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BETWEEN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE AND THE USSR

The independence of Transcaucasia as a socio-political transformation

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Introduction

For those who, like me, grew up in the Soviet Union and were interested in the history of the Russian Civil War period in their native region (in my case, Transcaucasia), it was extremely difficult to have a coherent picture of what was going on at that time. Even a simple restoration of the chronology of events presented a significant problem. There were several reasons for this. Understandably, Soviet historiography was compelled to present a civil war as a class conflict, which in case of Transcaucasia in 1918–21 was especially difficult, since conflicts there looked more like ethnic – rather than class – war. Thus, Soviet historians were forced to focus on and exaggerate the rare instances of class clashes and had to ignore significant ethnic conflicts.

During Nikita Khrushchev's leadership, due to political concessions, a number of authors in veiled form addressed the problems of pre-Soviet inter-ethnic clashes in Transcaucasia. The analysis of the historical process in these works was secondary, while the political component was primary. Their goal was to demonstrate and register in public memory historical injustices, and to provide a certain interpretation to the historical events. Despite these shortcomings, these works put into circulation a number of previously inaccessible documents, they permitted the clarification of chronology, and set the direction for historical debates in the coming decades.

The publication of collections of historical documents, often to commemorate a round date, was also popular. The fortieth anniversaries of the October Revolution and the Sovietisation of the Transcaucasian republics constituted such round dates, falling in 1957, 1960 and 1961 – right in the midst of the Khrushchev thaw spanning from the early 1950s till the early 1960s. The authors of these collections put into circulation documents that two decades previously would have been regarded as anti-Soviet propaganda. For example, the 1959 collection *The Great October Socialist Revolution and the Victory of the Soviet Power in Armenia* published the decision of Azerbaijan to transfer Nagorny Karabakh to Armenia (Elchibekian 1959; Kharmandaryan 1969). The document itself was left without commentary, but it was clear to readers that there had been a decision on the transfer, yet Karabakh remained part of Azerbaijan. The authors of another collection published a practically unknown first constitution of

Abkhazia, from which it followed that Abkhazia was in fact independent of Georgia (Sagaria 1970). Summing up, we can say that for the most part, the Soviet historiography of the Civil War period in Transcaucasia remained descriptive, politicised and non-analytical.

While Western scholars did not experience direct ideological pressure in the same way as their Soviet colleagues they nevertheless operated in an environment conditioned by their socio-educational background, political preferences and dependence on funding. A number of such works focused on the military-political and diplomatic history of Transcaucasia. These works provided a fairly detailed chronology of events and, in contrast to the Soviet works of the same period, they dealt with the themes of inter-ethnic conflicts (Kazemzadeh 1951; Swietochowski 1985). The shortcoming of these works is their excessive focus on military, political, and diplomatic history, with an often complete lack of social developments. Despite the absence of a rigid ideological framework, many Western works of that period were based on the generally accepted axiomatic assumptions that the Bolshevik leadership utilised the method of divide and rule, which limited their interpretation of a number of key decisions.[1]

Within the framework of this chapter, it is simply impossible to cover the entire history of the Civil War in Transcaucasia. Instead, I will try to analyse the socio-political causes that led to precisely this form of conflict, as well as to evaluate the solution to the problem proposed by the Bolsheviks. First, I briefly consider some of the social, ethno-demographic and political changes that occurred in the region in the course of the nineteenth century, which caused the conflicts during the Civil War. Then I provide a brief chronological review of the events of the period 1917–21 and discuss the specificity of the Civil War in Transcaucasia. In conclusion, I will elaborate on the Bolshevik policy to resolve the national animosities in Transcaucasia.

Socio-political pre-determinants of the Civil War period in Transcaucasia

An understanding of the Civil War in Transcaucasia is impossible without considering the political, social and ethnic changes that took place in the region as a result of its conquest by the Russian Empire (see Chapter 7). Over the course of the nineteenth century, changes occurred in Transcaucasia leading to the emergence of a completely new ethno-political situation in the region and to the growth of social and ethnic tensions on the eve of the First World War.

First of all, the Russian policy of integration of the region led to the erosion of the memory of the feudal domains that existed before the accession of the Transcaucasus into the Russian state. This undoubtedly contributed to the integration of the region into the Russian Empire, but at the same time also created prerequisites for the emergence of national identity among large ethnic groups no longer fragmented into the chaotic assembly of kingdoms, principalities and khanates existing prior to the 1820s. By the mid-1860s, the final configuration of the administrative structure of Transcaucasia was established. The region was divided into manageable provinces (Tiflis, Kutaisi, Irevan (Yerevan), Elizavetpol/Elisabethpol, Baku) and a number of regions and districts (Sukhum, Zaqatala/Zakataly, Kars and Batum regions). Economically self-sufficient provinces of imperial Russian Transcaucasia would serve as convenient building blocks for the newly founded states of Transcaucasia at the time of the collapse of the Russian Empire (Saparov 2015).

Significant demographic changes also occurred in the nineteenth century. As a result, the Armenian population acquired an insignificant majority in the Irevan province, which served

as the basis for formation of the independent Republic of Armenia (Suny 1997). In Abkhazia, the abolition of princely rule and the attempt to introduce direct Russian administration led to the uprising of the Abkhaz population, which was suppressed and resulted in the emigration of a significant part of the Abkhaz to Turkey (Müller 1998). A peculiar exchange of populations ensued, between the mountaineers of the Western Caucasus, who were evicted to Ottoman Turkey, and the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire, who moved to the Black Sea coast of Russia (see Chapter 7). In addition to immigration from Turkey, the most significant influx of population into Abkhazia came from the neighbouring Georgian region of Mingrelia. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the demographic situation in Abkhazia changed dramatically and ethnic Abkhaz became a minority in Abkhazia.

Finally, there were significant processes of socio-economic change. Georgian, Muslim and Armenian nobilities gained access to military and administrative positions within the Russian Empire, ensuring their loyalty. The children of local elites received education in Russian and European universities. Students from Transcaucasia studying in Russian and European universities were exposed to the ideas of nationalism and socialism and brought them home. In the 1860s, economic changes began in Transcaucasia, as a result of the exploitation of oil fields in Baku and the construction of the railway connecting Baku to the Black Sea ports. The arrival of capitalism also led to rapid social shifts.

The most noticeable changes occurred in the two main cities of the region. In Tiflis the Armenian bourgeoisie came to occupy a dominant economic position, coinciding with the decline of the Georgian nobility whose economic well-being was associated with land ownership and who could not adapt to the new conditions of the capitalist economy (Gregorian 1972). In Baku, the oil boom led to rapid population growth and the emergence of oil magnates. Here, Russian and European businessmen occupied the dominant positions, followed by Armenian and Muslim Turkic oil magnates. The oil fields led to the emergence of a significant working class in Baku, which was quite heterogeneous. Russian workers were the elite of the working class, occupying qualified positions, followed by Armenian workers, and the Muslim Turkic workers were for the most part represented by unskilled labour (Suny 1972). These patterns of socio-economic stratification coinciding with the ethnic divisions of the population led to the sharpening of ethnic identities and increases in national tensions.

Thus, on the eve of the First World War, the Transcaucasus was a region populated by peoples with strong ethnic identities and socio-economic contradictions. It was a very different region to the one that had become part of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The cataclysm of the First World War and the collapse of the Russian Empire set in motion the accumulated contradictions, resulting in multi-layered, multi-sided conflicts throughout the Civil War era.

A brief chronology of the Civil War in the Caucasus

The fall of tsarism in February 1917 was welcomed south of the Caucasus mountains as well as throughout the Russian Empire. The population was expecting positive changes with the emerging democratisation of the empire. Local elites aspired to receive national autonomy within a new Russia. The new regional government was represented by a Special Transcaucasian Committee (Ozakom).[2] So when in October 1917 the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government it came as a complete surprise to the local authorities who flatly refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Bolsheviks. A month after the Bolshevik coup the Transcaucasian Commissariat was created. However, there was no understanding among the

local elites that the empire was collapsing. The leaders of Transcaucasia, refusing to recognise the Bolshevik take-over, placed their hopes on the planned opening of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. Local elites and the population continued to see their future as part of a renewed (and as they hoped, democratic) Russia. The last political link connecting Transcaucasia to Russia was the Constituent Assembly; this, however, was severed when in January 1918 the Bolsheviks dispersed the Assembly.

A month later, at the end of February 1918, the leaders of the Transcaucasian Commissariat transferred power to the local parliament, the Transcaucasian Seim. There were no special elections to the Seim, instead the results of the voting in the Constituent Assembly were used. The biggest problem was that the leaders of the Seim could not make up their minds: they did not recognise the power of the Bolsheviks, but neither was there an alternative legitimate authority in Russia. By this time, civil war had flared up in the northern Caucasus, and the very idea of proclaiming the independence of Transcaucasia from Russia was frightening to them. Even though the events in the northern Caucasus did not have a direct impact, Transcaucasia was cut off from the rest of Russia.

At the same time, another, much more serious problem was looming: the collapse of the Caucasian front, which began soon after October 1917. The command of the Caucasian front tried to replace the deserting Russian soldiers with hastily assembled Armenian and Georgian units, but their numbers were too catastrophically small to hold the vast extent of the front. During 1917 there were no hostilities there, as both Russian and Ottoman Turkish troops were exhausted. When the collapse of the Russian army began, the Russian Army commanders concluded an armistice with the Turks on 18 December 1917. By February 1918, the front was practically deserted which created a unique opportunity for the Ottoman army to reclaim lost territories and opened up the prospect of an advance into Central Asia. In mid-February 1918, the Ottoman army began to slowly advance in the direction of Transcaucasia, almost without resistance.

Here we should temporarily move away from the Caucasian front and look at the Western front, where things looked much worse. In December 1917, a ceasefire agreement was concluded between Germany and the Bolsheviks, but when peace negotiations failed the Germans launched an offensive into Russia in February 1918. Under these conditions, the Soviet government was forced to make colossal territorial concessions and sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 to stay in power. This agreement ceded not only the European part of the Russian Empire but also parts of the Caucasus, where the Kars and Batum regions were given to the Ottoman Empire.[3] A paradoxical situation emerged: the Soviet government transferred the territories of Transcaucasia which were controlled by the Transcaucasian Seim, which in turn did not recognise the legitimacy of the Soviet government and refused to recognise the Brest-Litovsk treaty.

Under these conditions, the Seim decided to start negotiations with Ottoman Turkey. The negotiations were to be held in the city of Trabzon, which was in the hands of the Russian army. But by the time the Transcaucasian delegation arrived there, Ottoman troops had already entered the city. At the negotiations in Trabzon, the Ottoman Turkish delegation immediately demanded that the Kars and Batum regions be evacuated and surrendered according to the Brest-Litovsk treaty. As the Transcaucasian delegation did not sign the treaty and did not recognise the Soviet government, the Ottoman side suggested that Transcaucasia should have declared its independence before the conclusion of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, and now it was necessary to abide by the signed treaty. This news caused a storm of indignation in Tiflis. Fiery speeches were made at a session of the Seim and everything ended with a declaration of war on Ottoman Turkey on 13 April 1918.

The next day the Ottoman Army seized the strategic port of Batum, with its fortress and warehouses, almost without a fight. This humiliating defeat had the effect of a cold shower on the leaders of the Seim. The war option was not working out and it was necessary to seek a diplomatic solution to the problem. In order to restart negotiations with Turkey, the Seim, per Ottoman demands, declared independence from Russia, establishing the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) on 22 April. Three days later, in order not to disrupt the planned peace talks, the leaders of the Seim ordered the surrender of Kars fortress. Thus, the Ottoman side actually gained control over the territories that it had formally received according to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

When the peace negotiations between Turkey and the TDFR re-opened in Batum on 11 May 1918, the Transcaucasian delegation was greeted with an unpleasant surprise. The Ottoman side congratulated the TDFR on its independence and declared that since there was a war between Ottoman Turkey and Transcaucasia, the borders of the Brest-Litovsk treaty could not serve as a basis for new negotiations. Thus, Ottoman Turkey put forward new territorial demands. Meanwhile, the Ottoman troops were continuing their offensive. After two weeks of negotiations unable to change the Ottoman position, the Georgian delegation declared the independence of Georgia on 26 May, which was followed on 28 May by Azerbaijani and Armenian declarations of independence. Thus, the Transcaucasian Federation fell apart, having existed for barely 36 days.

The Declarations of Independence of the three Transcaucasian republics deserve special attention. One remarkable feature unites these declarations. None of them indicated in what territory a new state is formed. It was quite symbolic, and not at all accidental. In the conditions of the collapse of the Russian Empire, it was often simply impossible to clearly define ethnic boundaries, and this also made it possible to lay claim to large areas held by neighbouring groups. Thus, the new republics appeared without clear boundaries, and over the subsequent period of independence, these three republics tried to resolve this particular issue.

Azerbaijan, May 1918–April 1920

The situation in the newly established Republic of Azerbaijan was complicated. To begin with, after the declaration of independence, the Azerbaijani government moved from Tiflis to the city of Ganja (Elizavetpol), since Baku and parts of the Baku province were at that time under the control of the Baku Commune.

Baku, which was the economic powerhouse of Transcaucasia, also had a multinational population (Russian, Armenian, and Muslim Turkic) and had the largest concentration of industrial workers in the region. The overthrow of the Provisional Government led to a political split in Transcaucasia. If the authorities in Tiflis refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Bolshevik government, then in Baku the situation was different. There, in November 1918, the Baku Council (Baksovet) came to power: a coalition of Bolsheviks, Left and Right Socialist-Revolutionaries, and Armenian revolutionary Dashnaks under the leadership of the charismatic Bolshevik leader (of Armenian origin) Stepan Shaumyan, who recognised the power of the Bolsheviks in Petrograd. As can be seen, a significant Muslim population of Baku was not represented in the political power of the city, which would soon lead to conflict. In March 1918, bloody clashes occurred in Baku, ending with the pogrom of the Muslim population when Armenian units under Dashnak leadership joined forces with the Baksovet, which resulted in the strengthening of the Baksovet's power, which the Bolsheviks started to dominate. Soviet historiography unequivocally interpreted the March events as an attempt to seize power by the Turkic Muslim bourgeoisie, completely bypassing the national factors (the Baksovet military

units were mainly represented by Armenians) (Azizbekova et al. 1969; Tokarzhevskii 1957). It is hardly surprising that the post-Soviet historiography of Azerbaijan interprets the March events exclusively in the context of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, focusing on the national aspect and ignoring the socio-political component (e.g. Nadzhafov 1993).

At the same time, by the summer of 1918, when the young Republic of Azerbaijan was established it received the support of the advancing Ottoman army. The goal of the Ottoman offensive was the city of Baku with its oil fields and the prospect of a breakthrough to the North Caucasus and Central Asia. In the period from June to September 1918, the Ottoman forces with the support of the local armed detachments fought against the forces of the Baku Commune. The steady Ottoman advance towards Baku led to a political crisis there – the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Dashnaks who were in coalition with the Bolsheviks wanted to invite the British Expeditionary Corps located in the Iranian port of Enzeli to defend the city, a move which was opposed by the Bolsheviks. Continuing failures on the fronts led to the fall of the Baku Commune, in place of which the 'Centro-Caspian Dictatorship' or 'Dictatorship of the Central Caspian' (*Diktatura Tsentrokaspiia*)[4] came to power, which invited British troops to Baku. But these measures could not stop the Ottoman offensive. By 15 September, the city fell. The seizure of Baku was accompanied by the massacre of the Armenian population. Thus, finally by mid-September 1918, the Azerbaijani government established control over its capital.

Baku was not the only area outside the control of the Azerbaijani government: the mountainous part of the Elizavetpol province (Karabakh and Zangezur) with the large Armenian population wanted to join the newly formed Republic of Armenia. Another region beyond the control of the Azerbaijani government was the Mugan Steppe, where the Russian and Ukrainian colonists, with the support of the Russian border units that had retreated from Iran and Ottoman Turkey, were in conflict with the nomadic native population (Dobrynin 1974).

Despite re-capturing the capital Baku, the international situation was unfavourable for Azerbaijan. In October, Ottoman Turkey withdrew from the war and was forced to evacuate its troops from Transcaucasia, while in November 1918 British troops began to arrive in Baku from Iran. Initially, the British command was suspicious of the Azerbaijani government, due to their close ties with Ottoman Turkey. However, the lack of available forces in Transcaucasia forced the British to take into account local interests. Thus, Britain preferred to maintain the status quo established in the region.

In 1919, the Azerbaijan Republic confronted several foreign policy problems: the conflict with the Volunteer Army of General Denikin, which refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Azerbaijani government, the conflict with Georgia over a number of border areas, but the most serious was the conflict with Armenia. The problem was that there was no clear geographical separation of administrative units between the Armenian and Muslim Turkic populations. This allowed both parties to make territorial claims to the entirety of disputed provinces. Bloody conflicts occurred during 1919 in Nakhichevan, Karabakh, Zangezur and Kazakh districts. In Nakhichevan, the numerically dominant Turkic Muslim population was able to prevent the establishment of Armenian control, while Azerbaijan established its control over the Armenian-majority mountainous part of Karabakh. Finally, in Zangezur Armenian irregulars took control of the Armenian-populated part of the region.

Conflict with Armenia continued into 1920. After successfully forcing the Armenian population of Karabakh to recognise the sovereignty of Azerbaijan in 1919, the next target was Zangezur, which remained under the control of Armenian irregular formations. At the same time, Armenia did not want to accept the loss of the Armenian-

populated part of Karabakh. These positions would inevitably lead to new confrontation. When it became known that Azerbaijan sent troops for operations against Zangezur, the Armenians of Karabakh rose in a general uprising. The uprising, however, turned out to be very poorly coordinated and the rebels failed to take control of the city of Shusha. As a result, the Azerbaijani army suppressed the rebellion, the Armenian quarter of Shusha was burned down, and the city's Armenian population fled. Thus, by April 1920, Azerbaijan firmly established its military and political control over the disputed region, suppressing Armenian attempts at secession.

However, despite such a significant victory, the days of independent Azerbaijan were numbered. While practically the entire Azerbaijani army was fighting the Armenian uprising in Karabakh, the Red Army crossed the border and rapidly moved to Baku. This was done in response to a call for help from the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Committee in Baku, which proclaimed the establishment of Soviet power. Thus, on 28 April 1920, the independent Republic of Azerbaijan ceased to exist.

Armenia, May 1918–June 1921

It is not an accident that Armenia was last among the three republics to proclaim its independence. Until the very last moment, it was not clear whether Armenia could exist as an independent state, or whether it would be completely absorbed by Ottoman Turkey. However, in a series of battles in the suburbs of Yerevan the Armenian troops managed to stop the Ottoman offensive, which allowed Armenia to declare independence on 28 May 1918. The new state was in an extremely dire situation. Almost half of its population were refugees from Ottoman Turkey, who lived practically in the open. Geographically, at the time of independence, Armenia had a tiny territory: that small part of the Irevan (Yerevan) province which was not occupied by Ottoman troops. In the period from May to December 1918, the country was cut off from Georgia by Ottoman units occupying Lori district, and could not make their territorial claims to the Armenian-populated territories of Elisavetpol (Zangezur, Karabakh), Tiflis (Lori, Javakheti) and part of Erivan province (Nakhichevan, Sharur, and Surmalu districts). However, by the end of 1918, the situation seemed to be changing. Ottoman Turkey was defeated in the war and was forced to withdraw from the Caucasus.

After the defeat of Ottoman Turkey and the withdrawal of its troops from the Caucasus, Britain became the new dominant force in the region. It should be mentioned that, despite the status of a great power, Great Britain did not have enough military personnel to control the region, and after four years of world war, the British public had little appetite for another faraway military intervention in Transcaucasia. This predetermined the British policy in the region – the main emphasis was placed on maintaining the existing status quo with the support of local forces.

At the beginning of 1919, Armenia was the weakest (in economic, military, and political senses) state of Transcaucasia. Nevertheless, the Armenian leadership assumed that loyalty to the Allies in 1918 (when Georgia sided with Germany, and Azerbaijan with Ottoman Turkey) would be rewarded. Another area where the Armenian leadership hoped to find understanding was the issue of the territories of Western Armenia located within the Ottoman Empire. From the second half of the nineteenth century, the question of the Armenian-populated provinces in Ottoman Turkey was used to put pressure on Istanbul by the European powers and the Russian Empire. However, by the end of 1918, as a result of the genocide of 1915, there was virtually no Armenian population left in these provinces.

The Armenian leadership pursued two political lines to accomplish its territorial ambitions. First, in May 1919, hostilities began against several Muslim political formations, created by the retreating Ottoman Turkey as a buffer zone: the South-Western and Araxian republics (Kliukin 2002). This led to a military conflict with Azerbaijan during 1919 and in the early 1920s. Secondly, a delegation was sent to the Paris Peace Conference, which was to seek the creation of an independent Armenia including the territory of Turkish, or Western Armenia. Thus, the weakest state of Transcaucasia had the greatest territorial ambitions.

By the spring of 1920, the geopolitical situation began to change. This was primarily due to the turning point in the Russian Civil War: the Bolsheviks defeated the Volunteer Army of General Denikin and approached the borders of Transcaucasia. Soviet Russia could not allow the oil fields of Baku and the Black Sea ports of Georgia to fall into the sphere of British interests. These considerations made the invasion of Transcaucasia inevitable. At the end of April 1920, Soviet authority was established in Azerbaijan, and in May there was an unsuccessful attempt to Sovietise Armenia. Thus, the strategic plans of Soviet Russia in the Transcaucasus were a direct threat to the existence of independent Armenia. However, despite the changing geopolitical realities, the Armenian leadership continued to rely on its Western allies. This is understandable – at the Paris Peace Conference, the situation was turning in Armenia's favour: it was expected that the pre-1915 genocide Armenian-populated provinces of Ottoman Turkey would form part of independent Armenia, and the United States of America would be given a mandate to govern Armenia. Soviet Russia, by contrast, promised nothing of the sort; moreover, Moscow was an ally of the nascent Kemalist movement in Turkey.

In August 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres was signed, which divided the territory of the Ottoman Empire and created on paper an Armenian state in Turkey. This was the impetus for the actions of the Turkish nationalists under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal who refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Sèvres treaty. Turkish nationalists needed a military victory to raise the spirits of their troops who were defeated in the First World War. The Republic of Armenia offered an ideal opportunity for this: it was the weakest of Turkey's opponents, and the defeat of Armenia would open direct communications with Soviet Russia, which was promising military aid to Turkey.

In late September 1920, Kemalist units launched an offensive against Armenia. The Armenian army was unable to resist and surrendered the territories one by one. By 30 October, Kars fell and on the 7 November Alexandropol (today's Gyumri) was captured. Kemalist Turkey was about to capture all of Armenia. The Sovietisation of Armenia occurred when the Turkish offensive against Armenia reached its critical stage. On 29 November 1920, the Armenian Revolutionary Committee (Armrevkom) crossed into Armenia from Azerbaijan and proclaimed the establishment of Soviet power. A few days later, on 2 December, the Armenian government in Yerevan surrendered power to the Revolutionary Committee.[5]

Soviet Armenia was a devastated state. The economy had collapsed, hundreds of thousands of refugees were in the country, the war with Turkey was lost, and the Soviet Armenian government controlled only a small part of Armenia. In the west, significant territories were occupied by Kemalist Turkey (the entire Kars *oblast'*, the Surmalu district and the city of Alexandropol); under the conditions of the Turkish offensive, the Armenian government temporarily transferred control over the disputed Lori neutral zone to Georgia. Nakhichevan was also controlled by Azerbaijani and Turkish troops, and the mountains of Zangezur were controlled by anti-Soviet Armenian irregular units under the leadership of Garegin Nzhdeh.

Under these conditions, the Armrevkom leadership began political repression and launched a policy of military communism: the confiscation of food, livestock and property from the population. Unsurprisingly this led to a rapid loss of support from the population and when in February 1921, units of the Red Army took part in the Sovietisation of Georgia a general uprising against Soviet power began in Armenia. After the establishment of Soviet power in Georgia, the Red Army returned and suppressed the uprising in Armenia, forcing the rebels to retreat to Zangezur, where they proclaimed an independent Mountainous Armenia.

After the February uprising in Armenia, Moscow appointed a more moderate government under the leadership of Alexander Myasnikian. From March to June 1921, the new government was faced by several pressing territorial problems. Firstly, the mountainous part of Zangezur, controlled by Armenian rebels, was the last centre of anti-Soviet resistance in Transcaucasia. Secondly, there was the unresolved issue of Nagorny Karabakh, which was controlled by Azerbaijan, but had a predominantly Armenian population. At some point, these two territorial problems converged. In order to get support from the Armenian population and thereby weaken the rebels in Zangezur, the Soviet leadership of Transcaucasia announced the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia (Saparov 2012). This statement coincided with the beginning of the military operation to Sovietise Zangezur. However, before the Armenian leadership managed to extend its authority to Karabakh, the military operation in Zangezur had been completed, and thus the need to transfer Karabakh to Armenia was no longer necessary. Thus the Kavburo (the Bolsheviks' Caucasus Bureau) adopted its decision on 5 July 1921 to retain Karabakh within Azerbaijan but granting it autonomous status ostensibly as a solution to this territorial dispute.

Georgia, May 1918–February 1921

At the time of its declaration of independence in 1918, Georgia was in the most favourable situation among the three Transcaucasian states. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the city of Tiflis had been the administrative capital of Transcaucasia and all the central institutions and administrative staff were located there. In addition, the territories claimed by Georgia were much more ethnically homogeneous (especially Kutaisi and to a lesser extent Tiflis provinces) than the territories claimed by Armenia and Azerbaijan. Finally, in terms of communications, Georgia enjoyed a much better outlook than its neighbours: unlike Armenia, Georgia possessed a transit railway connecting the republic's Black Sea ports with Baku's oil fields.

Already in March-April 1918, with the successful Ottoman offensive underway, it became clear to Georgian leaders that a powerful ally was needed to contain the Ottoman Turks. With the eclipse of Russian power, the only suitable candidate was Germany, which anxiously observed the advance of its Ottoman allies towards Baku. During secret negotiations, Georgia secured German guarantees at the cost of concessions for the exploitation of Georgia's fossil resources.[6] However, this deal saved Georgia from the Ottoman advance. German prisoners of war held in Georgia were dressed in German uniforms and positioned at Georgian railway stations and roads leading to Tiflis, pretending to be regular German units.

With the end of the First World War, the German and Ottoman troops were replaced by the British. At the time of the withdrawal of Ottoman troops in December 1918, the Ottoman command triggered a brief war between Armenia and Georgia over Lori district when they simultaneously proposed to both sides to occupy that territory. This district was part of the Tiflis province and was separated from the Erivan province by a mountain range, but it was inhabited mainly by Armenians. Thus, Georgia claimed it on the grounds that it

was part of the Tiflis *gubernia* ('province'), and Armenia because it was ethnically homogeneous. Both sides moved their armed units there, starting a conflict. Only the intervention of Great Britain put an end to the hostilities on 31 December 1918. The disputed district was declared the Lori Neutral Zone for the next two years.

Georgia and Abkhazia, 1918–1921

At the time of the collapse of the Russian Empire, Abkhazia was called the Sukhum District. This is not a minor detail, since this name indicates that there was no full-fledged civil administration there. This was because Abkhazia was one of the last areas of the Caucasus to be fully integrated into Russian Empire, after it lost its political autonomy in the second half of the 1860s. As a result of the termination of Abkhaz autonomy important demographic changes occurred: a large part of the Abkhaz population migrated to the Ottoman Empire. At the same time Armenians and Greeks from Ottoman Turkey, as well as Russians, Ukrainians and other Europeans, and finally large number of Mingrelians from Georgia started to settle in Abkhazia. By 1917, the Abkhaz were a minority of the population (no single ethnic group enjoyed a majority), but because there was a large percentage of landowners and noblemen among the Abkhaz, they, along with the Russians were dominant among the elites (Müller 1998).

During 1917, local authorities in Abkhazia made plans for a future political system; in particular, the Abkhaz elites saw themselves in alliance with ethnic kin groups from the northern Caucasus (*Soyuz ob'edinennykh gortsev* 1994). The situation began to change in early 1918, when the Caucasian front began to fall apart, and a civil war began in the northern Caucasus. Deserting Russian sailors and soldiers passed into Russia. In the north, Bolshevik Soviets hostile to the bourgeois Abkhaz leadership formed in Tuapse, Sochi and Gagry. Under these threatening conditions, the Abkhaz National Council concluded a mutual assistance agreement with the Transcaucasian government in Tiflis in February 1918. Two months later, in April 1918, the Bolsheviks invaded Abkhazia and easily occupied Sukhum, expelling the Abkhazian National Council. This gave Georgia a reason to move against the Bolsheviks. Georgian troops drove the Bolsheviks out of the Sukhum district and continued their pursuit along Black Sea coast without encountering much resistance. The Georgian army occupied considerable territories: Sochi and Tuapse came under their control. Georgian expansion stopped when they encountered the Volunteer Army in the Tuapse area. In February 1919, the Volunteer Army attacked and expelled the Georgian army from Sochi and Gagry. The intervention of the British prevented Denikin from seizing the Sukhum district, and the border was established along the river Bzyb. Until the end of the civil war, this border remained unchanged (Saparov 2015).

In the meantime in Abkhazia, the Abkhaz National Council discovered that the absence of military power translated into the loss of political power. The Council continued to exist as a formal institution of power in Abkhazia, but the real power belonged to the representative of the Georgian army. Georgia restored the Abkhazian National Council, dispersed in 1918 by the Bolsheviks, in order to counter the accusations of the Volunteer Army that Georgia was illegally occupying the Sukhum district. Having found themselves without real power, representatives of the Abkhaz National Council showed extraordinary political flexibility in trying to find allies against Georgia. For two and a half years, the Abkhaz leadership allied itself with powers as diverse as Ottoman Turkey, Great Britain, General Denikin's Volunteer Army, and eventually the Bolsheviks. In February 1921 Abkhazia was invaded by the Red Army. In the ensuing chaos, the Abkhaz Revolutionary Committee (with the approval of Sergo Ordzhonikidze) proclaimed the independence of Abkhazia.

Georgia and South Ossetia, 1918–1921

Parallels between Abkhazia and South Ossetia may seem legitimate, yet a number of essential details make these two polities in many ways dissimilar. If Abkhazia existed as an independent political entity with its own elites, then in the case of Ossetia there had been neither a political entity nor a feudal Ossetian elite on the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains. The bulk of the Ossetian population in Georgia were peasants who migrated to the vacant lands of Georgian feudal lords, who, in turn, were happy to receive income-generating labourers. Thus, by 1917, Ossetians constituted a significant part of the population in a number of districts of the Tiflis province, but they lacked the political institutions and leadership that were available to the Abkhaz.

The conflict in Ossetia in early 1918 started as a social movement. Ossetian soldiers returning from the front began to seize the land and refused to pay taxes to landowners (Saparov 2010). In this, they differed little from their neighbours among Georgian peasants. However, when the authorities in Tiflis sent troops to restore order in the Ossetian regions, this added an ethnic dimension to a social movement: in effect, the Georgian authorities defended the interests of Georgian feudal landowners against Ossetian peasants. The conflict continued simmering in 1918 and 1919. In contrast to the Abkhazians, who during the years of the civil war repeatedly changed political orientation, Ossetians did not have much choice. Their socio-political situation (peasants opposing Georgian feudal lords and Mensheviks) made their orientation towards the Bolsheviks natural and inevitable.

Meanwhile, Bolshevik agitation resonated in remote mountainous Ossetian villages. This state of affairs eventually led to a large armed conflict in the summer of 1920, which largely predetermined the vector of Georgian-Ossetian relations during the Soviet period. By the beginning of 1920, the international situation was turning in favour of the Bolsheviks – General Denikin was defeated, and the Red Army was approaching the borders of Transcaucasia. Sergo Ordzhonikidze, who oversaw the planned Sovietisation of Transcaucasia, thought he could quickly establish Soviet power in the region. In April, without much opposition, Azerbaijan was Sovietised, after which it was planned to bring Soviet power to Georgia and Armenia. It is in this context that the Ossetian uprising of the summer of 1920 should be considered.

It was planned that the Ossetian Bolsheviks would invade Georgia from the north to support the Red Army moving from Azerbaijan. However, before the operation began, several events occurred. First, Poland began a successful offensive in Ukraine, which forced Moscow to suspend the planned Sovietisation of Transcaucasia. Second, Soviet Russia concluded a peace treaty with Georgia in these very days and had no intention of violating it just yet: Ordzhonikidze was forced to cancel the invasion of Georgia. Thirdly, the Georgian leadership did not wait for a Bolshevik invasion and took measures to block the mountain passes leading from the northern Caucasus to Georgia. For this purpose, Georgian troops were sent to the mountainous, Ossetian-populated regions. This provoked a local uprising of the Ossetians in one of these regions. In turn, the Ossetian Bolsheviks, who were preparing for an invasion of Georgia from the northern Caucasus, could not indifferently observe the Georgians suppress a local Ossetian uprising. In violation of instructions from Moscow to cancel the operation against Georgia, they sent their units to help the Ossetians in Georgia. Initially, events developed positively for the Ossetians: they overwhelmed smaller Georgian units and captured the town of Tskhinval. However, Moscow was not going to support the Ossetian Bolsheviks, and when Georgia mobilised regular units to put down the uprising, the Ossetians were left without support. Georgia suppressed the uprising and in the process expelled almost the entire Ossetian population from these territories.

Thus, by the end of the summer of 1920, Georgia seemed to have solved a number of pressing problems: Abkhazia was on the way to being integrated; the rebellious Ossetians were expelled; Batum, which for most of the period of independence had been under Ottoman or British rule, finally came under Georgian control; and a peace treaty was signed with Soviet Russia which recognised Georgia's borders. Moreover, in November 1920, Georgia regained control of Lori district, disputed since December 1918 with Armenia. This occurred in the context of the Ottoman offensive against Armenia, with the latter fearing that the Lori Neutral Zone would be occupied by Ottoman Turkey and signing an agreement with Georgia on 19 November, thus granting Georgia control over this disputed region for a period of three months (Galoian and Kazakhetsian 2000: 340–41).

But all this was just a lull before the storm. After Armenia fell to Kemalist and Bolshevik blows in December 1920 it was Georgia's turn to be Sovietised. The pretext for the invasion of Georgia were the events in Lori Neutral Zone. An uprising of the Armenian population began in February 1921, exactly three months after the region came under Georgian control. The Red Army crossed the border of Georgia in several places and by the end of February 1921, they had proclaimed the establishment of Soviet power in Tiflis.

With the Red Army's conquest of Georgia in February 1921, and the suppression of the last vestiges of resistance in the mountains of Zangezur, the civil war in the Transcaucasus ended, and Soviet power was imposed. Logically, the question arises, on the basis of which principles did the Soviet leadership resolve the bloody conflicts and establish peace in the region? Two interpretations of what happened have dominated answers to this question. One, dominant in the USSR, argued that the principles of socialism allowed the national question to be resolved and bourgeois nationalism to be eliminated, thereby satisfying the national aspirations of peoples. Another, popular in the West, argued that the Soviet leadership applied the principle of divide and rule by creating national autonomies in the republics, which created opportunities to intervene in the internal affairs of what were, according to the Soviet constitution, formally sovereign states.

Conclusion: the establishment of Soviet power and its (non-)resolution of ethnic contradictions

After three years of war and foreign intervention, the Transcaucasus region was in a dire situation: part of its territory was occupied by Turkish Kemalist troops; all three independent republics had unresolved territorial issues between them; and within the republics, conflicts with ethnic minorities were smouldering. The only borders not disputed at the time of Sovietisation were the border with Iran, and the border with Turkey, established as a result of the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Moscow signed in March 1921. Inter-republican boundaries within Soviet Transcaucasia were fiercely disputed and were settled only by the mid-1920s.

Despite the victory in the Civil War, the Soviet government had rather limited resources on the ground in Transcaucasia. Militarily, the 11th Red Army could neutralise salient threats, but did not have the resources to establish control over the entire territory of the Transcaucasus. The military units of the region's formerly independent republics formally became Soviet troops, but their loyalty was questionable, as proved by a series of uprisings in Azerbaijan and Armenia, in which national units took the side of the rebels (Saparov 2012). Social support for the Soviet government was minimal: a working class was present in significant numbers only in Baku, and politically, the Bolsheviks did not have broad support among local populations that had traditionally focused on national parties, the Georgian

Mensheviks, the Armenian Dashnaks and the Azerbaijani Musavatists. In this situation, the Soviet government was forced to accommodate local nationalist interests in order to avoid uprisings and maintain control over the region.

What were the approaches to resolving conflicts that guided the Soviet authorities? As it turned out, on the eve of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks did not have a clear plan for resolving national conflicts. During the Civil War, a system of concessions in the form of political autonomy to national minorities was created by trial and error. This system was applied situationally to resolve pressing issues (Schafer 2001). A detailed analysis of the creation of national autonomies in Transcaucasia indicates that in each case the decision was made on the basis of the current state of affairs on the ground, as well as taking into account the situational, short-term interests of the Soviet leadership. There was no general conflict resolution plan or strategy according to which national minorities could gain political autonomy.[7]

Abkhazia initially was proclaimed an independent Soviet republic. This happened during the Sovietisation of Georgia, when a political vacuum in the territory of Abkhazia allowed the Abkhaz Bolsheviks to declare their desire to join Russia. To avoid associations with Russian imperialism, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, who led the Sovietisation of Transcaucasia, suggested that the Abkhazians abandon the idea of joining Russia, and instead declare Abkhazia an independent Soviet republic. When the following year Georgian Bolsheviks opposed joining the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic,[8] the Abkhaz were forced to denounce their independence and proclaim unification with Georgia. This was done in order to undermine the resistance of the Georgian Bolsheviks (Saparov 2015).

Similar processes led to the creation of the South Ossetian autonomy. During the civil war, the Ossetian peasants sided with the Bolsheviks, whom they supported in the summer of 1920 during an unsuccessful attempt at Georgia's Sovietisation. The Georgian army suppressed the Ossetian uprising, as a result of which the majority of the Ossetian population fled to the northern Caucasus, where they joined the ranks of the Red Army. During the Sovietisation of Georgia in February 1921, Ossetian troops invaded Georgia and established de facto control over the Ossetian territory. The self-proclaimed Ossetian Revolutionary Committee declared its desire to join Russia. Such a development created problems for the Bolsheviks. On the one hand, the Ossetians were their loyal allies who had fought on the side of the Red Army, and outright rejection of their demands was not possible. On the other hand, the secession of South Ossetia from Georgia and its accession to Russia would undermine the already vulnerable position of the Bolsheviks in Georgia. Thus, the creation of the South Ossetian autonomy in 1922 was a forced compromise: Georgia retained its control over South Ossetia, and the Ossetians gained political autonomy.

Nagorny Karabakh also received its autonomous status as a result of similar processes. At the time of the Sovietisation of Azerbaijan in April 1920, the Bolsheviks, who needed the support of the Azerbaijani public, demanded that Armenia abandon its territorial claim to Karabakh. And in December 1920, when it was the turn of Armenia to be Sovietised, the Bolsheviks forced the Azerbaijani leadership to announce the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia. True, this decision remained on paper, as the Armenian leadership did not act to implement this decision. Then, in the summer of 1921, during heavy fighting with Armenian nationalists in the mountains of Zangezur, the Bolshevik leadership once again announced the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia. This time the Armenian leadership tried to extend its power to Karabakh. However, the battles for Zangezur, which were the reason for the decision on the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia, ended before Armenia managed to establish its control over Karabakh. In this situation, Azerbaijan protested and the leadership of the Bolsheviks once again had to opt for a compromise solution of

granting of autonomy to the mountainous part of Karabakh, featuring a predominantly Armenian population, while preserving this territory within the borders of Azerbaijan.

Let us consider the long-term effect of these efforts at conflict resolution. How successful (or unsuccessful) was the resolution of ethnic tensions in the Caucasus? Is it possible to claim that the solutions of the 1920s fuelled the conflicts that emerged during the collapse of the USSR? Analysing the Soviet era, especially the post-Stalinist period, one can see two distinct tendencies in the interpretation of the Bolshevik solution to Civil War-era conflicts. On the one hand, as union republics, Georgia and Azerbaijan were not satisfied because of decisions imposed on them, which resulted in incomplete control over the autonomies within their borders. Georgian and Azerbaijani policies in turn often provoked complaints in the autonomies, which led to the intervention of Moscow in the internal affairs of the union republics. At the same time, national minorities receiving autonomous status instead of secession or unification with another republic were not satisfied with their subordinate status. The policies of the superordinate republics in which autonomies were located were often perceived by the latter as discriminatory and aimed at assimilation, altering the demographic composition of the autonomous unit and pushing out the minority group. The impossibility of open discussion of these problems in the context of Soviet ideology led to the emergence of an alternative discourse dominant among intelligentsias, as well as dissidents. This phenomenon took place both in the union republics and in the autonomies. The essence of the emerging discourse was that both sides began to perceive the Bolshevik decisions of the national conflicts of the 1920s as illegitimate. In the context of Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost, this alternative discourse supplanted the orthodox Soviet discourse suggesting that national conflicts had been solved, and the parties began instead to demand the 'correction' of historical injustices: the national autonomies demanded secession from union republics, and the union republics demanded the abolition of the national autonomies.

Notes

1 American historian Ronald Grigor Suny's *The Baku Commune, 1917–1918*, published in 1972, is an exception: Suny was more interested in the social aspects of the Baku Commune (Suny 1972).
2 Ozakom is an abbreviation for *Osobyi Zakavkazskii Komitet*.
3 Russia gained control over Kars and Batum as a result of the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877–78. On the Russo-Ottoman wars, see Chapters 7 and 21.
4 The Central Committee of the Caspian Military Fleet represented sailors of the Caspian fleet and was dominated by Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and Dashnaks by the time they replaced the Bolshevik-dominated Baku Commune.
5 Hence the discrepancy between the time of Sovietisation of Armenia – Soviet sources believe that Sovietisation occurred at the time of the border crossing by the Revkom Committee in November, and Armenian and Western sources assumed that Sovietisation occurred in December at the time of the transfer of power to the Revolutionary Committee.
6 Soviet historians liked to point out that, according to that agreement, Georgia was treated like an African colony (Pipiia 1978).
7 In this chapter, it is not possible to describe in detail the process of creating autonomy. I deal at length with this issue in Saparov 2015.
8 The ZSFSR – *Zakavkazskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Federativnaia Sovetskaia Respublika* (Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic) was created in 1922 by merging Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia together ostensibly in order to improve economic cooperation between the republics. The proposed merger was met with opposition from the Georgian (and to a lesser extent) Azerbaijani leaderships who resented the impending loss of political and economic autonomy. The ZSFSR existed until 1936 when it was dissolved into its constituent parts.

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