (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 202–206). The UAM's friends among the Georgian National Democrats picked up on these tensions, reproaching the Mensheviks for failing to pay the Mountain leadership due regard and for meddling in the Caucasian Muslims' internal affairs (*ert'oba* 1918a; *sak'art'velo* 1917o).<sup>8</sup>

### **The Provisional Mountain Government and TerDag**

Attempts by Tiflis to impose control over the North Caucasus were arguably motivated by valid concerns about the incremental deterioration of the security situation there. But the Transcaucasian politicians were misguided in their aim to supplant rather than reinforce the UAM's own persistent efforts to maintain peace and order during the summer and early fall of 1917. After the so-called October Revolution, the UAM formalised its membership in the Southeastern Union of Cossack Hosts, Caucasian Mountaineers and Free Peoples of the Steppes. The Southeastern Union was a federative union whose *raison d'être* was to fend off "anarchy", i.e. disturbances incited by the radical left, and fight for the creation of a Russian federation. In a move similar to the formation of the Transcaucasian Commissariat (*Zavkom*) and its assumption of governmental authority within the bounds of Transcaucasia in mid-November 1917 as a response to the Bolshevik coup, the UAM declared autonomy in the form of the Provisional Mountain Government in early December, at once uniting with the Terek Cossack Krug in the federative Provisional Terek-Dagestani Government, or TerDag (Kosok 1955; Osmanov 2013, 39–40, 42–45, 57; *sak'art'velo* 1917o, 1917p, 1917q, 1917r, 1917s, 1917t, 1917u, 1917v, 1917w, 1917x, 1917y).<sup>9</sup>

Like Russia's Provisional Government, the TerDag was envisaged as a temporary government tasked with organizing an *oblast'* constituent assembly. Unfortunately, the alliance the UAM leaders made with the Cossack ruling circles backfired. Many rank-and-file Terek Cossacks accused Ataman Karaulov and his circle of betraying their property interests in favour of the supposedly counter-revolutionary *gortsy*, and, so this thinking went, these rebellious Cossacks started teaming up with the Bolsheviks – whose ranks were swelling with deserters from the Caucasus Front – in a plan to eliminate Chechen and Ingush "banditry" forever. Moreover, the once excellent relations enjoyed in the

spring and summer of 1917 between the *inogorodnye* and *gortsy* had soured by December, so frightened settlers and workers started joining the Cossacks and Bolsheviks in military-revolutionary committees (Muzaev 2012, 306–316; *sak'art'velo* 1917w, 1917z; *Vol'nyi gorets* 1919a, 1919b; Wade 2017, 75). Despite these developments, and growing dissent inside the UAM and Mountain Government, the TerDag continued to resist Transcaucasian interference. In mid-December, the Kumyk Rashid-khan Kaplanov, TerDag “foreign minister” and head of the Mountain Government, informed the newly created Transcaucasian Commissariat that

The Terek-Dagestani Government thinks both governments [Zavkom and TerDag] must work together and that neither should try to subjugate the other. One government must not intervene in the other's internal affairs as this will only make it impossible to achieve the intended goals. Any sort of disharmony will make it impossible to send bread to Transcaucasia and delay demobilization (*sak'art'velo*1917aa).

The record shows that throughout 1917 the Mountaineer leadership demonstrated a consistent willingness to cooperate with its neighbours to the north and south (Reynolds 2008). But at the same time it repudiated the imposition of any kind of subordinate relationship and was disconcerted by the centralist tendencies and perceived imperiousness of the Transcaucasian authorities. Indeed, Karaulov's sensitivity to the UAM's insistence on the *gortsy* right to self-determination goes a long way towards explaining why the union's Central Committee preferred working with him (and the Southeastern Union) over the *Ozakom* or the soviet authorities in Transcaucasia (Karmov 2014, 55–56). As Haidar Bammate, who served as the UAM representative in Tiflis, later recalled, Karaulov was the driving force behind the Mountaineers' inclusion in the Southeastern Union, “the most remarkable member of the Union”, and the heart of the TerDag (Bammate 1919, 23). Karaulov's disgraceful murder by a gang of soldiers on 13 December deprived the Mountaineers of their greatest Cossack ally and prompted a strategic reorientation towards the south (Muzaev 2012, 311).<sup>10</sup> Within days, the Provisional Mountain Government authorized Haidar Bammate to enter into contact and discussion with the Georgian and Armenian National Councils (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 206).

## December 1917–April 1918: seeking unity

### *The turn towards Transcaucasia and Mozdok Congress*

Although Karaulov's death precipitated the Mountain leadership's turn towards Transcaucasia, this about-face was facilitated by the so-called “nationalizing” of the revolution in Transcaucasia. After the October coup, the Transcaucasian Commissariat (Zavkom) was formed at the initiative of the Georgian Menshevik leader Noe Zhordania to function as a body of state authority until order could be restored in Russia. The Zavkom replaced the *Ozakom* and the Public Safety Committee (which had replaced the *Revkom*) and was more inclusive of the Azerbaijani Musavatists, who were sympathetic to the UAM (Kazemzadeh 2008, 57; *sak'art'velo* 1917bb). Meanwhile, national councils were gaining prominence in Transcaucasia. Armenians had chosen their national council in October 1917 (Hovannisian 1967, 86–93; *sak'art'velo* 1917cc, 1917dd). And in November, Georgian Menshevik leaders entered into a Georgian National Council alongside representatives from the Georgian parties demanding national-territorial autonomy (“Alionists”, a



subset of Georgian Mensheviks wanting national-territorial autonomy for Georgia; Socialist-Federalists and National Democrats).<sup>11</sup> Crucially, the Georgian National Council's deputy chairman, the prominent Menshevik Akaki Chkhenkeli, also had a history of favouring national-territorial self-governance (*alioni* 1917a, 1917b; Kazemzadeh 2008, 57; Jones 2005, 230–232, 260–262, 274, 279; Rayfield 2012, 325; *sak'art'velo* 1917ee, 1917ff, 1917gg, 1917hh).

The Georgian National Council proved sympathetic to the Provisional Mountain Government, greeting the news of its inception with applause and a congratulatory telegram (*sak'art'velo* 1917ii, 1917jj), and Bammate's efforts there appear to have produced some favourable results. On 15 January 1918, the Zavkom met to discuss whom to invite as negotiating partners to the imminent peace talks with the Ottomans. The majority present wanted to ask the Southeastern Union and Ukrainian Rada. But Chkhenkeli adopted a regional stance and proposed the Kuban and Terek-Dagestani Governments be invited instead. Chkhenkeli argued that the Southeastern Union was a fiction and Ukraine too distant to have a stake. He said that

the Caucasus can answer only for itself ... Our own Caucasian nationalities are responsible on the Caucasus Front. And if all of the nationalities here united, things would already not be so bad. The misfortune is that we are not unified.

His proposal was unanimously rejected because the Zavkom as a whole still clung to the idea of Russia (*Dokumenty* 1919, 29–35; Karagëzian 2015, 46–47).

But Akaki Chkhenkeli was right. The Southeastern Union simply passed the invitation along to the Kuban and Terek-Dagestani governments. Meanwhile, as the Zavkom waited in vain for a response from Ukraine, the First Congress of the Peoples of the Terek *Oblast'* gathered in Mozdok on 25–31 January 1918 (*Dokumenty* 1919, 40, 71). This congress reflected the shift leftward that had occurred throughout Russia after October and the fears and needs of the *oblast's* settler and disadvantaged populations. Considering the Mozdok Congress was convened by an alliance of disgruntled Terek Cossacks and Bolshevik agitators in order to obtain a “mandate” for a “war of annihilation” against the Chechens and Ingush, the congress could not possibly represent *gortsy* interests (Marshall 2009, 207). The presence of some pro-Bolshevik Ossetians and a contingent of unelected Kabardians and Balkars hoping for support in their struggle against the Nalchik *okrug ispolkom* fails to alter this fact.

The Mozdok Congress did, however, strengthen the position of leftists in the *oblast'*. The Socialist Bloc, an alliance between moderate socialists and a small contingent of Bolsheviks (most notably Sergey Kirov), sought to use the Congress as a springboard for replacing the “counter-revolutionary” TerDag with its own “revolutionary” government. To accomplish this, the bloc needed to redirect rising aggressions away from “toilers” of any ethnicity and towards the propertied elements and *intelligentsia* theretofore monopolizing local power (in the Terek Cossack Krug, UAM/Mountain Government and TerDag). It also had to solve the main source of ethnic tensions in the *oblast'*: unfair land distribution. At Mozdok, the Socialist Bloc achieved its first goal when it pushed a proposal through to dispatch peace delegations to the Ingush and Chechens to invite them to a follow-up congress in Pyatigorsk to discuss land redistribution (King 1987, 240–263; *Vol'nyi gorets*” 1919c, 1919d, 1919e).



### *The Pyatigorsk Congress and growing Soviet power*

The Socialist Bloc was aware that for the Pyatigorsk Congress (16 February–15 March 1918) to be perceived as authoritative, each of the *oblast's* national groups must send a delegation. And as it was widely understood that the Mozdok Congress had not been representative, the actions of the Socialist Bloc sparked a struggle for political legitimacy in the *oblast'*. The TerDag declared the Mozdok Congress illegitimate, scheduling 15 March as the date for elections to the *oblast'* constituent assembly promised earlier. Although the Terek Cossack Krug leaders formally backed the TerDag, a contingent of rebellious Cossacks went to Pyatigorsk. Meanwhile, the *gortsy* held national assemblies to decide whether or not to participate. The Ossetians' Fifth Congress repudiated the TerDag and agreed to accept the Pyatigorsk Congress – but only until the *oblast'* constituent assembly could convene. Representing a besieged population, the Chechen National Council agreed to send a delegation to Pyatigorsk under certain conditions. However, these conditions were not met since negotiations soon broke down due to Cossack intransigence, the council leadership's distrust of Cossack peace overtures, and the opposition of Uzun Haji, who decided to attack Khasav-yurt and apparently expected reinforcements from Turkey. A group of dissenters calling themselves the "Party of Peace" then unilaterally dispatched Aslanbek Sheripov to Pyatigorsk. The presence of one Chechen at Pyatigorsk could hardly signify the agreement of the entire nation, but it did mark a new split in Chechen society. The Ingush too were besieged, facing hunger and bracing for attacks from their Cossack and Ossetian neighbours. Therefore, they held a national assembly and made the prudent decision to send a delegation to Pyatigorsk. A large delegation of Kabardians and Balkars also attended the congress, but there was no representation from Dagestan (King 1987, 277–301; Korenev 1967, 117–134; Muzaev 2012, 384–394; *sak 'art 'velo* 1917kk; *Vol'nyi gorets*" 1920c).

The Pyatigorsk Congress opened on 16 February 1918, the same day that the Zavkom and Transcaucasian *Seim* (parliament) voted to negotiate with the Ottomans and conclude peace on the basis of restoring the Russia-Turkey frontier to its pre-war status and securing autonomy for the Armenians in Turkey.<sup>12</sup> On 17 February, the *Seim* chose Akaki Chkhenkeli to lead the planned peace delegation to Trabzon, only to discover that the Bolsheviks had already ceded Ardahan, Kars and Batumi to the Ottomans at Brest-Litovsk (Avalishvili 1940, 27; *Dokumenty* 1919, 83–85, 107; Kazemzadeh 2008, 90). Meanwhile, as the Pyatigorsk Congress continued its work, on 28 February Vasan Girey Dzhabagi, in the capacity of Mountain Government vice-chairman, authorized Tapa Chermoev (Chechen), Haidar Bammate, Zubair Temirkhanov and Magomet-Kadi Dibirov (Dagestanis) to do everything possible to forge closer ties with the Transcaucasian government and determine if the Ottomans would support an independent Caucasian state, authorizing them to go so far as to separate from Russia and join Transcaucasia in the name of the Mountain Government (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 206–207; Reynolds 2008, 237).<sup>13</sup>

Back in Pyatigorsk, the land-starved *gortsy* and *inogorodnye* factions started teaming up against the Cossack contingent in favour of land and resource redistribution at the Cossacks' expense. This reconfiguration contributed to a victory for the radical leftists at the Congress (Bolsheviks, left-SRs and Menshevik-Internationalists), who overcame the moderate socialists' objections to recognizing Soviet Russia's government, the Council of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*), and demands for an *oblast'* constituent assembly.

The left extremists were opposed to popular elections (four-tail franchise) in the localities, but they seem to have conceded to *gortsy* demands to permit this “where desired”. The Congress then declared the Terek *oblast’* to be an inseparable part of Soviet Russia and elected an *oblast’* soviet which, in turn, chose commissars (none of whom were moderate socialists, and from among the *gortsy* one Ossetian and one Ingush) for an *oblast’* council of people’s commissars. The Terek People’s Republic was then proclaimed on 9 March 1918 in Vladikavkaz (King 1987, 310–372, 386; Korenev 1967, 135–168; *Vol’nyi gorets’* 1919f).

The self-selected radical *gortsy* delegations then returned to their communities to organize Soviet power. The Kabardian and Balkar delegates organized a people’s congress which elected a soviet headed by a Russian Bolshevik, a move triggering conflict with the Nalchik *okrug ispolkom* and more inter-ethnic conflict over land claims (*Vol’nyi gorets’* 1920a, 1920b). In Chechnya, the national council split over whether to send delegates to the Third Terek Peoples’ Congress scheduled for May in Grozny. The majority faction rejected Soviet power, casting its hopes on Turkey and the Terek Cossack *Krug*, which had regained some clout after the Cossack dissidents’ debacle at Pyatigorsk. The Sixth Ossetian Congress did formally recognize the new Soviet power on the Terek, but Ossetian society was rapidly fracturing and a split between supporters of the pro-Bolshevik Kermen Party and a powerful pro-Cossack faction soon led to a summer of joint Ossetian-Cossack warfare against the Terek People’s Republic (Korenev 1967, 169–179). As for the Ingush National Council, it outwardly recognized the new Soviet government in the *oblast’* while its head, Vasan Girey Dzhabagi, doggedly pursued the goals of the Mountain Government.

### **Promoting unity at the Trabzon Peace Conference**

With the Kabardians, Balkars, Ossetians and Chechens internally divided, the Ingush ambivalent and the Dagestanis unrepresented, the Terek People’s Republic reflected at best the aspirations of a fraction of the *gortsy* population incited by Bolshevik promises of land and self-rule to oppose the indigenous authorities, who – however unpopular they may have become – had at least initially obtained their status through democratic elections and were acting in the best interests of their people as they understood them rather than in a cynical bid to preserve their privileges, as the Bolsheviks and other radicals persistently alleged. It was against this backdrop of looming civil war that the Mountaineer delegation arrived at the Trabzon Peace Conference (Kazharov 2018). Here the native politicians won the favour of the Ottomans, who saw the *gortsy* as a useful buffer against Bolshevik Russia. In a gesture of goodwill towards Georgia, the North Caucasians and Transcaucasian Muslims tried to convince the Ottomans to let Georgians keep Batumi, but the Ottoman War Minister Enver Pasha refused, and Chkhenkeli, having tried his best to convince the *Seim* that Transcaucasia could not possibly withstand Ottoman forces, finally took the independent decision on 28 March 1918 to accept the terms of the Brest-Litovsk treaty (*Dokumenty* 1919, 151, 159–160; Reynolds 2008, 237–238; Reynolds 2011, 201–203).

On one hand, the decentralists – North Caucasian Mountaineers, some Transcaucasian Muslims, and Georgian Socialist-Federalists and National Democrats – welcomed Chkhenkeli’s decision (Bammate 1991, 12; Kazemzadeh 2008, 103; Vashakidze 2019).

As Aleksandre Asatiani argued in the Georgian nationalist paper *sak'artvelo* (April 4, 1918), Georgia was too weak to defend its territory alone and therefore should make peace with the Ottomans and form an independent political union with the Caucasian Muslims. The *Seim*, on the other hand, was dominated by parties that imagined separation from Russia to be a great misfortune, and prominent Mensheviks starting screaming it would be better to die in battle than relinquish any territory or betray the revolution. Reflecting this quixotism, on 1 April 1918 the *Seim* reversed Chkhenkeli's decision, recalling his delegation to Tiflis and declaring war on the Ottomans (Bammate 1919, 28; Bammate 1991, 10–13; *Dokumenty* 1919, 163–166, 184; Kazemzadeh 2008, 101–103; Reynolds 2008, 238; Reynolds 2009, 159; *sak'art'velo* 1918a).

Upon receiving this news, Bammate expressed the Mountain Government's "profound satisfaction" with Chkhenkeli's stance and admitted that the *Seim* had placed the *gortsy* in a difficult position. He then underscored the Mountain Government's view that Transcaucasia was unviable as an independent state without the North Caucasus and reaffirmed its commitment to "reuniting" the region (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 208–209). After a stopover in Batumi, Mountaineer and Muslim representatives, accompanied by a Georgian nationalist, sailed to Constantinople for an audience with the Sultan. Meanwhile, the Turks seized Batumi and Kars before again proposing peace. On 9 April 1918 the *Seim* finally saw reason and declared independence from Russia in the form of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR). Chkhenkeli became the new head of government (Avalishvili 1940, 24, 28; Chesnais 1921, 47; *Dokumenty* 1919, 199–203; Kazemzadeh 2008, 102–105; Reynolds 2008, 238; *sak'art'velo* 1918b).

## April-May 1918: still seeking unity

### *The Batumi Peace Conference and declaration of independence from Russia*

Hostilities ceased by 12 April 1918 (Avalishvili 1940, 28–29). On 14 April, Vehib Pasha, the Chief Commander of the Turkish Front, reportedly informed Chkhenkeli that the Mountain Government had declared independence in Constantinople and its representatives were coming with the Ottoman delegation to Batumi, where they planned to take steps to unite with the TDFR (*Terskii Krai* 1918a). On 15 April, the Ottomans recognized the new Transcaucasian republic (Kazemzadeh 2008, 108; Hovannisian 1967, 172). In response, on 16 April, E. Bogdanov, the chairman of the Terek People's Soviet, sent a telegram to the new Transcaucasian government in which he characterized Chermoev and company as imposters, adventurers and swindlers lacking popular support and also criticized the TDFR for "dragging" the North Caucasus into its separatist act. The next day, Chkhenkeli's government met to discuss this telegram and then declared it had no intention of taking over any part of the North Caucasus although it would welcome the desire of the *authorized representatives* of the Dagestan and Terek *Oblasts* to unite on a federative basis (author's emphasis; Mamoulia et al. 2015, 215–216).

This exchange highlights the fact that Chkhenkeli's government considered the Mountain Government, not the Terek People's Republic, as authorized to represent the native North Caucasians. Perhaps alluding to the Bolshevik-leaning Terek Republic's essentially *inogorodnye* character, on 8 May 1918 Bammate asked permission for himself and three

other representatives of the “indigenous peoples’ government” to be admitted to the Batumi Peace Conference (AUPChR 1918, 1). When the Transcaucasian delegation met on 9 May to discuss this request, the major questions were:

- (1) Whether the Mountain Government had actually declared independence in Istanbul;
- (2) Whether it must do so to join the peace negotiations; and
- (3) If the delegation would participate separately or together with the Transcaucasians.

It was clarified at this meeting that the Mountain leaders had not yet declared independence but would need to do so in order to petition to join the TDFR; in the meantime, though, they would be allowed to participate in the peace conference as a separate delegation (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 213–224).

The Mountain and Transcaucasian governments both wanted guarantees of external support before taking the risk of political unification. Bammate made this clear when he asserted that “the moment of the unification of two independent states is, unconditionally, a moment demanding international sanction”. The Georgian nationalist Niko Nikoladze, accompanying the Transcaucasian delegation as an advisor, agreed, saying,

Unification is not only an internal matter. It is so important and dangerous that we need an external guarantee. We should not unite without outside help. And not one Georgian can place on his Motherland the responsibility for unification with the North Caucasus without the certainty of a guarantee that no one will attack us.

Chkhenkeli likewise stated,

The question of the recognition of the independence of the North Caucasus must be submitted at the conference. There is also the question of unification in the future, but before expressing this it is necessary to first obtain assurances at the conference about questions surrounding guarantees. (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 213–224)

Chkhenkeli straightaway informed the Ottomans that the Transcaucasians found no obstacle to the representatives of the “indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus and Dagestan” taking part in the conference, and on 10 May Bammate formally asked Chkhenkeli for the answer to his previous letter regarding the UAM representatives’ admission. That same day, General von Lossow, the chairman of the German delegation, informed Chkhenkeli that the Germans had no objection to the Mountaineers’ participation, as long as they first separated from Russia. Thus pushed by the Germans, and having received similar advice from the Turks, Chermoev and Bammate declared the independence of the Republic of the Union of Mountaineers of the North Caucasus and Dagestan on 11 May 1918. Chkhenkeli now notified Bammate that the Transcaucasian delegation agreed to the Mountaineers’ joining the conference, a fact formalised in the opening session that afternoon (AUPChR 1918, 1 & 2; *Dokumenty* 1919, 312–316; Mamoulia et al. 2015, 225–230; Vachagaev 2018, 65).

### **Proposal for unification with the TDFR**

Meanwhile, the Ottomans began demanding additional territory around the Kars-Alexandropol-Culfa Railroad and threatening to advance towards Tiflis. They claimed the

Transcaucasians had, by declaring war, forfeited the opportunity to limit their losses (Kazemzadeh 2008, 110; Reynolds 2009, 163–164; Reynolds 2011, 206–208). It was in these conditions that Bammate and Chermoev sent Chkhenkeli an official telegram on 13 May 1918 informing him that the Mountaineers had declared independence. On 13 May, Bammate sent another note to Chkhenkeli inquiring about the possibility of unification with Transcaucasia (AUPChR 1918, 1). The note informing the RSFSR authorities of the Mountaineers' independence declaration was sent via the head of the German mission to Moscow, Count Wilhelm von Mirbach (soon thereafter assassinated by extremist SRs) (Pipes 1996, 179–185; Mamoulia et al. 2015, 231). On 17 May, von Lossow notified Bammate that he had informed the German government of the Mountaineers' political aspirations. On the same day, he told Bammate and Chkhenkeli that Germany's government could not recognize the TDFR's independence until Russia did but that it was willing to mediate between Russia and the TDFR towards obtaining this recognition and would undoubtedly take the same view towards the Mountain Republic as towards Transcaucasia (AUPChR 1918, 3).

If unification was a matter of time, time was running out. On 18 May 1918, von Lossow offered to mediate between the Transcaucasian and Ottoman delegations since negotiations had stalled thanks to the Turks' advancement deeper into Transcaucasia (Kazemzadeh 2008, 113). On 19 May, the Transcaucasian delegation accepted the General's offer for mediation and Bammate appealed to the Ottomans for the military assistance promised earlier (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 233–234). Apparently receiving a positive response, on 20 May Bammate asked Chkhenkeli for permission to transport weapons, military equipment and a cadre of instructors from Batumi to Tiflis by rail, and from there to Vladikavkaz by road (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 235–236). Chkhenkeli did not respond to this question right away, but he did finally give Bammate a formal reply regarding the possibility of creating a united Caucasian state. It read:

In response to your telegram of 13 May of this year, I have the honor of informing you that the government of the Transcaucasian Republic fully shares in principle the opinion of Your government regarding the necessity, in view of the common political and economic interests of Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus, of establishing between the Transcaucasian Republic and the Union of the Peoples of the North Caucasus the necessary alliances through the creation of a single and *confederated* whole [emphasis added] (AUPChR, 1).

That same day, von Lossow also informed Bammate that the German government had expressed willingness to urge Moscow to recognize the Mountain Republic's declaration of independence. Regarding territory, the Germans agreed that while the republic should include the Terek and Dagestan *Oblasts*, the Kuban *Oblast'* would have to remain an open question (AUP ChR, 1).

Meanwhile, the Turks were advancing in the direction of Tiflis, and on 24 May 1918 von Lossow informed the Transcaucasian delegation that they had rejected his offer to mediate (Kazemzadeh 2008, 114–117; Reynolds 2011, 209–210). That same day, German and Georgian representatives reached an agreement regarding the opportunity for Georgia to obtain German support against Ottoman incursions if Georgia would declare independence from the TDFR (Kazemzadeh 2008, 119). On 25 May, before setting sail for Poti, von Lossow let Bammate know that Chkhenkeli had said that once the situation was clarified he planned to meet with Bammate to make an

agreement on arms transport through Georgia to the North Caucasus and that any such agreement would “have the full sympathy” of the German government (Mamoulia et al. 2015, 238).

On 26 May 1918, Khalil Bey issued an ultimatum demanding that the TDFR accept all previous territorial demands and relinquish the Nakhichevan district. Chkhenkeli had seventy-two hours to acquiesce. Having been encouraged by the Germans, Georgia responded by declaring independence in defiance of the Ottomans, forcing Azerbaijan and Armenia to follow suit on 28 May. Although the UAM politicians had dexterously managed to win the Transcaucasian, Ottoman and German representatives over to their point of view, they now lost their bid to safeguard the Mountaineers’ right to national self-determination against the growing Soviet menace by way of forming a regional confederation with Transcaucasia.

## Conclusion

After the February Revolution, the primary concern of the Mountaineer political leadership was to defend the native North Caucasians’ right to self-determination within the new Russian democracy. Committed to the principle of administrative decentralization, the Union of Allied Mountaineers and its offshoot the Provisional Mountain Government staunchly opposed attempts by authorities in Tiflis to extend their jurisdiction over Transcaucasia into the North Caucasus. However, when Soviet power began encroaching into Mountain territory, the *gortsy* leaders turned to pursue unification with Transcaucasia. This policy shift was encouraged by the fact that the UAM’s allies among the Transcaucasian Muslim and Georgian decentralists (nationalists and federalists) now had a stronger say in politics south of the range and these too welcomed the idea of a regional confederation that would serve mainly as a military alliance while still allowing individual nations to retain full internal autonomy.

On 11 May 1918, UAM representatives declared the independence of the Mountain Republic specifically to pave the way towards confederation with the TDFR and to participate in the Batumi Peace Conference, where they hoped to obtain the external guarantees necessary for national independence and Caucasian confederation. This act provoked condemnation from the rising Soviet power in the Terek *Oblast’*, which catered mainly to the *inogorodnye* population but also radicalized Cossacks and *gortsy*. Considering the Terek People’s Republic was not established through universal, equal, secret and direct elections and its appearance caused fractures within different national groups, it could not represent the collective will of the *gortsy*. Nor did it represent the *gortsy* majority since Dagestan and most of Chechnya rejected it alongside the head of the Ingush National Council and the Nalchik *okrug ispolkom*. Even so, the Terek People’s Republic was a powerful rival which served as the harbinger of civil war in the North Caucasus. If in the chaos of revolution and civil war neither republic could be considered strictly legitimate, the Mountain Republic was still more than a “fantasy state” concocted by a few adventurers (Marshall 2010, 71). It was a project initiated by democratically elected indigenous politicians with a record of defending the native North Caucasians’ right to political self-determination. Whereas in 1917 the defence of the right to national self-determination meant preparing for the Constituent Assembly and cooperating with other organizations favouring national-territorial autonomy in a democratic federative Russia, in spring 1918 it required



declaring independence from Bolshevik Russia and trying to form a regional confederation with the help of outside powers.

### Note on literature and sources

In the English-language literature, Michael Reynold's article "Native Sons" (2008) is the sole existing study of the Union of Allied Mountaineers. The UAM and Mountain Republic are also discussed in chapters in histories of the North Caucasus by Jeronim Perović (2018) and Alex Marshall (2010). The Mountaineers receive barely a mention in Firuz Kazemzadeh's *Struggle for Transcaucasia* (2008) or in national histories of Armenia, Azerbaijan or Georgia. In Russian, Timur Muzaev's *Soiuz gortsev* (2012) is the definitive work on the UAM, and Mairbek Vachagaev (2018) recently published a book on the UAM and Mountain Republic that covers the Trabzon and Batumi conferences in some detail. This article presents an original analysis based on material from memoirs, documents and period newspapers. Some of the documents were found in the digital collection of the Archival Administration of the Government of the Chechen Republic and are copies of materials physically located in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Dagestan. However, most are accessible in Muzaev's book and published collections of materials and documents, notably *Gaidar Bammat* by Georges Mamoulia *et al.* Information from the period press, particularly the Georgian nationalist paper *sak'artvelo*, adds a fresh dimension to existing research on the native North Caucasians and their relationship with Transcaucasia during 1917 and early 1918.

### Notes

1. The Bolsheviks switched to New Style (NS) dates in February 1918, but the Old Style (OS) was still used in the Caucasus through late spring 1918. I thus provide OS and NS dates through April 1918, placing the NS date in parentheses, and then switch to NS from May 1918 onward.
2. The term "Mountaineer(s)", a translation of the Russian *gorets* (*gortsy*) or Georgian *mtieli* (*mtielebi*), was used with capitalization in the English-language newspapers published in Georgia in 1919–1920: *The Georgian Mail* and *The Georgian Messenger*.
3. The Congress of Soviets claimed power and approved the Council of People's Commissars, the *Sovnarkom*, on 26 October 1917 (Wade 2017, 240–243).
4. Its sister organization in Petrograd was The Committee of Mountaineers of the North Caucasus.
5. This was demonstrated by his actions over the course of 1917 but he also remarked upon the similarity of their views at the First Mountain Congress in May 1917.
6. At the Baku Congress, a Georgian Socialist-Federalist representative expressed the hope that the Muslims and the Georgians could build a federal republic together (*sak'artvelo*, April 26, 1917). So the Socialist-Federalists were closer to the decentralist bloc, but they criticized the Georgian National Democrats and Social Democrats (Vashakidze 2019). Islamist parties like the *Ittihad* were centralist.
7. This was not a new idea. Nor was it forgotten in 1917. But for most of 1917 decentralists did not think it was realistic as long as Russia was a factor.
8. There were other instances where the Transcaucasian authorities tried to impose control in the North Caucasus such as in July after violent clashes in Vladikavkaz (*sak'artvelo*, July 23, 1917).



9. It may be more accurate to describe the “Bolshevik Revolution” as a “maximalist coup”, a forceful seizure of power by a Bolshevik-led radical left bloc which included left-SRs Menshevik-Internationalists and anarchists (Wade 2017, 208–211, 228–229).
10. The important Chechen sheikh Deni Arsanov was murdered shortly thereafter by Cossacks during a peacemaking attempt (Dukhaev 2016, 290–291).
11. In Georgian, the word *alioni* means “first light of day”.
12. The Seim was a representative body comprised of the delegates originally elected to represent Transcaucasia’s population at Russia’s Constituent Assembly.
13. This appears to be the OS date.

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1. F 243 op. 1 ě.ed.uch. 131 ed.xr. 270 [TSGA RD, f. P-8, op. 3, d. 234, scans 261, 262, 263, 266].
2. F 243 op. 1 ě.ed.uch. 131 ed.xr. 271 [TSGA RD, f. P-8, op. 3, d. 235, scan 247].
3. F 243 op. 1 ě.ed.uch. 131 ed.xr. 272 [TSGA RD, f. P-8, op. 3, d. 236, scan 223].

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- sak'art'velo*. 1917aa. "amier da imier kavkasiis urt'iertoba" (Trans- and Cis-Caucasia's relations) 12 December 1917, is. 270, p. 3.
- sak'art'velo*. 1917bb. "amier kavkasiis axali mt'avroba" (Transcaucasia's new government) 16 November 1917, is. 254, p. 3.
- sak'art'velo*. 1917cc. "somext'a erovnuli sabčo," (Armenians' National Council) 21 October 1917, is. 232, p. 3.
- sak'art'velo*. 1917dd. "somext'a erovnuli sabčos mocodeba" (Appeal of the Armenians' National Council), 3 November 1917, is. 243, p. 3.
- sak'art'velo*. 1917ee. "erovnuli sabčos aḡmasrulebeli komiteti" (National Council's Executive Committee), 28 November 1917, is. 262, p. 3.
- sak'art'velo*. 1917ff. "revoluc'iis nac'ionalizac'ia" (Nationalization of the revolution), 3 December 1917, is. 267, p. 1.
- sak'art'velo*. 1917gg. "Noe jordania da soc'ializmis nac'ionalizac'ia" (Noe Zhordania and the nationalization of socialism), 9 December 1917, is. 268, p. 2 (Geronti K'ok'oze).
- sak'art'velo*. 1917hh. "sak'art'velos erovnuli sabčo" (Georgia's National Council), 21 December 1917, is. 278, p. 3.
- sak'art'velo*. 1917ii. "daḡestan-č'eč'net'i" (Dagestan and Chechnya), 12 December 1917, is. 270, p.1 (Sh. Amirejibi).
- sak'art'velo*. 1917jj. "misasalmebeli depeša mt'ielt'a qrilobas" (Salutatory telegram to the Mountaineers' Congress), 20 December 1917, is. 277, p. 3.
- sak'art'velo*. 1917kk. "t'erg-daḡestnis droebit' mt'avrobis deklarac'ia" (Terek-Dagestan's Provisional Government's declaration), 15 December 1917, is. 273, p. 3.
- sak'art'velo*. 1918a. "erovnuli t'avdac'va", 4 April 1918, is. 72, p. 1 (A. Asatiani).
- sak'art'velo*. 1918b. "sazavo delegac'iis dabruneba" 5 April 1918, is. 73, p. 3.
- Terskii Krai*. 1918a. "Telegrammy" (Telegrams), 17 April 1918, is. 14, p. 1.
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- Znamia truda*. 1917b. "Iz" zhizni partii c.-r." (From the life of the S.R party) 8 April 1917, is. 4, p. 4.
- Znamia truda*. 1917c. "K" postanovke natsional'nago voprosa" (Setting the national question), 9 April 1917, is. 5, p. 2 (N. Berezov").
- Znamia truda*. 1917d. "Rezoliutsii konferentsii (Resolutions of the conference), 11 April 1917, is. 6, p. 3.