

THE SOVIET CAUCASUS, 1920–91

Resistance and accommodation

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Introduction

The story of the Caucasus immediately before the beginning, and immediately after the end, of Soviet rule is one of turmoil: rebellion and protest, ethnic conflict, frequent turnover in political systems and personnel, and foreign interventions driven largely by interests in the region's oil. So deep was the impression of the region as a tinderbox which could easily ignite, that in the early Soviet period Vladimir Lenin and other Soviet leaders called for 'special concessions' and exceptional policies. After 1991, portrayals of the Caucasus in the post-Soviet Russian press similarly presented it as a place of consistent danger and uncertainty well into the 1990s, and long after the civil and ethnic unrest of 1987–94 had died down across the region apart from Chechnya. Between 1921 and 1987, echoes of these characterisations could be seen in the Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in sporadic protest and rebellion, incidents of conflict between nationalities, and crises between the republics and Moscow. Such open instances were rare, but nonetheless more frequent than in other parts of the Soviet Union. And for much of the time there existed a flourishing underground, both in the cultural sense and in the sense of political opposition. The northern Caucasus was more of a regular trouble-spot, which proved resistant to the imposition of Soviet rule in the 1920s and where some of the most persistent and violent opposition to the collectivisation of agriculture was encountered in the 1930s. Partly for this reason, the northern Caucasus was, along with Crimea, the main focus of the forced deportation of entire national groups in the course of the Second World War (known as the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union). This process itself provoked greater resilience among the deported peoples, and stored up more problems for the Soviet and Russian authorities later on.

Alongside these tendencies, however, and more characteristic of daily affairs at least in Transcaucasia, leaders and citizens of the three republics alike showed a marked ability to accommodate the overall forms of Soviet rule and to adapt to the social, political and economic changes that Soviet power entailed. Adaptability to the whims of what was, in many ways, a foreign imperial power proved an effective strategy for making the best of a situation which was far from ideal, but under which there were opportunities to prosper if higher authorities could be handled with due regard. Scholars and national leaders alike have

noticed that the simultaneous existence of these two tendencies – resistance and accommodation – came naturally to a population which had, for centuries, been on the peripheries of different empires, from the Greeks and Persians through the Mongols and Ottomans to the Russian Empire. Frequent military incursions, shifting allegiances and successive suzerains and hegemonies made adaptability a matter of survival (see Chapter 6).

Linked to these two characteristics of resistance and accommodation, the third important one for understanding the Soviet experience in the Caucasus is nationalism. We should not be anachronistic and assume that the national identities which are clearly defined and expressed in post-Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia today, as well as among Chechens, Ingush and so on, have existed for ever and in much the same forms. Nevertheless, it would be fair to say that the idea of Nation was more firmly rooted in Transcaucasia at the start of the Soviet period than elsewhere in the USSR. As detailed in other chapters in this volume, the Georgian national movement had gathered strength in the nineteenth century, and especially since the 1860s. It was rooted in the exclusive notions of territory, language and religion and, combined with socialist ideas, achieved mass appeal in the years of unrest of 1904–07. Armenia, too, had a well-developed national movement led by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutsyun) and other parties, and the 1915 genocide reinforced ties of national solidarity with an overwhelming narrative of victimhood. Azerbaijan was less established as a national concept, as indeed the notion of an Azerbaijani state or nation was relatively recent. But a strong secular intelligentsia had set out the intellectual basis of the Azerbaijani nation well before Sovietisation, and the independence years of 1918–20 embellished this with territorial definition and state structure. By contrast, in Soviet Central Asia nations barely existed and were largely inventions of the 1920s; the Slavic identity of Ukrainians and Belarusians and widespread use of Russian as a first language in those republics diluted or confused national identity, while the nations of the Russian Empire which could claim levels of national development comparable to those of Georgians and Armenians – the Finns, Poles, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians – achieved independence at least up until 1939.

Finally, the factor that moderated and expressed these three tendencies of resistance, accommodation, and nationalism within the confines of an authoritarian system was political leadership, embodied mostly in the top levels of the communist parties of each republic or region. These were subject to frequent change, usually initiated from Moscow, which could significantly affect policy directions.

As an introduction to the history of the Caucasus in the Soviet period, this chapter is structured thematically under these four headings – resistance, accommodation, nationalism and leadership – as well as sections dealing with demographic and territorial change and cultural development, and a section on the wartime deportations, before concluding with an account of the beginnings of political and ethnic unrest in the period of perestroika, which was to play a major part in the break-up of the USSR. The thematic organisation of the chapter should not suggest that the years of Soviet rule were one undifferentiated period or disguise the important changes over time, which it is hoped the thematic sections will highlight. After all, the reader should bear in mind that this was a period of intense social and economic change, driven by both Soviet and global developments. During this time Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia changed from overwhelmingly rural to overwhelmingly urban populations, with the territories of the northern Caucasus not far behind. Modernisation, in all of its senses, was going on all around the Caucasus, bringing with it a world war, greater international communication and globalisation.

As well as these global processes, the population of the Caucasus was deeply affected by the policies of the Soviet regime. This was not merely a change of one ruler for another, but a deep transformation that altered day to day life in fundamental ways. In the 1920s, for much of the population there were tangible improvements. Mass education was introduced for the first time, and for most school children instruction was given in their own language rather than Russian. Thus, while the number of 'national' schools before the revolution was negligible, by 1927 in Transcaucasia 88.3 per cent of Armenian, 95.5 per cent of Azerbaijani and 98.1 per cent of Georgian children of primary school age were being schooled in their own language (Dimanshtein 1930: 278–79). In the northern Caucasus the experience was more mixed, with Russian language education predominating in Dagestan and instruction in a mixture of the local language and Russian common elsewhere. The sweeping away of the former privileged sections of society allowed for the redistribution of land in the countryside, and of housing in towns, doing much to alleviate poverty across the region (Jones 1988). The policies of *korenizatsiia* ('nativisation') meant that in both the major republics and the smaller autonomous republics and regions, members of the predominant local nationality were given preference in posts in the administration. A combination of the measures of expropriation and *korenizatsiia* had the knock-on effect of reducing the influence of Armenians in Tbilisi and in Georgia generally, where they had occupied many of the economic and political elite positions before the Revolution. Some left Georgia for Armenia, but for those that stayed there was a notable shift in status which could also be seen as they tended to move towards less exclusive districts of Tbilisi (Blauvelt and Berglund 2016: 74–75).

Following Sovietisation, the Georgian Orthodox Church was subjected to regular harassment, and 1,500 churches were closed by the end of 1923. The Georgian Church was picked out, not only because of its Orthodox creed, but also because it had organised initial resistance to Sovietisation under Patriarch Amboise (Serrano 2007: 252). Other religious organisations were largely able to flourish in the 1920s. Indeed, Stalin publicly endorsed the incorporation of Islamic traditions and practises into the Soviet system in the northern Caucasus. A series of decrees against religion in 1929 made all religious institutions, however, the objects of official attacks. This change of course went hand in hand with the beginning of collectivisation, which dramatically changed the way of life of the majority of the population in the Caucasus. Collectivisation meant that independent farmers were forced to join collective farms, where they no longer exercised any control over what they produced and had to send most produce to state authorities at fixed rates. Communist leaders in several republics, notably Georgia, argued that this policy, designed mostly for the Russian peasantry, was not appropriate to the very different cultural and agricultural conditions of the Caucasus. But such pleas were ignored and the same model imposed across the Soviet Union. In the more mountainous regions of the northern Caucasus, where geographical conditions were very different and social traditions also militated against these kinds of arrangements, collectivisation provoked especially strong resistance.

The other major source of change brought about by Soviet rule was the process of industrialisation, which gathered pace with the introduction of the first five-year plan in 1928. Demand for oil increased the economic significance of Baku, and the plans stipulated some other areas of specialisation, such as a high concentration of railway stock manufacture and repair in Tbilisi. But industrialisation led to a general increase in factories and other forms of manufacturing across the board. A twofold demographic change resulted from the rapid industrialisation of the 1930s: a shift of population from the countryside to the towns, but also a growth in the ethnic Russian population as a result of an influx of managers and skilled workers. In Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the Russian population roughly

doubled in the 1930s, but still remained relatively low as an overall proportion of the population. In the northern Caucasus, by contrast, one of the highest increases in the Russian population took place (Kaiser 1994: 118–122).

Resistance

The strength of Georgian national identity and the brand of Georgian socialism that had reached across social divisions in 1905 and again in 1918, made it one of the most resistant populations of the Soviet Union. This was already evident in its late Sovietisation in March 1921, almost a year after Azerbaijan and Armenia (see Chapter 8). The special situation in Georgia led many of its new Soviet leaders, backed by Lenin, to take an indulgent stand towards the Georgian nation, promoting separate cultural development and emphasising the uniqueness of Georgia. Others, including Sergo Ordzhonikidze, leader of the Bolshevik organisations in the Caucasus and backed by Joseph Stalin, objected to this indulgence as pandering to national chauvinism. These differences were to erupt in late 1922 and cause a major political incident in both Tbilisi and Moscow.

Of more immediate concern in Georgia, however, was the anti-Soviet rising of August 1924. Although this was quite easily contained and put down, at the cost of 4,000 rebel lives, it did underline how combustible the republic could be (Jones 1988: 632–33). While Georgia remained relatively calm until after the Second World War, its population continued to engage in occasional episodes of protest. In 1956, when students and other young people across Georgia's towns set out to mark the third anniversary of the death of Georgia's most famous son, Joseph Stalin, who had led the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953, their gatherings were banned. In response, daily protests grew in size and intensity, and shifted from just paying homage to Stalin to raising political demands. Eventually, on the night of 10–11 March, Soviet Army troops fired on protestors in two separate incidents, leaving over twenty people dead. While this action brought the protests to an end, it sharply radicalised a large section of the Georgian youth, some of whom went on to lead the independence movements of the 1980s (Blauvelt and Smith 2015). Youth protest became a regular occurrence from the mid-1960s on. Most famously, in 1978 an attempt to bring Georgia into line with other Soviet republics by changing the status of Georgian as the sole official language had to be dropped following sustained protest (Alexeyeva 1985: 106–12). Tbilisi was the scene of some of the largest street protests in support of national demands which swept across the Soviet Union in its last years. Tragically, the streets of Tbilisi were again soaked in blood as the Soviet Army once more opened fire on demonstrators in April 1989.

Although brought under Soviet rule before Transcaucasia, some of the strongest resistance to the implementation of Soviet policies could be found in the northern Caucasus, just as had been the case with the expansion of Imperial Russian rule in the nineteenth century. Resistance was especially strong among the Chechens and Ingush, beginning with a sustained armed opposition to Sovietisation in 1920–21 (Broxup 1992). Armed resistance continued up to 1925, led first by Uzun Haji, and then by Said Bek, grandson of Imam Shamil (Yemelianova 2002: 109). Even after this was quelled, ethnic conflict and cross-border raids on livestock, usually targeting a different national group, continued to disrupt and cause headaches for the Soviet authorities (Smith 2001). In some instances, such behaviour was encouraged by the collusion of those same authorities – most notably, the decision to eliminate Cossack communities from the region, which added to the impression that Cossacks, and by extension Russians, were fair game (O'Rourke

2011). Chechens and Ingush also resisted the collectivisation of agriculture initiated by Stalin in 1929, refusing to implement the required measures and carrying out acts of violence against officials sent to force them through (Avtorkhanov 1992). Finally, in 1940 Chechen writer Hasan Israilov led a rebellion against Soviet power and, taking advantage of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, was able to seize control of much of the northern Caucasus mountains.

In the post-war period, aside from the events in Georgia in 1956 and 1978, protest was sporadic up until the late 1980s, and took different forms. A growing dissident movement in Armenia was able to organise a substantial demonstration commemorating the 1915 genocide on 24 April 1965. The movement quickly turned its attention to territorial demands against Azerbaijan, and anti-Soviet protest became marginalised. In January 1974, dissident Razmik Zohrapyan burnt a portrait of Lenin in the centre of Yerevan in protest. In 1977 members of the same organisation as Zohrapyan, the National Unity Party, were accused of detonating a bomb on the Moscow Metro which killed seven people. Three Armenians were executed for the terrorist act (Payaslian 2007: 185–86). Tbilisi and other Georgian towns were also rocked by explosions during the 1970s, but these were more likely linked to business and gang rivalries than to anti-Soviet protest. But one Georgian, Vladimir Zhvania, was executed for political terrorism in 1977 (Nahaylo and Swoboda 1990: 190).

As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, dissident groups operated on the margin of legality, but were given a boost by the fact that the USSR was a signatory to the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. This imposed obligations in the field of human rights on the Soviet state, and while these were largely ignored, it proved difficult to fully suppress the organisations, known as 'Helsinki Groups', which used petitions and other forms of protest to apply pressure to meet these obligations, including in Armenia and Georgia. In the 1980s, concerns for the environment, especially over pollution in Lake Sevan and worries about nuclear power plants in Armenia, inspired the first instances of activism at about the same time as the environmental movement was emerging in the Baltic republics and Kazakhstan. Whereas the movement in the Baltics was channelled into the anti-Soviet Popular Fronts that pushed for national independence, in Armenia rivalries with Azerbaijan eventually took over from other concerns.

Accommodation

More regularly than protesting or engaging in other forms of resistance to Soviet rule, in Transcaucasia officials and citizens alike proved capable of making the most of conditions. Even after the weakening of the *korenizatsiia* policies in the 1930s, most leadership positions in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were held by locals, who were generally adept at achieving and mobilising popular support. After Sovietisation, the Bolsheviks sought to gain a degree of popular legitimacy and support in Azerbaijan by entrusting leadership to the former local socialist party, the *Hummet* ('Endeavour'). The idea of a similar arrangement for the Armenian Dashnaksutyun party which had been in power in Armenia up until 1920 never came to fruition, but the Dashnaks and their supporters were initially more fearful of Turkey than of the Bolsheviks, leading them to acquiesce in Soviet rule. Georgia was viewed by the Bolsheviks as more problematic – national traditions were strongest, and the socialist movement was overwhelmingly associated with the Menshevik Social Democrats who were in power there from 1918 until 1921. There was little room, then, for the kind of co-optation that had worked elsewhere, and the small number of Georgian Bolsheviks needed, with Lenin's support, to indulge Georgian national aspirations. While this led to a split with more hardline Bolsheviks like Ordzhonikidze, an accommodating attitude prevailed.

Georgia in particular, but also Azerbaijan and Armenia, were indulged to a certain extent by the central Soviet authorities throughout the Soviet period: there was less interference from Moscow than elsewhere, the local languages remained supreme in most spheres, and there was no mass movement of Russians into the republics, or many instances of Russians being parachuted in to leading positions in the Communist Parties. Indeed Armenians and especially Georgians, from Stalin, Beria and Mikoyan at the top but also at all levels of the Soviet state, Party and cultural apparatus, played an important role in governing the Soviet Union. The promotion of the leaders of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, and Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, to full membership of the leading decision-making body of the Soviet Union – the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) – in the 1980s was a high point in terms of institutional links between the Caucasus and the Soviet centre. Well defined diaspora groups in Moscow and elsewhere were able to exert influence on behalf of their compatriots to a greater extent than was the case for other Soviet nationalities (Scott 2016).

For their part, the local populations found ways of pursuing better standards of living within the confines of the Soviet system. During the 1960s and 1970s, in Georgia, the 'informal economy' – economic activity which was conducted outside the official planning system and therefore was unrecorded and absent from official statistics – was estimated to have accounted for up to a third of economic activity. This was the highest in the Soviet Union. In Azerbaijan and Armenia, the informal economy was estimated at around half of this size, but was still high in Soviet terms (separate estimates for the northern Caucasus are not available) (Kim and Shida 2014). Such estimates, backed up by anecdotal accounts, suggest that standards of living in Transcaucasia were much higher than official figures suggested in the last decades of the Soviet Union. In fact, in general living conditions were rather good, and sufficient to ensure the acquiescence of the population even if the political system remained unpopular. By contrast in the northern Caucasus could be found some of the poorest areas of the Soviet Union. While local officials could do something to improve conditions (Gorlizki 2010), and the region was effectively subsidised by the Soviet centre, adverse geographical conditions, high levels of corruption, and political divisions contributed to high levels of poverty. This underpinned continuing unrest in the northern Caucasus: as we shall see, repression and administrative reorganisation, including wholesale deportations of populations, were deployed to deal with people who, while small in number, were seen as among the most rebellious of the USSR (see Chapter 13).

Nationalism in Transcaucasia

Initial Soviet indulgence towards national sensitivity in Transcaucasia was not unqualified or consistent. Azerbaijan, the region's only predominantly Muslim Soviet republic, was held up as a beacon to the 'Peoples of the East'. But well established cultural traditions and practices were dismantled and replaced by new ones that were more in line with Soviet preferences. The assault on Azerbaijani culture included changing the use of the Arabic alphabet, replacing it first with Latin, then with Cyrillic (Altstadt 2016). In Georgia, the explosive creativity of avant-garde and modernist art which had made Tbilisi a beacon for progressive artists in the independence years 1918–1921 stalled, but did not disappear, after Sovietisation. By the late 1920s, however, Georgian modernism was declared formalist and bourgeois, and its best artists either emigrated, were caught up and executed in Stalin's Great Terror, or were forced to abandon art and reduced to obscurity (Chikhradze 2014). The formalism of Soviet art from the 1930s on and the reduction of national traditions to ethnic

kitsch failed to stifle distinctive cultural production. Georgians were not only able to continue to enjoy their culinary and aesthetic traditions, but to spread them across the USSR (Scott 2016). Especially after the relaxation of restrictions on cultural production in the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev (in office, 1953–64), national art forms flourished. The Gruziiia film studio in Tbilisi became one of the foremost producers of cinema. Poetry, drawing on traditions that predated the Russian Empire, flourished in Azerbaijan under Heydar Aliyev's leadership (Altstadt 1992: 188–91).

But in both Transcaucasia and northern Caucasus, nationalism was expressed largely in relation to the other nationalities of the region. Rivalry, often erupting in violence, over the status of Nagorny Karabakh and Nakhichevan dominated Armenian and Azerbaijani political and personal life at times of upheaval – the revolutionary years of 1904–1906, 1917–1920, and the late 1980s. In the years between Sovietisation in 1920 and the death of Stalin in 1953, however, there were few signs of such tensions. Indeed, Nagorny Karabakh was viewed with some envy by Armenian villages situated in the Azerbaijan Soviet Republic but outside of the administrative borders of Nagorny Karabakh, as a haven where Armenian interests and culture could flourish (Smith 2015). Georgia's internal borders, with Adjara, South Ossetia, and especially Abkhazia, were a more constant source of friction than Nagorny Karabakh. Policies on questions like language and education in Abkhazia and South Ossetia varied across the Soviet period, in response to changing political alignments in both Moscow, Tbilisi, and the autonomies themselves. Territorial reorganisations also impacted the status of minorities and their relations with Georgians. A particular turning point in Abkhazia came in 1931, when Abkhazia's official status was reduced from that of a full union republic to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia. The subordinate status of Abkhazia was confirmed in 1936, coinciding with the death of its charismatic leader Nestor Lakoba. Lakoba had been on good terms with Stalin and able to secure good deals for Abkhazia. But he was seen as a rival by the up and coming leader of Transcaucasia, Lavrenty Beria, who may have had a hand in Lakoba's death. What followed was a rolling back of Abkhaz linguistic and self-government rights, but this was reversed again following the death of Stalin and subsequent arrest and execution of Beria in 1953.

But the most noticeable response to the relative relaxation of central control after Stalin's death was a new form of nationalist competition which occupied and exhausted most of the intellectual energy of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and other academics as well as politicians of Transcaucasia for the rest of the Soviet period and beyond. Debates about the relative territorial claims based on length of settlement by Azerbaijanis and Armenians and about the history of the Abkhaz people had figured in academic life in the 1930s and the late Stalin period. But disputes reached a new level, starting between Georgian and Abkhaz academics, with the publication of *Giorgi Merdula: A Georgian Writer of the Tenth Century*, a new book on the topic of the origins of the Abkhaz by Pavle Ingoroqva in the more open atmosphere of 1954, which sparked a furious dispute (Ingoroqva 1954). Georgian writers initially had the upper hand, insisting that the Abkhaz were no more than a tribe of the Georgians, that their language was heavily influenced by Georgian, and/or that they had only arrived to the region a couple of hundred years previously. But with Moscow taking a keener interest in Abkhazia, and with concerns about Georgian nationalism increasing in the wake of 1956, the more extreme Georgian views were officially denounced, and Abkhaz historians were able to make counter-claims about the longevity of their presence in the region.

The dispute between Armenian and Azerbaijani intellectuals focussed on the origins and ethnicity of the Caucasus Albanians who were accepted as the original inhabitants of the eastern Caucasus (see Chapter 6). This ancient history became linked to more immediate debates about the original inhabitants of Nagorny Karabakh and the relationship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In both sets of disputes the relatively recent history of the Russian Empire figured to some degree – the separate incorporation of Georgia and Abkhazia at the start of the nineteenth century, and Armenian immigration after 1825 – but much of the argument concerned distant and obscure events and developments (Shnirelman 2001). Linked to these was the status of, in particular, Nagorny Karabakh, but mostly demands for a change in its status (and that of Abkhazia) were restricted to petitions or letters to the Soviet leadership by prominent cultural figures. An outbreak of ethnic violence in Stepanakert in Nagorny Karabakh in 1968 was quite exceptional, but indicated that tensions still existed. The more open conflict raging in intellectual circles may have seemed harmless at the time, but fed into the conflagration of nationalism which erupted in 1988.

In the same period, each of the republics of Transcaucasia pursued different projects of national assertiveness. The aftermath to the March 1956 killings in Georgia encouraged both open nationalism and an underground movement which now went beyond celebrating Georgianness by adopting an anti-Soviet and anti-Russian tone (Blauvelt and Smith 2015). The Soviet Armenian government embarked on a reconstruction of Yerevan and other cities according to a newly 'invented' Armenian national style, developed in contrast to Russian and Turkic traditions and replete with echoes of the 1915 genocide (Ter Minassian 2007). This culminated with the opening of the Armenian Genocide Memorial Complex in Yerevan in 1967. In Azerbaijan, for a period, official politics took an increasingly nationalist direction. On 21 August 1956 the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic passed a law decreeing Azerbaijani as the sole official language of the republic. In the wake of this decree, Russians and Armenians began to be excluded from senior posts, and complaints arose that they were being shut out of the political, cultural and social life of the republic altogether. Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Mirza Ibragimov and other leaders were later accused of a range of nationalist and self-interested acts and policies: the Azerbaijani leadership failed to implement a change to the education system in 1959 by insisting that all instruction be in Azerbaijani, promoted only Azerbaijani cultural and historical figures, and indulged in economic nationalism that was summed up in a reported declaration by the head of the Council of Ministers, Sadikh Ragimov, that Azerbaijan would not provide Georgia with gas because 'the gas is ours, Azerbaijani, and we cannot give it to the Georgians' (Fursenko 2003: 363–87). For these nationalist misdemeanours, which Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 had seemed to encourage, Ibragimov and others lost their posts in an extensive purge in 1959.

Nationalism in politics and in academic circles was not unheard of elsewhere in the Soviet Union. But in Transcaucasia they were much more prominent. In part this was due to the approach of the Soviet leadership in interfering less regularly in the affairs of the republics than was the case elsewhere, or at least relying on the more informal channels that grandees such as Lavrenty Beria and Anastas Mikoyan had at their command. But it also rested on the established nature of nationalism in the region where, in spite of shared cultural heritage in many spheres, three large and proud peoples, and a number of smaller ones, were able to, and at times were encouraged to, continue pursuing national development.

The Great Patriotic War and deportations from the Caucasus

These tendencies to express nationalism through competition with other, nearby, national groups, were less obvious among the smaller peoples of the northern Caucasus, where there was a stronger tradition of combined resistance to Russian imperial and Soviet rule, and Islam served to some extent as a unifying force (excluding Russians and Ossetians). Successive territorial reorganisations in the Civil War years and the 1920s did not follow a clear pattern, but on some occasions reflected local rivalries between national groups. In later years Ingush, Ossetian and other historians added their voices to territorial claims based on historical evidence, but never to the same extent as in Transcaucasia. What defined the fate, and shaped the national character of, many of the people of the northern Caucasus was the wholesale ethnic deportations of 1943–44 (see Table 9.1).

It remains difficult to comprehend why and how such a massive operation could be conducted while the war with Hitler's Germany was still in full swing. The deportations tied up thousands of NKVD (interior ministry) troops as well as railway carriages and locomotives when these were needed at the Front. There were precedents for this kind of move, first, in the 'national operations' of Stalin's Great Terror which targeted members of specified nationalities, but where there was at least some discrimination in arresting suspected political opponents. These included large number of Germans, who were especially suspect at a time of growing tensions with Germany. In the months after the outbreak of war in June 1941, this process was stepped up so that the entire German population of the Volga region, some half a million individuals, was deported to more remote parts of the Soviet Union.

With no warning, this process of deporting entire national groups from their homelands was extended to the Caucasus, beginning with 73,000 Karachais in November 1943.

Aside from the Crimean Tatars and Kalmyks (and the earlier deported Germans) these operations all took place in the Caucasus. The Meskhetians were a Turkic group living mostly in Georgia, while the others were all recognised territorial nationalities of the northern Caucasus. They, like the Volga Germans, were seen as suspect because of possible allegiance to Turkey, and were especially threatening as they were close to the Soviet-Turkish border (see Chapter 14). The northern Caucasus marked the limits of the German advance, and much of it was occupied, albeit briefly, during 1942–43. In this region the occupation was relatively benign, if that can be said for any occupation, certainly compared to the

Table 9.1 Deportations from the Caucasus, Crimea and Kalmykia

Nationality	Population in republic or region according to 1939 census	Date of deportation
Karachais	73,000	2 November 1943
Kalmyks	131,000	27 December 1943
Chechens	408,000	23 February 1944
Ingush	92,000	23 February 1944
Balkars	43,000	8 March 1944
Meskhetians	200,000	15 November 1944
Crimean Tatars	202,000	18 May 1944

Source: Kreindler (1986: 387). Different sources vary in the figures, but not by huge amounts.

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occupation of Ukraine and western Russia. Many of the mosques closed down by the Soviets were reopened, and religious rights generally restored. The Germans set up and ruled through local governing organs such as a Karachai National Committee, with similar arrangements for the Kabardians and Balkars.

There were a number of reasons the Germans applied this light touch and made extra efforts to involve locals in the administration. Firstly, the German military, the Wehrmacht, remained in charge throughout, not the SS. In official Nazi ideology the Muslims of the northern Caucasus, while inferior to Aryans, were not regarded as sub-human in the way Jews and Slavs were. Indeed, they were regarded with a certain respect and admiration, particularly for the history of resistance to Russian and Soviet rule. More pragmatically, the fact that the population was regarded as anti-Soviet meant the occupiers were more inclined to entrust them with some self-rule, while the difficulties of fully occupying and administering difficult mountainous terrain were also acknowledged (Alexiev 1982).

Within this framework, collaboration between locals and the Germans was perhaps more common than in other occupied regions. This was enough, in any case, to provide a pretext for the wholesale punishment of peoples by removing them from their homelands. It is only possible to speculate on whether collaboration was the real reason for the deportations. The Germans found willing collaborators everywhere they went, but the numbers who resisted German rule or fought loyally in the Soviet Army easily outnumbered the traitors. On the other hand, the Soviet leadership had by now grown accustomed to viewing national characteristics as fixed and immutable, meaning it had become second nature to blame an entire people for the acts of a few. An alternative explanation is that, while the deportation of Germans and Meskhetians was prompted by security concerns (however misplaced), Stalin and Beria used the opportunity and pretext provided by the war to settle old scores and deal decisively with parts of the population that had proved particularly difficult to bring and keep under Soviet rule.

Most of the operations were prepared for months in advance, with NKVD agents infiltrating into the population. In the case of the Balkars, however, it seems that deportation was decided on at short notice in the aftermath of the operation to deport the Chechens and Ingush, based on the expedient that NKVD operatives were still in the region (*Tak eto bylo* 1993). Each operation was expected to take no more than three days, and generally proceeded in much the same way. At dead of night or early morning, village inhabitants were aroused and told to leave with little time for preparation. They were then taken by truck to the nearest rail station, where they were loaded into cattle wagons. Those who resisted, who were unfit to travel, or for whom there just was not enough room or who were found later hiding in the mountains, were mostly shot on the spot. The journey of 20 or more days, with little food or sanitation, resulted in extensive loss of life (Bauer 2002; Comins-Richmond 2002; Kreindler 1986; Nekrich 1981).

A majority of the deportees were sent in this way to northern Kazakhstan or Siberia, where they were dispersed among makeshift camps. There had been little preparation, and malnutrition, malaria and typhoid took a further toll on the deported populations. In all, probably less than half of the population targeted for deportation survived the process itself and the first year of exile. The deportees were often met with initial hostility on the part of the local population, and were widely dispersed. Over time, however, there were many instances of local relations improving and of particular national groups finding ways to gather themselves together, either legally or in defiance of the authorities. In this way strong communities in exile were built, even more bonded together by the traumatic experience, and even more hateful of Soviet rule than before (Pohl 2002).

While these nationalities were able to rebuild and grow strong in exile, much of their history over subsequent decades concerned efforts to return to the northern Caucasus and other homelands. Illegal return started, in relatively small numbers, almost immediately after the Second World War was over. Following Stalin's death and the fall of Beria, in 1957 the territorial status of the Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, Karachais and Balkars was restored. The planned orderly return turned into a disorderly stampede, often provoking conflict with members of other nationalities, such as the Kabardians and Ossetians, who had taken over land and housing belonging to the deportees. The scale and nature of the deportations and their aftermath were among the greatest traumas of the Soviet Union, and their consequences included ethnic conflict in the 1990s and legacies that run through to the present day (Tishkov 1997: 168–69; see also Chapter 15).

Territorial reorganisation and demography

The post-First World War assumption that the territory of the former Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg empires would be divided into nation-states may not have been shared by everyone, not least the populations of ethnically mixed districts (Ginderachter and Fox 2019). But it sufficiently informed the approaches of the national and even socialist revolutionary parties of the Russian Empire that the establishment of borders became a pressing, even existential, matter. The Soviet federal system and the assignment of ethnic preference within national republics or regions added further urgency to the establishment of national borders. The complex ethnic map of the Caucasus, northern and southern, left a number of borders open to challenge, and decisions taken in the early Soviet period were to have significant and lasting consequences.

Borders decided on in the 1920s and in subsequent reorganisations in the Soviet period laid the basis for the territorial divisions between, and within, post-Soviet states (Map 9.1).

The borders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia established in the years of independence were never subjected to much revision by the Soviets. But the Soviets did replicate an earlier experiment in uniting the three republics in a Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR, sometimes referred to by its acronym in Russian, ZSFSR). Although this federation within a federation existed until its formal abolition in 1936, it played little meaningful role other than to act as the vehicle through which Transcaucasia was formally joined to the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922.

By formally joining together the three republics in this way, the TSFSR was able to enter the Soviet federation on a more equal footing with its other founding members, Ukraine and Belarus, although still a long way behind the fourth founder, Russia, in terms of size.

Of more lasting significance were the location and status of the borders of the subordinate territories – Nagorny Karabakh, Nakhichevan, Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia. Abkhazia, in spite of only a minority of its population being actually Abkhaz, was treated as a separate territory, although under a March 1921 agreement it was linked to Georgia with a 'special status', then confirmed as a separate republic in 1925, before demotion to an autonomous republic within Georgia in 1931. In practice it enjoyed almost unqualified self-rule and was answerable directly to Moscow under the leadership of Nestor Lakoba, up until Lakoba's death and the abolition of the TSFSR in 1936. The Adjaran Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the South Ossetian Autonomous Region were established in 1921 and 1922 and did not see their status formally changed or come under challenge until the dying days of the Soviet Union.

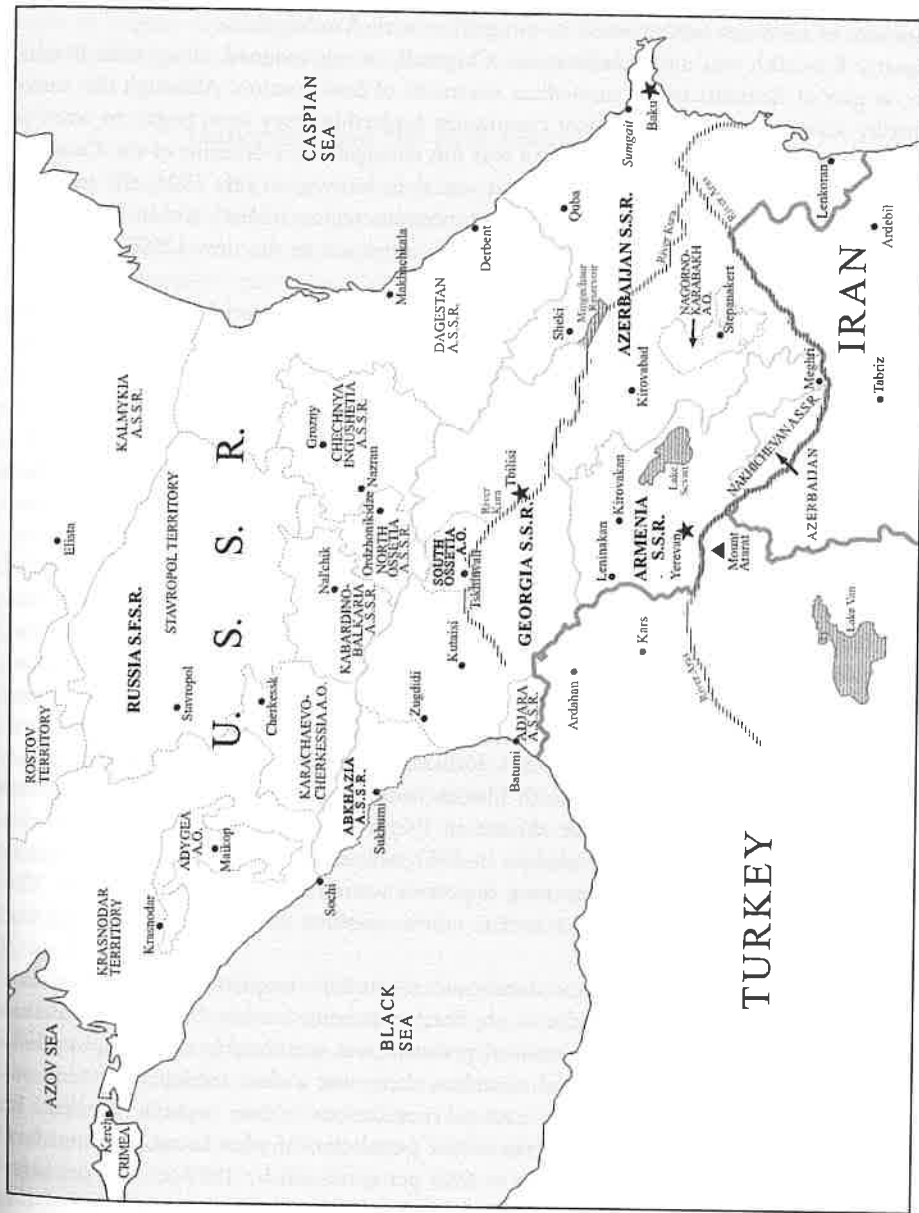
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Map 9.1 The Soviet Caucasus after 1957. Designed specifically for this volume by Glory Hall, all rights reserved

Nakhichevan was something of an anomaly, as it was mostly inhabited by Azerbaijanis, but was some distance from the main part of Azerbaijan, with Armenia in-between. Initially it was allocated autonomous status within Armenia, but in 1921 was designated as part of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. This status remained unchallenged and, as long as borders remained open between the republics, did not present logistical or political problems. The development of air travel further eased its integration with Azerbaijan.

Nagorny Karabakh was more problematic. Originally it was assigned, along with Nakhichevan, as part of Armenia in the immediate aftermath of Sovietisation. Although this move was initially accepted by the Azerbaijani communist leadership, they soon began to warn of unrest and anti-Soviet feeling if the decision was not changed. By a decision of the Caucasus Bureau of the Russian Communist Party (as it was then known) in July 1921, the status of Nagorny Karabakh was altered to that of an autonomous region (*oblast'*) within Azerbaijan, which was formally implemented in July 1923 and confirmed in the new USSR Constitution adopted in January 1924 (Libaridian 1988).

The northern Caucasus was subject to much more frequent territorial reorganisations. In late 1918 a Gorskaia ('Mountainous') Autonomous Republic was created with the promise of extensive self-rule, in part designed to win the mountain population over to the side of the Reds in the Civil War. A year later a separate Dagestan republic was formed, followed by other, smaller, autonomous regions and republics. By the end of 1922, separate autonomies were in place for the Kabardians, Balkars, Karachais, Cherkess and Chechens. When the Gorskaia Republic was finally dissolved in 1924, Ingush and North Ossetian autonomous regions were created. Given the small population sizes and the difficulties of drawing clear ethnic borders, it was decided in many cases to combine ethnic groups in one republic or region. Thus Dagestan was created and run as a multi-ethnic republic, while the Kabardians and Balkars shared an autonomous republic, as did the Karachais and Cherkess who shared an autonomous region. Finally, in 1934 the Chechens and Ingush were united under an autonomous region, which was upgraded to the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936. Most of these republics and regions were abolished or renamed following the deportations of 1943 and 1944. Kabardians were able to acquire land that had previously belonged to Balkars, and North Ossetia took over much of the Ingush territory and Ingush-inhabited properties in the district of Prigorodnyi. The official reversal of the deportation decisions by Nikita Khrushchev in 1957 caused a crisis throughout the region, as land and property belonging to returning deportees was already occupied by others. The tensions resulting from this continued to fan ethnic conflicts beyond the demise of the USSR (see Chapter 15).

The legacy of Stalin's deportations dominated territorial competition in the northern Caucasus in the post-Stalin years. In the south, borders remained stable, but the most defining feature of the period in terms of national presence was a noticeable demographic shift. Outside of the autonomous regions and republics, there was a clear tendency in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to consolidate national populations within republic borders. In 1897, Georgians had made up 55.7 per cent of the population of what became the territory of Soviet Georgia. By 1959, this had risen to 64.3 per cent, and by 1989 to 70.1 per cent. The change was clearest in Tbilisi, which had been a largely Armenian town before the Bolshevik revolution but was overwhelmingly Georgian by the end of the Soviet Union. Aside from Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia, the major populations in Georgia were Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and they were concentrated in particular regions in the south and east of the country respectively. For Azerbaijan, the population changed from 59.8 per cent Azerbaijani in 1897 to 67.5 per cent in 1959 and to 82.7 per cent in 1989.

For Armenia, it was 53.2 per cent in 1897, 88 per cent in 1959, and 93.3 per cent in 1989 (Kaiser 1994: 64, 174). The later figures already reflected an accelerated exchange of population between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the wake of conflicts over Karabakh, which was to further consolidate populations in the succeeding years. But already it was clear that, whether through the provision of incentives or the use of force, or a natural tendency for people to migrate towards their 'own' republics, especially after the war the three Transcaucasian republics were becomingly increasingly homogenised.

Leadership and the path towards disintegration

With the Caucasus relatively isolated from the rest of the USSR, the question of local leadership assumed particular importance. First Secretaries of the Union and Autonomous Republics were not just ciphers of the authorities in Moscow; they acted as independent authorities and, increasingly, came to represent national interests and constituencies.

In the northern Caucasus, leadership turnover and purges were so frequent in the 1920s and 1930s that it was difficult to establish any significant power base. In the more stable post-Stalin years, it was possible for someone like Timbora Mal'bakhov to be First Secretary of the Kabardino-Balkar regional committee of the Communist Party for almost thirty years, from 1956 to 1985. During this time he built his presence as a 'strongman', lavished out patronage, and amassed considerable power and wealth (Gorlizki 2010).

Leaders in Transcaucasia had the potential for even greater influence. Some of them, notably Sergo Ordzhonikidze, Lavrenty Beria, Heydar Aliyev and Eduard Shevardnadze were promoted to key positions in Moscow. Stalin himself had not been active in the Caucasus since well before the Revolution, but maintained personal ties with the region and frequently vacationed on the Black Sea coast, as did Anastas Mikoyan, the senior surviving Armenian revolutionary and sole survivor of the Baku Commissars from 1918. Mikoyan, Ordzhonikidze and Stalin were less inclined than others to directly promote the interests of 'their' nationality, but could intervene decisively in internal disputes. Thus Ordzhonikidze, for example, opposed the more 'national minded' Georgian leaders in the autumn of 1922, although he was ultimately over-ruled by Lenin. He also led the meeting of the Caucasus Bureau of the Russian Communist Party which decided the status of Nagorny Karabakh in 1921. In both cases, personal connections may have played some role, but political and ideological considerations, as understood by Ordzhonikidze himself, appear more decisive (Khlevniuk 1995).

Other leaders, especially in the later Soviet years, were not ashamed to push for particular national or regional interests. Often personal ties, whether based on friendship, family, clan or ethnicity were as important as national identification. Beria, for example, surrounded himself with Mingrelians when he was promoted from leading the Transcaucasian Bureau of the CPSU to leading posts in Moscow. Heydar Aliyev, after 13 years of leading Soviet Azerbaijan, was promoted to Moscow by Yuri Andropov. He maintained close ties with the Republic, and especially with the group linked to Nakhichevan, from where he himself hailed. These networks enabled him to survive a later demotion by Mikhail Gorbachev, so that eventually he was able to return as President of independent Azerbaijan (see Chapter 10).

First Secretaries in each of the republics in Transcaucasia not only had the key say in policy making, but enjoyed considerable patronage potential and controlled key appointments, notably in the autonomous regions and republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Politics

in the Soviet Caucasus was, then, the product of a complex web of networks and relationships within and between republics and regions, as well as with Moscow. Rivalries at all levels also made tenure in senior positions extremely insecure up until the 1930s. Although the great purges of 1937–38 had less impact on leading positions in Transcaucasia than elsewhere, in the 1920s and early 1930s there were frequent purges. Beria was able to establish some stability, appointing Kandid Charkviani (in office, 1938–52) as his own successor in Georgia, and supporting Mir Jafar Baghirov (in office, 1933–53) as leader in Azerbaijan. In 1952, a decline in Beria's influence with Stalin had ramifications in the Caucasus, where a number of Beria's clients, including Charkviani, were purged. Following Beria's arrest in 1953, a much more extensive purge was conducted which included the removal of Beria's relatives to Kazakhstan, the arrest and execution of Bagirov, and other leadership changes. Khrushchev himself took control of policy in Abkhazia for a while.

The First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan from 1954–59, Imam Mustafayev, was removed in the purge of 1959, as he was held politically responsible for the nationalist direction that the Party had taken, as well as for mistakes in economic policy. After this, however, the region benefitted from the security afforded to senior officials throughout the Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev. As well as Aliyev (in office, 1969–82), Karen Demirchyan (in office, 1974–88) in Armenia, Vasily Mzhavanadze (in office, 1953–72) and Eduard Shevardnadze (in office, 1972–85) in Georgia were notable for their longevity in office. This pattern of low levels of leadership change under Brezhnev was, in most cases, replicated in the autonomous republics and regions of the northern Caucasus (Goryachev 2005: 442–78).

The political stability of the Brezhnev years was thrown apart by the advent of the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, who led the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985–91. Gorbachev initially declared that the national problem had been 'solved' in the Soviet Union, although early crises in Kazakhstan and Yakutia shook this belief. His main concern was political and economic reform, and in the national republics the policies of promoting openness had unexpected consequences. The environmental movement in Armenia developed into a strong, pro-democracy Armenian National Movement, which brought Levon Ter-Petrosian to power in 1990.

In Georgia demands for national independence motivated a mass protest movement on a scale only matched in the Baltic republics, and which prompted the military intervention of 1989. While much of the population could coalesce around national demands, political opposition, however, was highly fragmented as leaders of different dissident factions and former communist officials who still retained some popularity competed for power. In a controversial election in October 1990, where the campaign was marred by violence and the election itself subject of a call for a boycott by some opposition groups, the anti-Soviet dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia became chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia. This was the prelude for a period of turmoil and civil war, which is described in later chapters.

Politics in all three Transcaucasian republics, and across the northern Caucasus was, however, dominated by ethnic politics in the last years of the Soviet Union. Violence erupted over Nagorny Karabakh in 1987, and over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 1989–90. Tensions between different nationalities in the northern Caucasus erupted in 1989 in the first clashes between Ingush and Ossetians in the town of Prigorodnyi, and smaller-scale violence occurred throughout the region (see Chapter 15).

The formal demise of the USSR on 26 December 1991 was barely noticed in the Caucasus. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia had already effectively been acting independently of

the centre, and the ongoing ethnic and political conflicts simply continued across the Soviet/post-Soviet divide. The republics and regions of the northern Caucasus retained, for the time being, their status within the Russian Federation, and here too, ongoing conflicts including the mounting political crisis in Chechnya continued without pause.

Conclusion

The substantial differences between the northern and southern Caucasus before the Soviet period were, if anything, accentuated by developments between 1921 and 1991. While the three Transcaucasian republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were able ultimately to prosper economically, to flourish culturally, and to avoid, for the most part, direct interference from Moscow, the northern Caucasus was subjected to partial linguistic russification and demographic reorganisation, culminating in the wartime deportations. The region remained poor, dependent on Moscow, and subject to the whimsical actions of local 'strongmen'.

Nevertheless, the fraught issue of nationality and identity came to dominate both the north and the south, especially at the beginning and end of the Soviet period. In Transcaucasia, nationally minded governments oversaw demographic shifts in favour of the titular nationality, publicly sponsored culture, and an academic focus on national claims, which privileged more and more the rights and status of the dominant nationality, and excluded other nationalities more and more from power and from the connection to their linguistic and cultural base, even where this was just across the border. The three republics adopted many of the key symbols and trappings of nation-states and, had it not been for disputed and ethnically mixed territories within their claimed historical borders, they might have emerged from the Soviet Union as strong and stable political entities. But the peripheries of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh prevented this happening. Developments in the Soviet period simply made notions of a multicultural society incompatible with the demands of the forces that emerged victorious after independence. In the northern Caucasus constant reorganisation and division ultimately had similar results, although national demands were framed more in terms of access to land, housing and so on than in nation-state terms.

A mixed history of resistance and accommodation characterised the experience of Soviet rule in the Caucasus. These characteristics could be seen in the earlier history of the region as well as in post-Soviet developments. Other Soviet legacies – corruption, the importance of informal relationships and forms of economic activity, and the politicisation of history and other academic disciplines, have also impacted post-Soviet development. The inability to embrace national difference was not always obvious during the Soviet period but was, ultimately, a twentieth-century development which continues to haunt the region.

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