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Manifestations of Nationalism: The Caucasus from Late Soviet Times to the Early 1990s

NADA BOŠKOVSKA & JERONIM PEROVIĆ

WHEN MIKHAIL GORBACHEV INTRODUCED HIS POLICY OF REFORMS, he was not prepared for the rise of nationalism and ethnic conflict that would grip the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s. As a native of the ethnically mixed Stavropol *Krai* in the North Caucasus, Gorbachev, according to his own account, was well aware of the multinational character of the Soviet Union and the sensitivities of some of its ethnic minority groups (Nahaylo & Swoboda 1990, p. 231). However, in line with Marxist thinking, which anticipated the decline of nationalism, he was brought up believing that the ‘friendship among peoples’ was strong and that in socialism nations would ultimately grow ever closer together until their complete fusion (*sliyanie*) into a supranational ‘Soviet people’. As a result, when Gorbachev became general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985, nationalities policy was not on his economic or political agenda. The 27th Congress of the CPSU in March 1986 even contained a declaration that ‘the nationalities question inherited from the past has been successfully solved in the Soviet Union’ (Denber 2018, p. 279). Gorbachev, as he would later confess, initially underestimated the importance of this issue completely (Lapidus 1989, p. 210).¹ He was not able to foresee, therefore, that by introducing far-reaching changes to the Soviet polity through political liberalisation and economic reform, he would reopen the ‘national question’ and ultimately unleash powerful forces that would become increasingly difficult for the central state to control.

Gorbachev experienced a first taste of the seriousness of the ‘national question’ in December 1986, when the long-standing first party secretary of the Kazakh Soviet Republic, Dinmukhamed Kunaev, was replaced with an ethnic Russian, Gennadii Kolbin. This imprudent move on the part of the Soviet leadership was a break with the traditional practice of reserving the post of party first secretary in a non-Russian ethnically defined republic for a member of its ‘titular nationality’. Large demonstrations subsequently gripped the Kazakh capital of Almaty (Alma-Ata), which were severely repressed, leaving several people dead. In the years that followed, manifestations of nationalism—including Russian nationalism—became more

¹While he did in fact acknowledge that he underestimated this issue during the time he was still general secretary, he later tended to object to such accusations. See, for example, his interview in *Der Spiegel*, 33/2011, pp. 98–102, here p. 100.

frequent throughout the Soviet Union. While the Baltic republics were leading the ‘parade of sovereignties’ on the non-Russian-populated Soviet periphery, the most serious challenge arose in the multi-ethnic Caucasus region, where, by 1988, the Armenian–Azerbaijani dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, a largely Armenian-populated territory belonging to Azerbaijan, had turned into a grave conflict with dozens of casualties and thousands of people fleeing their homes. Gorbachev wanted to avoid bloodshed, but he simply had no recipe for solving this protracted situation. One of his top policy advisers at the time, Anatolii Cherniaev, recalled that during an internal meeting on 9 October 1988, Gorbachev exclaimed:

I want it to be done humanely; I don’t want blood, I want for us to start talking with each other. ... But I do not know a solution either. If I knew what the solution is, nothing could stop me, I would break all the conventions to get it done. But I don’t know!²

If in 1987 the collapse of the Soviet Union still seemed impossible, by 1991 it had become inevitable, and nationalism was its driving force (Beissinger 2002). When the Soviet Union was finally dissolved at the end of 1991 and Moscow started withdrawing its troops from the South Caucasus, nothing could ultimately stop Armenians and Azerbaijanis from going to war against each other. Within weeks of the Soviet Union’s demise, military confrontation erupted over Nagorno-Karabakh. Fighting lasted until the spring of 1994, leaving some 25,000 people dead and turning more than one million into refugees—although the precise figures are hard to verify (De Waal 2003, p. 285). The year 1992 also saw ethnic tensions erupting in other parts of the Caucasus region: conflict escalated in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, when Georgian armed forces unsuccessfully tried to prevent the secession of these two territories from the Georgian state. Several thousand died during the wars of secession in the early 1990s, while hundreds of thousands, mostly Georgians, were driven out of their homes in ‘ethnic cleansing’ campaigns (Cornell 2001, pp. 153–62). Conflict also escalated between Ossetians and Ingush over the disputed Prigorodnyi district, leaving almost 650 people dead by June 1994 according to official sources (Cornell 2001, p. 248).

While armed conflicts also developed elsewhere during 1992 (in Transnistria and Tajikistan), the Caucasus became the site for the most destructive of the post-Soviet wars, after Russia’s armed forces intervened on a massive scale in Chechnya in December 1994, in an attempt to restore Moscow’s sovereignty over this separatist republic. The First Chechen War was officially concluded in August 1996 only to be resumed, after a period of relative peace, in August 1999, with Russia invading a second time in response to an incursion by Islamist Chechen fighters into the neighbouring republic of Dagestan. The military phase of the Second Chechen War lasted until about 2003. While the separatist movement was severely disrupted by this time, fighting against militant Islamist groups continued well until the late 2000s, with military operations increasingly carried out also by pro-Russian Chechen forces. The Chechen conflict brought immense suffering and devastation to the people of this small North Caucasian republic. The precise number of casualties is unknown: Russia’s human rights organisation ‘Memorial’ estimates that at least 15,000 members of Russia’s

²*The Diary of Anatoly S. Chernyaev, 1988*, The National Security Archive, Washington, DC, 2008, pp. 49–50, available at: https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB250/Chernyaev_Diary_1988.pdf, accessed 13 May 2018.

armed forces may have been killed during the two Russo–Chechen wars.³ The number of Chechen ‘rebels’ killed and the scale of civilian casualties were much higher, but the figures are disputed (Trenin & Malashenko 2004, pp. 141–42, 156–58; Sakwa 2005, pp. 139–41). What we know, however, is that no other conflict in the post-Soviet space has brought more death and destruction than the Chechen wars.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was ‘one of the most notoriously unanticipated developments of modern history’ (Beissinger 2002, p. 2), and accusing Gorbachev in retrospect for not foreseeing the destructive forces of nationalism would not be entirely fair. In fact, for most people living in the Soviet Union in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, the ‘national question’ did indeed seem to have been solved, as relations among the different ethnic groups appeared to be fairly harmonious. This was true even for Chechnya, historically the most troublesome part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, where no major ethnic unrest was reported from the 1960s through to the late 1980s (Perović 2018).

How, then, did this outpouring of nationalist sentiments come about? While the Soviets were inclined to view manifestations of nationalism as relics of a more primitive social order, observers in the West tended to stress the antiquity and universality of national sentiments, condemning the Soviet state’s efforts at Russification, suppression of non-Russians and state control (Suny 1989, p. 505). From this perspective, ethnicity was seen as a basis for legitimate assertiveness, and the issue for some contemporary Western scholars ultimately came down to whether or not non-Russians would eventually have the strength to ‘rebel’ against the centralised Soviet state (Motyl 1987). Yet, these approaches ultimately failed to explain the sources of the nationalism that had surfaced by the end of the 1980s, and the hostilities that emerged among some of the Soviet Union’s ethnic communities.

What largely escaped observers at the time was the fact that nationalism was essentially modern and a by-product of the particularities of Soviet ‘nation-building’ policies, which the Bolsheviks had introduced in the early 1920s. At the core of early Bolshevik nationalities policy were the creation of ethnically defined administrative territories and *korenizatsiya* (nativisation), the advancement of non-Russians, their languages and cultures within their respective ethnic territories. In this ‘affirmative action empire’, members of the so-called ‘titular nations’ were promoted to positions in cultural and educational institutions, as well as in the party and the state apparatus (Martin 2001). Most of the larger ethnic groups living inside the Soviet Union (with the prominent exception of the Russians) were granted ethnically defined territories. As the Soviet Union’s federal structure was hierarchically organised, the number and strength of ethnic institutions depended on the status of an individual autonomous territory within the overall federal structure. At the top were the union republics, which constituted, according to the Soviet Constitution, separate state entities with the right to secede from the Soviet Union. The union republics were generally less vulnerable and under less pressure than those national units that were subordinated to the union republics, that is, the autonomous republics, provinces or districts with fewer and weaker ethnic institutions (Gorenburg 2003).

The Soviet federal model with its autonomous ethnic entities stood in stark contrast to the highly centralised nature of the Communist Party, where power was concentrated within the

³The figure of 15,000 is for the time period 1999–2007. See ‘Armed Conflicts Report: Russia’, Project Ploughshares, January 2009, available at: <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/02/25/Russia.pdf>, accessed 21 May 2018.

party's central committees. Given the high degree of centralisation within the party and tight control over political processes from top to bottom, ensured also through the state's internal security organs, the federal structure appeared to be only a nominal feature of the Soviet state. 'Autonomy' therefore did not seem to matter greatly, as it was largely confined to the area of culture, language and non-political issues.

The Bolsheviks did not see their policy of empowering the non-Russian nationalities as an end in itself, but as a means towards achieving their ultimate goal of socialist transformation. The 'nations' forged from the various peoples, as bearers of new socialist ideas, would ultimately amalgamate into a single socialist people. However, while ethnic communities linked together through language, folk culture, a common territory and religion had existed on what became the Soviet Union for centuries, it was largely thanks to Soviet nationalities policy that these ethnicities became 'coherent, articulate, and conscious nations' (Suny 1989, p. 506). When Gorbachev set out to implement his ambitious programme of reform, these nations indeed began to articulate their interests, sparking a general discussion about power and autonomy in the Soviet federal system. The mere fact that the Soviet leadership allowed a discussion on these issues challenged long-standing official discourses and thus undermined the Communist Party's grip on power. Gorbachev's policies of 'openness' (*glasnost*) and 'restructuring' (*perestroika*) opened up opportunities for the national elites to claim more rights and competences over political and economic affairs within their territories.

In the process of renegotiating centre-periphery relations, the national elites discovered that ethnic-centred historical narratives were a powerful resource that could be used to mobilise their populations and promote their interests. In this context, reference to historical wrongs—real or imagined—played an important role. The main lines of conflict evolved between the Soviet 'centre' and the non-Russian 'periphery' (and between the Soviet centre and Russian nationalism), but also within the periphery, among different non-Russian ethnic groups, struggling not only over sovereignty and territory but also over the interpretation of history and past events. Grievances were specific to each ethnic group, but proved to be especially powerful where past injustices were still vivid in people's collective memories. References to history, often in connection with anniversaries of important events, could now be voiced openly as a result of *glasnost* and were used by national elites to justify, or legitimise, certain political claims. But they also had an important societal function in that they served as a point of orientation in times of rapid change and crisis; history functioned as a basis for national mobilisation and a means to create a consensus on a national past.

Content and structure of this special issue

Yet, if Gorbachev opened the 'national question' unintentionally, where did 'nationalism' come from? This special issue provides answers by turning its focus to the multi-ethnic Caucasus, a region that counted between 30 and 40 minor and major ethnic conflicts and territorial disputes by the late 1980s and early 1990s (Tsutsiev 2006, pp. 84–92). Five of these conflicts would eventually erupt into larger military confrontations: the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the conflicts between Abkhazia and Georgia and between South Ossetia and Georgia, the Ossetian–Ingush as well as the Russian–Chechen conflicts. As of today, none of these disputes have been fully resolved.

Grouped together under the common title ‘Manifestations of Nationalism’, the contributions do not attempt to explain the demise of the Soviet Union; rather, they look at the role and the use of history as a powerful driver of political processes, which often (but not always) favoured ethnic division and conflict. The seven essays collected here were initially presented at an international conference titled ‘Conflicting Narratives: History and Politics in the Caucasus’ organised by the Office of Eastern European History at the Department of History of the University of Zurich and held on 9–11 December 2015. The conference proceeded from the assumption that historical narratives have played, and in fact continue to play, an important role in the political trajectories and national consolidation of the states and ethnic territories of the Caucasus region. Oftentimes, the national narratives that evolved were established in opposition to supranational Soviet histories, emphasising political and territorial claims rather than representing a reflection of the past in its own right.

The authors of the essays presented at the conference came from various disciplines. They were dealing with both the northern (Russian) and southern part of the Caucasus region, covering a period from the late Soviet era until after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. The questions put forward at the conference included: how do notions of the past manifest themselves in official discourses? To what extent do historical myths affect political developments? In which ways does politics influence historical narratives and historiography? What is the current state of historical research on sensitive issues of the past in the Caucasus?

Arsène Saparov’s contribution, entitled ‘Re-negotiating the Boundaries of the Permissible: The National(ist) Revival in Soviet Armenia and Moscow’s Response’, presents a historical case study examining the events surrounding the 1965 commemoration in Soviet Armenia of the 50th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. Based mostly on new archival findings from the Armenian National Archive, the author shows how an unauthorised and largely spontaneous public demonstration, which took place in Yerevan on 24 April 1965 in remembrance of the genocide, eventually brought about a change in the official Soviet position regarding this traumatic event in Armenian history. By recognising the Armenian position on the issue of genocide and the right of Armenia to honour this event, formerly unthinkable nationalistic ideas were brought into mainstream official discourse. This had an important impact on the trajectory of Armenian nationalism in later years. In fact, the author asserts that the events of 24 April 1965 marked an ‘important watershed’, as popular demands, which were supported by local Armenian party and state authorities, successfully challenged the Soviet authorities to allow commemorations, thereby granting legitimacy to notions of genocide, justice and territorial claims. All of these notions became relevant during the *glasnost*’ years, when Armenians reaffirmed their territorial claims over the largely Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh region, demanding that this territory be united with the Armenian ASSR.

The 1915 genocide of Ottoman Armenians is also at the centre of Vicken Cheterian’s analysis, ‘The Uses and Abuses of History: Genocide and the Making of the Karabakh Conflict’. In his contribution, Cheterian asks how the reference to this event in Armenian, Azerbaijani and Turkish discourses was connected with the evolution of the Karabakh conflict in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He argues that all parties have incorporated the genocide into their discourses, albeit in radically different ways. For Armenians, this traumatic event was deeply entrenched in the collective memory of the nation, and thus shaped the ways in which developments were perceived. Anti-Armenian pogroms carried out by Azerbaijanis, namely the Sumgait massacre in February 1988, marked the beginnings of large-scale violence,

bringing back memories of the past. Against this background, the war with Azerbaijan was also viewed in connection to past traumatic events, as a means to defend Armenians against yet another potential annihilation. While reference to the genocide has increased in Armenian discourse over the years, the same also applies to Azerbaijan, which has not only taken over the Turkish position of genocide denial but also portrays itself as a victim of attempted genocide by the Armenians. Against this background, the author sees little hope that the Karabakh issue can be resolved or that the tensions between the conflicting parties will be eased: as long as these positions remain such a long way from each other, there is no real prospect of reconciliation.

In their essay, Sergey Rumyantsev and Sevil Huseynova examine everyday nationalism in Armenia and Azerbaijan by exploring the experience of ethnic Armenians living in Baku in 1990, that is, after the pogroms of January 1990, and the life of ethnic Azerbaijanis in a small village in Armenia until 1989, when the residents of this village moved to Azerbaijan, having agreed on a peaceful 'swap' with an ethnic Armenian village in Azerbaijan. The authors base their essay on more than 30 biographical interviews conducted during 2005–2009, asking people, among other things, to recall their lives in Soviet times in order to understand what concepts such as 'friendship among peoples' and 'internationalism' meant, and whether and in which ways the eruption of nationalist conflict later in the Soviet period destroyed former memories of everyday life. The two case studies offer interesting insights: a significant share of residents of Baku, a truly 'international' city due to its ethnic mix, perceived themselves as 'Bakuvians', as members of a sort of supranational community. For the 'Bakuvians', belonging to the 'cosmopolitan' world of the city was the key marker of identity and more important than ethnicity, religion or traditional culture. A 'Bakuvian' could be an Azerbaijani, an Armenian, a Russian or a Jew, but a person with a different habitus could not be a 'Bakuvian'. In the rural areas, the situation was markedly different. Apart from a few exceptions, villages represented homogenous ethnic communities. Armenians, Russians or Azerbaijanis lived side by side in neighbouring villages, but rarely in the same village; unlike in the city, interethnic marriages were the exception rather than the rule. In both cases, however, most of the interviewees recall interethnic relations as being fairly peaceful and friendly. At the same time, people do not deny that there were problems regarding relations among the different nationalities, which they mostly attribute to the 'unfair' hierarchy among nationalities created by the Soviet federal system. Once the conflict erupted, the system simply did not offer any resources for a peaceful solution; on the contrary, Soviet discourse on nationality and the practices of nationalities policy aggravated ethnic divisions and contributed to the formation of an ethnic 'other' as the enemy.

In her contribution, titled 'The Armenian Earthquake of 1988: A Perfect Stage for the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict', Katja Doose opens up yet another perspective on the evolution of the complicated Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. Her focus is on one of the most devastating natural disasters in Soviet history, the earthquake that shook Armenia in December 1988, causing large-scale destruction, the death of at least 25,000 people, and leaving hundreds of thousands without shelter. Rather than studying the earthquake as such, the author is interested in the social and political dimensions of this catastrophe and analyses the ways in which different actors—the Armenians, the Azerbaijanis and the Soviet government—reacted to and interpreted this event. While Moscow sought to use this event as an opportunity to mobilise union-wide help and give new substance to the Soviet slogan of 'friendship among peoples',

both Armenia and Azerbaijan sought to use the earthquake to further their nationalistic demands: Azerbaijan saw the event as delayed gratification for Armenian action and even as God's 'punishment' for Armenia's unjust claims regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. In the case of the Armenians, the earthquake served as a catalyst for a national mobilisation that had been well underway by the time the tragedy struck. Feeling more vulnerable than ever before and not at all happy with Moscow's disaster management, Armenians felt threatened and unprotected, which helped to bring people together in seeking to defend what they considered just national goals. Gorbachev's hope that the disaster might help to ease growing ethnic animosities would turn out to be an illusion. In fact, rather than overcoming existing ethnic tensions, the way the disaster was perceived by Armenians and Azerbaijanis exacerbated ethnic conflict and also alienated Armenia even more from the Soviet Union.

Because of the various wars and ethnic tensions that have gripped the non-Russian-populated areas of the North Caucasus, researchers have tended to view the entire region as one large zone of conflict, and most of the existing analysis has dealt with the wars in Chechnya. Almost no attention has been paid to those areas of the North Caucasus that managed the difficult transformation period of the late 1980s and early 1990s in a relatively peaceful way. Ian Lanzillotti's contribution rectifies this shortcoming by focusing on the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, which did not witness major upheavals during this time and where relations between the two 'titular nations', the Kabardians and the Balkars, have been fairly harmonious. His contribution, entitled 'Towards an Explanation of Intercommunal Peace in Kabardino-Balkaria: Post-war Nationalities Policy and Late Soviet Society in the North Caucasus', argues that this had to do not only with the fact that relations between these two neighbouring ethnic groups had historically not been too conflict-ridden but also with the Stalin-era campaign of *korenizatsiya* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, that is, during the precise time when the Balkars lived as exiles in far-away Central Asia (in 1944, Stalin deported this people, as well as the Chechens, the Ingush and the Karachai, to Central Asia, under the pretext that they had collaborated with the enemy during World War II). While historians generally tend to see *korenizatsiya* as a characteristic of Bolshevik nationalities policy in the 1920s and 1930s, Lanzillotti demonstrates convincingly that the period after World War II saw renewed efforts on the part of the Soviet leadership to promote indigenous languages and the formation of a native intelligentsia in parallel with nativisation efforts in the industrial and the education sector. When the Balkars and other North Caucasians were amnestied and allowed to return home in 1957/1958, they profited in unintended ways from this ongoing Soviet nativisation campaign, making their re-integration into the republic in the late 1950s and early 1960s relatively easy. While the author concedes that there were other factors at work that helped to facilitate the smooth and conflict-free return of the Balkars, the state-sponsored nativisation efforts were central in fostering harmonious intercommunal relations during late Soviet times.

Yet another North Caucasian republic, Dagestan, is at the centre of Victor Shnirelman's analysis. His contribution, 'The Politics of the Past in Dagestan: National Unity and Symbolic Revolt', looks into the evolution of historiographical debates regarding the concept of a unified Dagestani identity and the challenges posed to this concept by representatives of local ethnic groups. Shnirelman focuses in particular on the ways that the past has been instrumentalised in pursuit of political and social goals by Kumyk and Lezgin ethno-political activists. The Kumyks and Lezgins represent, together with the Avars, Dargins and Laks, the

largest ethnic groups of multi-ethnic Dagestan. However, since the Avars and Dargins are the most populous and also experienced the highest population growth in late Soviet times, they increasingly dominated government agencies within the republic during the late Soviet period. Avars and Dargins thus felt that their interests were best protected within a united Soviet Dagestan republic and consequently promoted the idea of a united Dagestani identity and a common national history. For the Kumyks and Lezgins, the situation was different, as they felt increasingly underrepresented and threatened by the larger ethnic groups. Consequently, representatives of these peoples began to demand greater rights and privileges already during Soviet times. Scholars belonging to different ethnic groups were engaged in myth-making by developing various historical theories—and at times even reverting to outright falsification of history—in order to underline the ‘remote past’ of their ethnic community. In so doing, they sought to strengthen ethnic claims to ‘ancestral’ territories or advance certain political interests. During the time of ‘sovereignisation’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s, broader nationalist movements emerged in Dagestan, debates on history became more radical, and ethnic tensions increased. Fortunately, Dagestan avoided open ethnic clashes and warfare in the early 1990s. However, it was still a place of severe ethnic confrontation, which largely manifested itself in the politics of the past.

The final contribution to this special issue is by Bruno Coppieters. His essay, ‘Four Positions on the Recognition of States in and after the Soviet Union, with Special Reference to Abkhazia’, assesses the international community’s recognition policies in the post-Soviet space. The essay takes a normative perspective, with the focus largely on Georgia and the specific case of Abkhazia. The author starts with the observation that while the international community accepted the declarations of sovereignty and independence of union republics, it was not inclined to grant the same rights to the autonomous administrative–political territories within these republics. The international community of 1991 based its position on the principle of ‘continuity’, thus basically following the Soviet Constitution, which granted only the union republics the formal right of secession. In light of the bloody conflicts that erupted in Georgia, but also in other parts of the Caucasus region, over the question of whether or not subordinated entities within union republics should have the right to sovereignty and even independence, the author discusses three alternative positions. Each of these positions was present in Soviet debates on state reform and state creation: the ‘remedial position’ defending the right to secession based on justified historical claims; the ‘choice position’, which argues for freedom of choice regarding the right to secession for any ethnic-territorial entity existing within the Soviet federal system; and the ‘effectivist position’, which proceeds from the position that the recognition of a certain state entity should take into account the factual control of the political authorities over the population within a territory. After discussing these alternatives, and the ‘just causes’ each of these positions claim, the author concludes that the international community was correct to adopt the ‘continuity position’ in 1991.

This special issue makes an important contribution to our understanding of the ways nationalism has manifested itself in the Caucasus region, at times in violent forms, from the late Soviet times until after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In these processes, historical narratives, myth-making and memory politics have played an essential role. In order to understand how specific ethnic conflicts evolved and eventually turned violent, one thus needs to analyse the ways that history has been used—and still is used—for specific political and nationalist purposes. Therefore, any effort at solving the protracted Caucasian conflicts

must involve a sincere and critical reappraisal of the past. This goes for all the conflicts in the region, but special attention needs to be paid to the Armenian–Azerbaijani struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh, which is currently the most severe and the most dangerous, as indicated by the fact that the conflicting sides are very far away from finding common ground when it comes to the interpretation of the past. It is thus laudable that scholars have started paying more attention; but much more effort will be needed.

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