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## Soviet Nationality Policy: Impact on Ethnic Conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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Soviet Nationality Policy: Impact on Ethnic Conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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## **DEDICATION**

To my wife and our little baby girl. I am so lucky to have had your love and support throughout the entire graduate experience.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to answer two interlinked questions with respect to ethnic conflict in Georgia: Why and how two ethnic groups (Abkhazians and Ossetians) in Georgia sought secession in 1990s rather than accepting unity under a common Georgian roof, and what explains the occurrence of ethnic conflicts between the Abkhazians and Georgians and between the South Ossetians and Georgians?

The central argument of this thesis is that Soviet nationality policy was a foremost driving force in shaping consciousness of being ethnic groups in Georgia and set the stage for the inter-ethnic conflicts of the post-Soviet era. A number of factors explain the particular inter-ethnic conflicts in Georgia among ethnic groups, including a long historical relationship between the Georgian people and the Abkhaz and Ossetian minorities, but I argue that the foremost factor was the role of Soviet nationality policy that evolved from Lenin to Gorbachev, a policy that granted ethnic groups some level of privileges and fostered a wave of national self-assertion, Soviet nationality policy and the Soviet federal structure created numerous ethnic- and territorial-based autonomous units during the Soviet era; these units shaped their own political institutions, national intelligentsias, and bureaucratic elites, forming the basis for later nationalistic movements and developing a wish for self-determination and full independence. These institutions and beliefs made ethnic conflict in a post-Soviet Georgia inevitable.



## INTRODUCTION

Conflict between ethnic groups has become one of the major security dilemmas in the post-cold War period in Caucasus. The breakup of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of fifteen new multi-ethnic states, which in turn inflamed ethnic tensions and conflict. As some minority groups have suffered discrimination and some ethnicities have sought to achieve dominance over others increased tensions have erupted into violence in many of these newly independent states. Georgia is one of the post-Soviet states to have bitterly experienced such ethnic conflict.

As John M. Cotter (1999) states, the existence of many “nations without states” in a region makes violence between ethnic groups inevitable. In the conflict literature, there are numerous studies that have accounted for variations of conflict and its intensity; their explanations range across a wide scope, from the “ancient hatreds” and old rivalries, to systematic manipulation by contentious elites, to religious and cultural disputes.

All scholars studying conflict agree that conflict throughout the world reached its peak after breakup of the Soviet Union (Volkan, 2006; Souleimanov, 2013). Vamik Volkan’s seminal book, *Killing in the name of identity: a study of bloody conflict*, includes a striking story about the collapse of the Soviet Union. The author went to Moscow as a guest of the Diplomatic Academy of the USSR Foreign Ministry, having been assigned the task by the Diplomatic Academy of giving seminars “on the concept of identity and large-group psychology [that] would help representatives of the Soviet republics and other autonomous Soviet political entities understand

each other, value their togetherness, and not fight among themselves” (Volkan, 2006, p. 25). Among the participants of one conference he led were Lithuanian, Kazak, Russian, Azeri, Armenian, and Daghestani delegates, as well as representatives from other parts of the Soviet Union. Volkan writes that “the topics I discussed often induced verbal clashes among representatives from neighboring republics where conflict was already brewing. [...]. On the fourth day an elderly Russian raised his hand and addressed me in perfect English spoken with a heavy Russian accent. ‘Doctor’, he said, ‘we appreciated your efforts. You have been very informative. But, you and I and, I think, everyone in this hall, know that the cookie will crumble’. The cookie of course was the Soviet Union” (Volkan, 2006, p.25).

The eventual crumbling of the “cookie” made inevitable ethnic conflicts. Georgia is one of the most diverse countries in the world, home to a multitude of ethnic minorities, including Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Russians, Ossetians, Yazidis, Kurds, Caucasus Greeks, Ukrainians, Abkhazians, Assyrians, and Jews. The ethnic complexity of this society creates or leads to many problems in the region. From my perspective, a starting point of inter-ethnic conflict in South Caucasus is the Soviet nationality policy that evolved from Lenin to Gorbachev; this policy set the stage for the inter-ethnic conflicts of the post-Soviet era. Soviet nationality policy and the Soviet federal structure created lots of ethnic and territorial based autonomous units during the Soviet era these units shaped their own political institutions, national intelligentsias, and bureaucratic elites. When the central power of the Bolsheviks came to an end, these national institutions served as the basis for the fifteen newly independent states’ self-determination and independence. Secondly, Russian deportation policy led to dramatic changes in the demographic nature of the regions affected. Of course, rise of modern nationalism was one of the main reasons for the emergence of ethnic problems in the post-Soviet era, but it is clear that Russian deportation policy was also primary reason for the emergence of ethnic problems

because it radically altered regions' cultural texture and demographic structure. When the clear signs of the collapse of the Soviet Union appeared, these regions witnessed rise of modern nationalism with problems regarding internal minorities and power struggles among ethnic groups.

Georgia is what Paul Jackson (2004) calls a "fissile state," a state which has a tendency to fragment because of its complex ethnic structure and history of instability and conflict among ethnic groups. Ethnic conflicts in Georgia have remained in the shadow of external and internal violent ethnic conflicts, especially in Chechnya, but they deserve more attention internationally. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian nation-building process gained momentum. This was not an easy process for Georgians because the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century proved to be extremely tense for Georgians. Ethnic conflicts, civil wars, and Russo-Georgian wars combined with severe economic and political crises devastated the country, turning it from one of the most prosperous Soviet republics into one of the poorest and most underdeveloped states in Europe and the Near East (Mikaberidze, 2007). Georgia's political development during these years of turmoil and its struggle to maintain independence vis-a-vis the neo-imperialist aspirations of Russia are very complicated and difficult to illustrate.

In *Minorities at Risk*, Ted Robert Gurr (1993) found out that since 1945 more than 200 of the minorities have openly ignored the terms of their incorporation in states controlled by other dominant groups. Their grievances regarding discrimination in every sense and threats to group identity have provoked and motivated numerous protest movements. Grievances "couple with historically grounded demands for the restoration of lost autonomy" (92) have sparked countless rebellions. Many of these rebellions evolved into protracted conflicts that have had serious political and humanitarian consequences. At the beginning of 1992 more than 20 million refugees

(more than half of world's total refugees at that time) were fleeing from civil wars. These included 6.8 million of the 16.6 million transnational refugees [...] and 18 million of an estimated 23 million internally displaced people" (Gurr, 1993, p. 92). In the case of Georgia, two full-scale ethnic based wars blew up and small scale clashes occurred.

The Soviet Census (1989) provides a basis for discussing ethnic division in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. According to the Census, the population of the Georgian Republic consisted of: Georgians 70.1% (3,787,393), Armenians 8.1% (437,211), Russians 6.3% (341,172), Azerbaijanis 5.7% (307,556), Ossetians 3.0% (164,055), Greeks 1.8 % (100,324), and Abkhazians 1.8% (95,853) (Table 1) (Hewitt, 1999). As George Hewitt (1999) asserts, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially the end of the Caucasian War on 21 May, 1864, is regarded as the beginning of their greatest tragedy by the northwest Caucasian peoples including the Ubykhs as well as most of the Abkhazians and Circassians forced into exile in Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the exile is the main reason of Abkhazian's demographic weakness rises in Abkhazia today.

**Table 1:** Population of the Georgian Soviet Republic by ethnic structure, according to the last 1989 Soviet census

	1979	1989	1979	1989
Whole population	4,993,182	5,400,841	100%	100%
Georgians	3,433,011	3,787,393	68.80%	70.10%
Armenians	448,000	437,211	9.00%	8.10%
Russian	371,608	341,172	7.40%	6.30%
Azerbaijanis	255,678	307,556	5.10%	5.70%
Ossetians	160,497	164,055	3.20%	3.00%
Greeks	95,105	100,324	1.90%	1.80%
Abkhazians	85,285	95,853	1.70%	1.80%

Source: George Hewitt, Abkhazia, Georgia and Circassians (NW Caucasus), Central Asian Survey, 1999 Vol. 18 No. 4. p. 463

In multiethnic societies such as in Georgia, ethnic mobilization has often led to demands for territorial autonomy or complete secession. The complex ethnic structure of Georgia opened a

way for these kinds of demands on the parts of ethnic minority groups. Although, according to the last Soviet census before the collapse in 1989, ethnic minorities comprised somewhat under thirty percent of general population of Georgia (as seen above), two autonomous territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, claimed a right to go their own way without Georgia as a result of large-scale ethnic conflicts among parties.

This thesis aims to explain the causes of ethnic conflict, and how and why autonomous ethnic groups in Georgia (the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) sought secession rather than accepting unity under a common Georgian roof as did many other ethnic groups in Georgia who did not seek secession. I argue that Soviet nationality policy was a main conflict driving apparatus in case of Georgia because it created an opportunity for ethnic groups to shape their own political institutions and nationalistic elites that later shaped nationalist movements and developed a wish for self-determination and full independence.

In this context, the purpose of this thesis is fourfold: first, it examines the components of the phenomena of inter-ethnic conflict in the country of Georgia focusing on the group identity, language, and historical development of ethnic groups. The second goal is to develop a historical analysis of the inter-ethnic conflicts in Georgia by means of the examination of two autonomous regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). The third is to explain Soviet nationality policy, and also examine the role of Soviet nationality policy that created a basis for Georgia and at the same time a basis for Abkhazians and South Ossetians to seek their independence. The fourth goal is to analyze Soviet nationality policy as a conflict trigger among parties by focusing on the nature of Soviet nationality policy that allowed every ethnic group to advance its ethnic, linguistic and cultural characteristics in Caucasus. Focusing on these four components, I aim to understand the interethnic conflict in Georgia in all its aspects and fill a gap in the academic literature by

assessing whether or not there is a causal relationship between ethnic conflicts and Soviet nationality policy.

I will use the case of the former Soviet republic of Georgia, where two relatively separate secessionist ethnic conflicts occurred in the early 1990s, a Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and a Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Late in the decades of the 1990s, violence erupted in the South Ossetian Autonomous region in north central Georgia between Georgians and South Ossetians as a result of the Georgian Supreme Soviet repealing the region's traditional autonomy within Georgia (Cotter, 1999). The unrest in South Ossetia continued until June of the 1992 when Russian military troops broke the Georgian blockade of Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. Abkhazia, which is located in northern Georgia, declared its independence on 23 July of 1992, the result of the simmering ethnic conflict with Georgians inhabiting northern Georgia. This declaration of independence stimulated inter-ethnic conflict among groups that lasted until September 1993 and resulted in the withdrawal of Georgian forces from the region with Russian assistance and in Georgia's loss of control over the region of Abkhazia and a de facto independent Abkhazia even if Abkhazians were small numbers.

## **Methodology**

In order to fill the gap in the current literature concerning inter-ethnic conflicts in Georgia, I will employ the process-tracing method to address the question of how inter-ethnic conflicts emerged in Georgia through the lens of the ethnonationalism process and the role of both Abkhazian and South Ossetian elites in the state-making process. I argue that Soviet nationality policy afforded both Abkhazian and South Ossetian elites an opportunity to shape a national consciousness in favor of self-determination and mobilize the public to seek secession. I

also argue that ethnic, cultural, and political discrimination as well as economic grievances alone are not enough to lead ethnic groups to seek secession--they are used by elites as triggers to mobilize their ethnic groups. In response to the widely accepted "return of the repressed" perspective, recent studies argue that instead of suppressing nationhood, the policies of the Soviet Union unintentionally institutionalized it. Brubaker argues that the institutionalization of nationhood by the Soviet regime emerged in two ways. First, Soviet nationality policy and Soviet federal structure led to a "territorialization of ethnicity," creating administrative units out of the old nations and ethnicities, each defined as the homeland of a specific ethnic group with its own constitution, territory, cultural institutions, bureaucratic elites, and national intelligentsia. Second, the citizenry was carved up "into a set of exhaustive and mutually exclusive ethnic nationalities" (Brubaker, 1998, p. 286). In this way, Brubaker indicates, ethnic-national identification and territorial nationhood were pervasively institutionalized. Institutionalization of nationhood occurred in Georgia among Abkhazians and South Ossetians during the Soviet period, especially after Stalin's era.

Furthermore, a case study will be conducted on the secessionist ethnic groups (Abkhazians and South Ossetians.) By means of the method of process-tracing, the links between possible causes and observed outcomes can be traced (George & Bennett, 2005). I keep in mind an important idea, pointed out by Ted Robert Gurr (1993): "Strong states have the capacity both to suppress rebellions and to make significant concessions to protesters, weak states may be unable to do either" (91). It is important to note that a state's responses to ethnic groups' grievances are essential in shaping the outcomes of ethnic conflicts. Gurr points out that "Regional and global powers have repeatedly intervened on behalf of communal rebels or the states that they challenge" (91). By tracing the ideas of Ted Robert Gurr on cause and effect relationships, I will seek to unveil how and to what extent the role of Georgia as a weak state and

the role of Abkhazian and South Ossetian elites, along with other intervening variables, played in the outcomes of the conflicts under discussion.

The decision to employ Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the cases under examination derives from the hypotheses that emerged in my mind as I read extensively among the resources on ethnic-related conflicts in the region. This study is structured around two hypotheses. First, conflict is endemic and inevitable in many societies where members of those societies are denied their basic human needs for identity, equality, recognition, security, dignity, and participation and battle for scarce resources. It is also likely wherever the performance of a government is believed to be against the national interest and where government policy is biased on behalf of a certain ethnic group. Second, I argue that the Soviet federalist structure and Soviet nationality policy enabled the elites of the Abkhazia and the South Ossetia areas to shape nationalist movements and later a public consciousness in favor of self-determination and statehood. An example of such an elite is Nestor Apollonovich Lakoba (1893-1936), who was the key figure in the leadership Soviet Abkhazia, a member of the Abkhazian Revolutionary Committee, an old Bolshevik and a close associate of Sergo Ordzhonikidze. Lakoba had been involved in underground agitation in Abkhazia, Batumi, Gronzy and southern Russia after the 1917 Revolution. Using Soviet nationality policy (the *korenizatsiya*), Lakoba created a powerful patronage network in Abkhazia (Blauvelt, 2007).

In this thesis, an inter-disciplinary method has been chosen to understand the dynamics of ethnic conflicts in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia): A configurative case study of Abkhazia and South Ossetia focuses on identifying ethno-political problem spots and subsequently assessing the role of the Soviet nationality policy as a driving apparatus of ethnic conflict in the region. Use of the historical methodology of process tracing is pertinent in light of the fact that the problems of today have a long history that requires looking at contemporary



developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia through the lens of the past. I will assume that the great political and economical inequalities that existed in Georgia have contributed to ethnic prejudice and were used by Russia to trigger ethnic conflict in the region in hopes of regaining its hegemony over the region (Toft, 2001). The case study is central to providing causal explanations with process-tracing, helping to uncover evidence of causal mechanisms at work and to explain outcomes (George & Bennett, 2005).

The main reason why the process-tracing method is employed in this study is to answer the question of why Abkhazians and South Ossetians sought secession in the 1990s although both ethnic groups had lived together with Georgians for centuries. Therefore, it is reasonable to use this research model, which, as Bennett and Checkel put it, is “particularly well suited for measuring and testing hypothesized causal mechanism” (Bennett & Checkel, 2015, p.3). The strategy of process-tracing is useful in both theory testing and theory development by producing various observations within a case through which we are able to see connections in specific ways that explain the case (George & Bennett, 2005). “Process tracing methods are arguably the only method that allow us to study causal mechanisms” (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p.1-2). As Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen (2013) put it, studying causal mechanisms by employing process-tracing methods enables us to “make strong within-case inferences” (2) regarding causal processes through which outcomes are produced, allowing the researchers to update the degree of confidence in order to validate a causal mechanism.

The data will be collected mostly out of secondary sources, using already existent discussions in the recent literature. This thesis employs multiple methods for data collection including text, document, policy, and historical analysis. It examines the writings of contemporary scholars on the subject. Thus, this study has undertaken detailed analysis of most of the ethnic conflicts that occurred in Georgia. However, this paper does not claim to have the

solution to the threat posed by ethnic conflict in Georgia; it is a humble contribution to the discourse.

### **Organizational Structure of the Study**

This study is divided into four chapters. The first chapter provides an overview via brief histories of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia respectively. In doing so, it examines the basis of historical structure of parties and how their ethnic identities have been shaped and developed from ancient times to the modern day in light of their unique linguistic and cultural characteristics. Even as each ethnic group fell under the hegemony of a powerful neighboring state (such as Tsarist Russia, Persia, Ottoman Empire, and Soviet Russia) and even as the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were controlled by Georgian principality, all three ethnic groups were successful in protecting their cultures and maintaining distinct ethnic identities.

Chapter two provides the historical background of inter-ethnic conflict among parties and examines the emergence and the development of ethnic conflict in Georgia through the lens of historical events from the period of the short-lived democratic republic of Georgia (1918-1921) to the 1990s. In doing so, this chapter attempts to construct phases of ethnic conflict through events that acted as conflict triggers, from the first sparking of disputes among parties to the escalation of inter-ethnic conflicts in the last years of the Soviet Union.

The third chapter examines the Soviet nationality policy from Lenin to Gorbachev. Through the implementation of their nationality policy, the Bolsheviks aimed to deal with the problem of national and ethnic differences within the USSR's borders, but at the same time the policy encouraged the development of a national consciousness among ethnic groups by

supporting ethnic groups' cultures and languages. Soviet Nationality policy changed as the Soviet leadership and its perspective changed, and led to unexpected results in Caucasus. Under the Gorbachev regime this policy failed, and the outbreak of ethnic conflicts inside the newly independent successor states ensued.

Chapter four demonstrates the cause and effect relationship between Soviet Nationality policy and inter-ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus. I argue that Soviet Nationality policy created new national elites in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by training them and promoting them to leadership positions in the administration apparatus in newly formed territories; at the same time its nationality policy provided ethnic groups the right to autonomy which came with some cultural and ethnic privileges. Those elites who were educated and promoted to leadership positions had enjoyed their status in their autonomous territories during Soviet period, and when it appeared that the Soviet Union would dissolve, this, in addition to the development of a Georgian chauvinism among the Georgian ruling class (signified by such slogans as "Georgia is for Georgians"), created an anxiety among minority ethnic groups that they might lose their autonomous status. Thus, the Soviet period created the necessary conditions for the emergence of ethnic national consciousness and nationalistic movements, and later these developments allowed both ethnic groups (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) to seek for secession.

In the conclusion, I summarize the preceding chapters and conclude the study with an assessment of the causal explanation between the Soviet nationality policy and ethnic conflicts between parties.

### **Literature Review: An Overview of Predominating Theories of Ethnic Conflict**

Conteh-Morgan (2004) asserts that "violent conflict is endemic to nation-states and is becoming inevitable in many societies" (1). Ted Robert Gurr argues (1993) that ethnopolitical

conflicts are not confined to the Third World. These claims are indisputably true, vindicated bitterly countless times throughout world history and across most states and societies. The society that has not experienced conflict cannot be found. Thus, many scholars agree that violent conflict is, as Conteh-Morgan puts it, “endemic” and “inevitable” in many societies. All societies or nations have class cleavages and inequalities, poverty, economic disorder, unemployment, and ethnic discrimination that are capable of triggering conflict.

The rise of modern nationalism was one of the main reasons for the emergence of ethnic problems in the world. As Hans Kohn (2017) asserts, our understanding of nationalism is not older than the second half of the eighteenth century, the time of its “first great manifestation [...] the French Revolution” (3). According to him, “Nationalism is a state of mind [...]. Nationalism is an idea, an *idée-force*, which fills man’s brain and heart with new thoughts and new sentiments, and drives him to translate his consciousness into deeds of organized action” (18-19). He saw nationalism as not only a certain group’s common consciousness and togetherness; “but it is also a group seeking to find its expression in what it regards as the highest form of organized activity, a sovereign state” (19).

Eric Hobsbawm provided one of the leading modernist approaches to nationalism. His seminal works, *The Invention of Tradition* and *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* are primary contributions to the study of nationalism. Hobsbawm sees nationalism as an “invented tradition” driven by elites to secure and maintain their status, which was being threatened by the transformation of society as a result of the industrial revolution (Hobsbawm, 1983). In essence, according to Hobsbawm, social experiences such as joint language, religion, ethnicity, and state identity are core factors that inspire creation of national idea.

Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson are two of the most prominent proponents of the modernist approach that regards social-cultural transformation of society as the major cause of

the emergence of nationality, nations and nationalism. Gellner's theory of nationalism asserts that the origin of nationalism derived from the distinctive structural necessities of industrial society (Gellner, 1983). Gellner defined nationalism as "primarily a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (Gellner, 1983, p.1). According to Anderson (2006), nationality and nationalism are "cultural artefacts of a particular kind," and the emergence of these artifacts, at the turn of eighteenth century, ushered in by "the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became 'modular', capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations" (Anderson, 2006, p.4). For Anderson, a nation is "an imagined political community" - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 2006, p.6). It is imagined in the sense that the fellow members of a certain nation do not know, meet with, or hear of, most of each other. "Nationalism is not awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist" (Anderson, 2006, p.6). It is imagined as limited in the sense that "even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings; has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (p.7). It is imagined as a community in a sense that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (p.7).

The end of the Cold War led to a dramatic change in the nature of world conflict (Huntington, 1996). During the Cold War, most of the world's conflicts were related to the struggle between democracy and communism. The study of ethnic and nationalist conflict has gained momentum since the end of the Cold War, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to the creation of new independent states where the process of state-building inevitably led to new conflict. Students of conflict have tried to unravel core questions: how do

conflicts emerge and how can violent and non-violent conflicts be solved? Many scholars of conflict agree that there is no single description that has succeeded in providing a complete picture of the varied theories of violent conflict, and I will not attempt to do so here.

In the twentieth century, as well as the more distant past, tens of millions of people lost their lives in ethnic conflicts all around the world. Ethnic conflict is surely one of this century's most pivotal phenomena. In academia, numerous theories and much research have attempted to explain the causes of ethnic conflict; ethnic conflict has certainly gained much attention since the end of the Cold War. Literature concerning ethnic conflict generally consists of similar methods and forms of analysis, focusing on ethnic conflict in broad terms and employing large n-size studies. Furthermore, most of the literature agrees on the operationalization of ethnic conflict into a simple dichotomous variable. The variable measures simply if there is an ethnic conflict in a given state or not. The measurement of other variables differs depending on expectations of the causes of conflict.

In terms of core hypotheses on conflict studies, Ted Robert Gurr sees modernization as the underlying cause of all conflict. According to him, "modernization perhaps most of all, poses threatening alternatives to the cultural values, religious beliefs, language, and life ways that are the essence of identity in a [ethnic] group" (Gurr, 1993, p. 90).

Samuel P. Huntington (1996) saw "civilizations" as a cause of conflict between the West and the non-West. Huntington posits that ethnic conflict is the result of globalization, a process that is likely to draw multiple cultures into contact with each other, eventually causing a clash of civilizations. According to Huntington (1996), "conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilizations." It is clear that the increased ease of global communication will lead to more interactions among different cultures, thus intensifying civilization consciousness. This increased civilization consciousness leads to the differences

between people becoming more apparent and more likely to foster enmities, leading to conflict among ethnic groups in a state (Huntington, 1996). Even though diversities and differences in cultures seem to be sensible or rational causes of ethnic conflict, empirical analysis shows that there are various problems with Huntington's argument, that it ignores some important phenomena that are likely to have an impact on conflict (Fox, 2002). Consider the fact that it is protracted discrimination that causes most ethnopolitical conflicts, not differences in cultural roots (Senghaas, 1998). According to Fox (2002), most conflicts occur between the members of the same civilization, which we have seen all around the world. Conflicts between different civilizations within a state account for only a small minority of all ethnic conflicts, and there is no statistically significant evidence that suggests that civilizational clashes are likely to increase ethnic conflicts (Fox, 2002). Russett, Oneal and Cox (2000) find that differences based on the level of civilization have little ability to predict whether disputes among ethnic groups will escalate to violence.

Another theory argues that there is likely to be a correlation between the availability of natural resources and ethnic conflict (Humphreys, 2005). This hypothesis argues that when a state is dependent on primary commodities including both natural resources and agricultural products, it is likely to be more prone to internal violence. Therefore, coexistence of political, socio-economic, and other sources of conflict (such as access to natural resources) between groups manifest themselves along ethnic or identity lines. In *Minorities at Risk*, Ted Robert Gurr (1993) sees economic and political discrimination as two primary criteria that trigger minorities to take political action in support of their collective interest. Conteh-Morgan (2004) emphasizes "the exclusivist character of ethnicity" that is used as a powerful mobilizing symbol in terms of ethnic discrimination. As he puts it, "Conflict may revolve, for example, around exclusivist behavior manifested in interethnic discrimination, and situations of strong competition over limited

resources” (Conteh-Morgan, 2004, p. 194). In addition, Paul R. Brass (1991) asserted that ethnicity is used as a political tool by ethnic groups to make demands for alteration in their status in every sphere of life. Thus, ethnic and nationalist elites see ethnicity as a policy-making apparatus to be used against rival groups, dividing people into groups in which the members of certain groups are similar to each other and collectively different from others. According to Humphreys (2005), ethnic conflict is explained by grievances or greed that arise from situations when members of some ethnic groups feel marginalized ethnically and politically because they are disadvantaged by another one in terms of access to natural resources. This resource-based approach to explaining conflict stems from the presence of inequality. As Davies (1962) put it –“political stability and instability are basically dependent on a state of mind, a mood in society” (19). When there is an intolerable gap between what people feel they deserve and what they get in terms of goods or economic power, dissatisfied people will join together and revolt (Davies, 1962; Marx & Engels, 2002). Even if economic inequalities are also one of the main triggers for most conflicts, Marie Besançon (2005) asserted that economic equality or inequality actually leads the escalation of ethnic violence. This suggests that it is not necessarily resources or economic inequality that causes ethnic conflict.

Another approach concerning ethnic conflict focuses on the role of religion. According to Fox (2004) asserts that religion is one of the main elements of modern social and political phenomena. In *The Rise of Religious Nationalism and Conflict: Ethnic Conflict and Revolutionary Wars 1945-2001\**, Jonathan Fox (2004b), employing an analysis of MAR (the Minorities at Risk) and SF (State Failure) datasets, found that when looking at ethnic conflict as a whole, religion does not have an important impact on ethnic conflict until 1980. However, after 1980, religion has had an increasingly consequential influence on ethnic conflict in combination with separatism, and furthermore, religion-based conflicts are more likely to be violent than other



types of conflicts (Fox, 2004b). In another study, Fox found that religious factors (such as religious grievances, religious institutions, religious legitimacy, and religious discrimination, among others) can be a very powerful influence on ethnic conflict (Fox, 2004a). Fox believes that religion has a powerful impact on ethnic conflict because religion can be a way to identify as part of an ethnic group. Furthermore, Smith (1975) asserts that societies are likely to be divided into socially and politically large shared units, such as religious groups, and the distribution of power depends on to which of those units one belongs, so these kinds of social structure are likely to increase collective violence.

Another approach proposes that spatial dependence or contagion effects can have a strong impact on ethnic conflict. Hill and Rothchild (1986) and Gurr (1993) argue that contagion and diffusion influence political conflicts. This notion is based on the assumption that behavior in geographic units is somehow related to and affected by behavior in neighboring areas (Sadowski 1998). Klingman (1980) says that societies across the world are becoming increasingly interdependent, so that social phenomena occurring within a given society are not isolated but are rather affected by the domestic events of other contiguous societies. Conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh provides an example of conflict that is in an adjacent territory. This idea can be applied to ethnic conflicts, suggesting that adverse consequences from one nearby state can spread to other states, causing intrastate conflict to emerge and predicting that groups residing in highly conflictual regions are more likely to experience violence, including intrastate ethnic conflict (Saideman and Ayres 2000). Vasquez (1992) argues that conflicts may spread directly through spillover or through demonstration effects, in which actors elsewhere learn from examples set by combatants. For example, South Ossetia and Abkhazia influenced and supported each other against the Georgian government.

## Literature Review on Conflict in the Caucasus

Ethnic-based conflicts in the Caucasus have been at the center of the school of conflict studies for more than two decades (Cornell, 2001; Volkan, 2006; De Waal, 2013) After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many ethno-political conflicts were bound to start and ethnic conflicts spread like wildfire throughout the territories of non-Russian nationalities.

Interpretations of the causes of this fire in the Caucasus have focused on the successful implementation of the nationality policies of the Soviet Union that constructed national-territorial identities by means of “indigenization” (Suny, 1993); demands for sovereignty and self-assertion by ethnic groups (Lapidus, 1998); claims to self-rule through ethnic mobilization of minority groups and as a result of the Soviet state structure and the drawing of intra-Soviet boundaries (Cornell, 2001); “ethnic fears” (Kaufman, 1998); separatist ethnic-political conflicts supported and escalated by external intervention (Horowitz, 2002); conflicts as a response to territorial policies and the outcomes of the autonomous status of minorities within nations (Cornell, 2002); and the fight for scarce resources (Cohen, 2001). Another school of thought has focused on ethnicity as a political mobilizing force (Tishkov, 1997), while yet another has examined the role of outside powers in manipulating existing conflict, while a number of studies in the literature have focused on “nationalism” as a primary cause of the conflicts in the Caucasus. One common belief is that pre-existing nationalist conflicts were suppressed during the Soviet period but resurfaced on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union (Goldenberg, 1994). Nodia and Scholybach (2006) assert that “the emergence of Georgian nationalism was paralleled by development of counter-nationalist programmes in the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia” (9).

From the perspective of Vamik Volkan (2006), the ethno-nationalistic rhetoric of members of majority groups in a state increases a tension between clashing parties as Vamik

Volkan (2006) asserts that “the political rhetoric of independence that followed Gorbachev’s reforms became increasingly colored by the slogan that “Georgia is for Georgians” (27). Volkan argues that while at the beginning “this slogan may have implicitly included those who were not ethnic Georgians, the exclusive component of it become more and more explicit” (Volkan, 2006, p. 27). This kind of rhetoric of ethnonationalism is likely to cause anxiety among other ethnic minorities, who are likely to be reminded of instances of intolerance and injustice from the past, such as Russia’s deportation of thousands of Meskhetians from their homes to Central Asia in 1944.

## **Conclusion**

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, conflict between ethnic groups, in particular those involving “nations without states,” has become one of the major security issues in the Caucasus, and the Caucasus has become a prominent subject of study for scholars of conflict . In this thesis I will employ the process-tracing method to address the question of how ethnic conflicts emerged in Georgia through the lens of the ethnonationalism process and Soviet nationality policy. In my first chapter I will examine the history of Georgian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian identities to provide a basis for understanding the ethnic conflict in Georgia through the lens of their ethnic, linguistic and historical characteristics.

## **CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORY OF GEORGIAN, ABKHAZIAN AND SOUTH OSSETIAN IDENTITIES**

### **Introduction**

The entirety of Georgian history, from tribal communities to a modern state, has shaped the Georgian nationality and culture. I will focus on the milestones that have led to the conflicts among the ethnic groups in Georgia. It is essential to focus on Georgia during the periods of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union in order to understand the stages of development of conflict in Georgia in recent times. Though Georgians had struggled with powerful neighbors in the long era between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries of their subjugation, Georgian ethnicity survived owing to the continued existence of state formations and ruling elites, along with the role of Church that nurtured language and culture.

For centuries, the majority of disputes between the Georgian-Abkhazians and Georgian-South Ossetians derived from their ethnic, cultural, and historical demands on one another and over the territories that they had long inhabited. In order to understand the ethnic conflicts among these parties in the 1990s, it is necessary to clarify the ethnic origins of these groups. Thus, this chapter will examine the ethnic, linguistic and historical structures of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

### **The History of Georgia and Georgian Ethnic Identity**

Georgia is a great example of a statehood process that contrasts with the many strong states over the course of history that have lost their identity and disappeared from the scene. Few

countries in the Transcaucasia have endured as many struggles and overcome as many challenges in their quest for statehood as has Georgia. Georgians' struggle for survival is remarkable.

They first appeared on the world stage in ancient times and have struggled for centuries with great powers--the Greeks and Romans, the Byzantines and Persians, the Mongols and Turks, and then the Russians--and never lost their identity as expressed in their language and religion. It is clear that there is an independent Georgia today thanks to this struggle to protect their identity and culture. One Georgian scholar, Alexander Mikaberidze (2007) identifies Georgia as "a tiny republic squeezed between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea" (xi) and "a country with an ancient past, thousands of years of winemaking, 3,000 years of statehood, and almost two millennia of Christianity" (xi).

No one can provide as short and meaningful an explanation of Georgians' struggle and history as can Alexander Mikaberidze (2007). As he puts it:

Because of its special position between Europe and Asia--at the crossroads of people, religious, cultures, and languages--Georgia has witnessed many historical dramas that have largely determined the destiny and history of her inhabitants. Life, for Georgians, has been an endless and tragic fight for preservation of their land and liberty. Powerful conquerors have sought to possess this land, and the Assyrians, Midians, Hittites, Parthians, Romans, Arabs, Mongols, Persians, Turks and others strove to dominate the region. One by one, these conquerors moved on, but Georgia lived on, and over the centuries a unique culture and rich tradition, a true mixture of the East and West, has developed here. (xii)

Common belief is that the Georgians derive from indigenous inhabitants of the Caucasus (Mikaberidze, 2007). In his *The Making of The Georgian Nation*, Ronald Grigor Suny argues that

the beginning of the formation of Georgian nationality took place in the Late Bronze Age. Soviet Scholars, including Giorgi Melikishvili, argue that “this was the period of the disintegration of primitive communal relations among the population of Georgia‘ and the transition to ‘class society’” (as cited in Suny, 1994, p. 7). Furthermore, Melikishvili proposes that “primitive communal society was replaced by ‘military democracy‘ and firm alliances of tribes, which in turn may be seen as the beginning of the formation of a Georgian nationality” (as cited in Suny, 1994, p. 7).

In terms of the formation of Georgian Nation, Georgians, as an ethnic group, call themselves *Kartveli* and call their land *Sakartvelo* or “land of *Kartvels*” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 3). Many scholars agree that this term (*Kartveli*) emerged from the *Karts*, “one of the proto-Georgian tribes” as a dominant group (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 3) that gradually became a dominant group in the region. The unity of Georgia was brief; during most of history “the land in which Georgian speakers have lived has been divided into two principal parts, separated by the Surami mountain range” (Suny, 1994, p. 3). Western Georgia, located at the basin of the Rioni River, “was in ancient times known as Colchis and later as Lazica, Abasgia, or Imeretia” (Suny, 1994, p. 3). Eastern Georgia, a larger territory lying along the Kura River, was called Iberia by the classical world and Kartli by the Georgians (Suny, 1994, p. 3).

As language is a determinant factor in determining ethnic group membership, it is important to examine the language structures and groups in Georgia to find the link between ethnic groups and national consciousness based on linguistic differences in Georgian society. Many argue that there are many determinants of ethnicity that include language, religion, culture, physical characters, and so on. Language, above all, has played the prominent role in determination of being a member of any ethnic group, especially in Europe (Fowkes, 2002). A

contrasting case is Latin America, where language was never an important determinant factor for the early nationalist movements (Anderson, 2006).

The languages of the Georgian peoples are very complex. Briefly, Georgian languages are divided into four major linguistic groups and are separated from the Indo-European, Altaic, or Finno-Ugric language families, belonging instead to the southern Caucasian language families. The Georgians divided into four linguistic groups: Kartvelians, Mingrelians, Laz/Chans, and Syans. (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 3)

Kartvelian (Kartveluri), known as ethnic Georgians, is derived from an original, proto-Georgian language that began to separate into several distinct but related languages about 4,000 years ago (Suny, 1994).

The Mingrelians, who identified themselves as the Margali, “live on the plains north of the Rioni River and west of Tskhenistskali River” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 4).

The Laz/Chans originally inhabited the entire southwestern coastline of Black Sea (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 4). However, after the Ottoman Turks gained control over Anatolia, the Laz/Chans were restricted to the northeastern part of Anatolia (especially Samsun, Kars, and Batumi).

The Syans are located in the mountains of Syaneti, above Mingrelia, containing valleys of Inguri, Tskhenistskali, and Keladula rivers.

Ottoman conquests resulted in the loss of large territories in southwestern Georgia in 1703; the current border between Turkey and Georgia was determined as a result of the Treaty of Kars in 1921. So Turkey has a considerable Laz/Chan population in northeastern territories. Furthermore, in consequence of the Safavid occupation in late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Georgian

peoples also appeared throughout Persia, especially in Fereydan territory, where Fereydan Georgians continue to live. In addition, the Georgian territories of Zakatala and Belakani were ceded to Azerbaijan in March 1922, so its Georgian population, known as Ingilos, continues to live there today (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 4).

—On the basis of language it has been established that Georgians were made up of three principal, related tribes—the Karts, the Megrelo-Chans (Zvans), and the Svans- but in addition there were other Georgian-speaking tribes in Asia Minor, among them the Kashkai (Gashgai, Gashgash, Kashku, Kaska), the Mushki (Moskhi, Moschi, Meskhi), and the Tibal (Tabal, Tibar)” (Suny, 1994, p. 4). Furthermore, G.A. Melikishvili, the well-known Soviet investigator of ancient Georgia, remarks that these Ibero-Caucasian language speakers “in all probability have been settled in the territory of Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus from the most ancient times” (as cited in Suny, 1994, p. 4).

The proto-Georgian state underwent various changes in form throughout history, and many historians who study Georgian history argue that the emergence of a unified Georgian kingdom goes back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The Georgian nation has experienced periods of traumatic development and decline during centuries (Souleimanov, 2013). During the period of King David IV and Queen Tamar in the European Middle Ages, Georgia flourished expanding its territories across South Caucasus and eastern Anatolia. During the periods of downturn, Georgian kingdoms and principalities fell under the hegemony respectively of Rome, Byzantium, the Sassanid Persian empires, the Arabs, the Mongols, the Seljuqs, and then the Ottoman Turks and Safavid Iranians, and finally Russia (Wright & Goldenberg, 1996; Souleimanov, 2013). Therefore, this is contradictory: —the legacy of this territorial and political continuity of Georgian statehood—whether in the form of the ancient unified kingdoms or of the (semi-) vassal



principalities--has played an important role in recent years in efforts to consolidate Georgian national consciousness” (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 72).

As a result of being under the hegemony of powerful neighbors with strong differences in culture and religion, Georgians were not able to consolidate a single collective Georgian identity. Therefore, “the overall process of Georgian nation building has taken long centuries to complete” (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 72). However, it seems that Georgians have tried to resolve the problems of political and cultural fragmentation of the nation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century by means of “effective social engineering of nationalities” (Souleimanov, 2013). However, national self-awareness did not only develop among Georgians--it has also emerged among the various non-Georgian nationalities who have inhabited Georgia’s borders for centuries, in particular the Abkhazians and South Ossetians.

Before the Russian tsarist regime was established in Georgia, Western Georgia remained under Ottoman control throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>- 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and Georgian dynasties constantly attempt to find ways to reduce these foreign intrusions (Wright & Goldenberg, 1996; Mikaberidze, 2007). Although Ottoman armies occupied Mingrelia, Guria, and Imereti, subsequent turmoil in Ottoman territories helped the Georgians to take them back. However, representatives of the Ottoman Empire remained in strategic places, especially along the coastline, and as a result royal authority was weakened and grand nobles gained in power; another factor that undermined the western Georgian principalities was the constant intrigues and struggles of these nobles (Mikaberidze, 2007).

The tactic implemented by Russia to extend its influence over Caucasus was to co-opt local elites to gain allies (Cornell, 2001). During the 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian authorities consistently sought military support from the Russian Empire to help break the Ottoman hold on

the region. In 1784, the Georgian King, Solomon I, died, creating a gap of authority and leading to a struggle for the crown that raged for five years in western Georgia. After the new Imeretian king, Solomon II, came to power, he faced several serious problems both inside and outside of Georgia, such as defiance of his authority among some of the great nobles, that led to long term instability. Solomon II's attempts to gain control and extend his power to the rest of the western Georgia merely irritated the powerful grand nobles of Guria and Mingrelia. As a result of this chaos, the western Georgian principalities were annexed by the Russian regime in 1803-1809 in order to preserve some vestiges of autonomy. In 1810, the kingdom of Imereti was taken by force of arms and King Solomon was sent into exile in the Ottoman Empire. Eventually there was no other choice for the remaining principalities but to accept control by the Russian Empire (preserving –some vestiges of autonomy, with Guria until 1828, Mingrelia until 1857, Svaneti until 1858, and Abkhazia until 1864”, respectively) (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 31).

In terms of independence, with the end of the Russian control over Georgia, Georgia gained its independence for a short time from 1918 to 1921, and meaning: –an age-old sense of identity was uniquely Georgians” (Volkan, 2006, p. 26). However, Georgia's history of struggle against foreign continued from the era of the Russian Tsar into the era of the USSR. Like the other socialist republics, Georgia was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1921 by way of an occupation by the Soviet Red Army, its pro-Western and pro-democratic leanings curbed and its distinct Georgian culture and identity threatened by the Bolsheviks. But, with the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 an essential milestone representing the nation-building process and self-determination for Georgia arrived. As Emil Souleimanov (2013) puts it, the year 1991 was to be for Georgians one –signifying the triumphant reestablishment of the long historical continuity of Georgian statehood” (71).

For centuries Georgia has been a crossroads where civilizations meet. Therefore, Georgia for hundreds of years has hosted a significant number of ethnic groups within what are now its contested (inter)national borders. It is easy to see that relations among these groups were generally peaceful. For example, in the capital of Georgia one can see churches, mosques, and synagogues located on the same streets; there was no problem with inter-marriage between ethnic groups (Souleimanow, 2013).

### **The History of Abkhazia and Abkhaz Ethnic Identity**

Abkhazia is located in the northwestern part of Georgia. Today it survives as an independent republic within Georgia as a result of a bloody conflict in the 1990s, but it is only recognized internationally by a few states. The demography of Abkhazia has undergone major changes several times. According to the last Soviet census, 45.7% of its population were Georgians and 17.8% ethnic Abkhazians. However, a large population of the Abkhazian people currently lives in Turkey, the descendants of Abkhazians who fled their homeland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to Russian oppression (Following the Shamil Rebellion that ended in the 1860s). From 1992 to 1994, however, almost all Georgians (more than 250,000) and other ethnic groups were ousted from the territory as a result of ethnic cleansing (Mikaberidze, 2007; De Waal, 2013).

Abkhazians or Abkhaz are one of the indigenous peoples in the Caucasus. According to Mikaberidze (2007), they were considered a minority group in the region of Abkhazia in the period of Abkhazian ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic). However, –since the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in 1990, they constitute a majority in the self-proclaimed republic of Abkhazia” (64). Since ancient times the Abkhaz have called themselves *Apsua* and their

territory *Apsny* (land of the Abkhaz). In terms of their language, in the study of the origin of the Abkhazian people, Vjacheslav Chirikba (1998) asserts that the common root of the modern Abkhazo-Adyghean languages, a part of the proto-West Caucasian, might be dated approximately to the third millennium BCE. Their language belongs to the Abkhazo-Adyghean group of the Caucasian language family; in 1862 a Latin-based alphabet for the Abkhaz language was devised by P. Uslar, and in the 1890s Dniri Gulia created an Abkhaz script, developing Abkhaz into a written language (Wixman, 1988; Mikaberidze, 2007). The alphabetic basis of the language was changed several times by the Soviet authorities--in 1926 the analytic alphabet of N. Marr was introduced only to be replaced by Roman letters in 1928, Georgian script in 1938, and the Slavic one in 1954" (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 64). This was symptomatic of the confused soviet policy toward the Abkhazians, partially genuflecting to the idea of the equality of all peoples within the USSR and globally, partly suggesting that the Russians were the elder brother, the leading nation of the soviet union (after, for a while, earlier arguing the Georgians in the soviet republic of Georgia were its *kulturtraeger*).

There is a controversial discussion between Abkhazian and Georgian historians over the ethnic origin of the Abkhazian peoples because of its political implications. On the one hand, according to Abkhazian historians, the modern Abkhazians descended from ancient tribes that had inhabited the region of Abkhazia for centuries, and Georgians only immigrated to Abkhazia. On the other hand, Georgian historians insist that proto-Georgian tribes, among them the Abkhazians, had inhabited this area from ancient times and that modern Abkhazians are the descendants of the North Caucasian tribes that migrated to the region from North Caucasus territories and acquired the Abkhaz identity (Mikaberidze, 2007; De Waal, 2013). This, according to Chirikba (1998), there are several hypotheses explaining the formation of the Abkhazian peoples. A well-accepted theory argues that this peoples was formed within the region of their

modern habitat (West Caucasus). Important support for this hypothesis is “the series of West Caucasian toponyms and hydronyms interpretable only in terms of Abkhazo-Adyghean languages” (Chirikba, 1998, p. 40). In other words, a common ancestry with several other Caucasian groups, slowly developing a distinct ethnos.

The history of Abkhazia’s territory has been documented since ancient times, when the population of the Black Sea coastline of the Caucasus was characterized by a considerable tribal diversity. As noted by contemporary Greek and Roman writers from Herodotus onwards, such tribes as Achaeans, Kerkets, Heniokhs, Koraksians, Sanigns, Missimians, and others lived in the Caucasus. Most of them were culturally and linguistically related, and one of them is identified as the ancient ancestor of the Abkhazians (Chirikba, 1998; De Waal, 2013). In the first millennium BCE, the region of modern Abkhazia was under control of the ancient kingdom of Colchis, later that of Egrisi. Between the first and fourth centuries CE, western Georgia, including Abkhazia, was part of the Roman Empire and later remained within the Byzantine Empire. In the first and second centuries, Christianity was initially introduced to the region, and the local tribes converted to Christianity during the next centuries. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Abkhazia became an autonomous principality of the Byzantine Empire. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Abkhazian leaders recognized the sovereignty of Eristavi Archil of Kartli, and, in the next century, Eristavi Leon II united western Georgia into the Kingdom of the Abkhazs. This separate Abkhazian kingdom endured until 978, when it was incorporated into the United Kingdom of Georgia (Aves, 1993; Fowkes, 2002; Mikaberidze, 2007; De Waal, 2013).

Originally, the Abkhazians were distinct from Georgians linguistically rather than culturally. As I indicated, a separate Abkhazian kingdom existed from 780 until 978, and again during the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Fowkes, 2002; De Waal, 2013). Namely, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a Georgian

dynasty (the Sukumi principality) began to extend its influence over the territory of Abkhazia under the Sharvashidze family within the United Kingdom of Georgia (Suny, 1994). In 15<sup>th</sup> century, after the collapse of the United Kingdom of Georgia, the Sharvashidze recognized the sovereignty of the Mingrelia. Starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire gained its influence over the region and some Abkhazians converted to Islam. During this period, Abkhazia divided into several political entities that were led by prominent noble families such as the Sharvashidze, Marshania, and others (Mikaberidze, 2007; De Waal, 2013).

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia's influence in Abkhazia had grown and the Georgian principalities, such as Imereti, Guria, and Mingrelia, were annexed by the Russian Empire. In 1810, the Russian Empire gained control over the whole territory and Prince Giorgi Sharvashidze recognized Russian sovereignty; as a result Abkhazia became a part of the Russia Empire (Lak'oba, 1998; Fowkes, 2002; De Waal, 2013). In 1864, when the principality was officially abolished, Abkhazia was reorganized into the Sukhumi Military District within the Kutaisi Gubernia (Fowkes, 2002; Mikaberidze, 2007). Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Abkhazians actively resisted Russian rule in the region, with several large anti-Russian uprisings occurring in 1821-1824, 1840-1842, and 1866. From the 1830s to the 1860s, many Abkhazians participated in Imam Shamil's campaigns against the Russian Empire in the territories of Chechnya and Dagestan. As a result of the Russification policy in the region and the failure of the Abkhazian uprising of 1866, Russia persecuted tens of thousands of Muslim Abkhazians, many being deported to the Ottoman Empire between 1864 and 1878. They moved to Turkey (Anatolia and European Turkey), Syria, Palestine, and other Ottoman territories. Another mass evacuation took place as a result of the war between Ottoman and Russian Empires during 1877-1878 (Fowkes, 2002; De Waal, 2013).

Russian rulers exacerbated ethnic divisions in the Caucasus, causing an increase in the tension between the Georgians and the Abkhazians. In response to Russification policies, –Georgian nationalist leaders called for increased settlement of Georgians, Mingrelians in particular, in Abkhazia, where many regions became depopulated following the oppressive Russian measures” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 67) which further increased local antagonisms.

In the 1905 Revolution, Abkhazians took actions in support of the Russian imperial authorities in part due to fear of potential Georgian oppression. As a consequence, Georgians perceived Abkhazians as being pro-Russian and a threat to Georgian independence and integrity. The demise of the Russian empire in 1917 enabled Georgians to establish a short-lived Georgian republic from 1918 to 1921 and further conflicts ensued between Georgians and Abkhazians, who sought secession from Georgia; the causes of the Abkhazian separatist movement included both Abkhazians’ fears of Georgian cultural domination and Bolshevik propaganda (Mikaberidze, 2007; De Waal, 2013).

All these population movements and events had a decisive effect on the ethnic texture of the region. For example, Georgians and Russians moved into Abkhazian territories vacated by Abkhazians as a result of two important events; this explains how the Abkhazian people became a minority in their own country; first, after the failure of the rising of 1866, and second, after the Russian-Ottoman war in 1877-1878. These two events resulted in initial waves of emigration towards Turkey. The majority of the Abkhazian region’s inhabitants were also no longer Muslim because many of Muslim Abkhazians were deported to Turkey, while others converted to Christianity (Fowkes, 2002). The great majority of Abkhaz who remained, 80 percent, were Orthodox Christians (Wixman, 1980; De Waal, 2013). The Abkhazian aristocracy and ruling

elites spoke and wrote in Georgian; it was only peasants who spoke the Abkhazian language (Fowkes, 2002).

In 1918, Abkhazian Bolsheviks sought to establish a soviet republic in Abkhazia, but Georgian authorities responded severely with military force, squashing the secessionist movement by the end of the year. At the same time, ~~the~~ Abkhazian National Council discussed the issue of Abkhazian autonomy with the National Council of Georgia, and a special agreement was concluded in June 1918 that granted the Abkhazian National Council wide self-government. In 1921, the Constitution of Georgia recognized the autonomy of Abkhazia within Georgia” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 68).

Some Abkhazian groups continued to claim their full independence and acted in favor of Russian invasions of Georgia, actively supporting General Anton Denikin’s Volunteer Army in February 1919 and then the Bolshevik invasion in March 1921. After the Soviet annexation of Georgia, the socialist Russian government rewarded the Abkhazians with the creation of the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR Abkhazia) within Caucasus region of the Soviet Union. SSR Abkhazia existed from 31 March 1921 to 19 February 1931, and formed in the aftermath of the Red Army invasion of Georgia in 1921 when it agreed to a treaty uniting it with the Georgian SSR (the status of Abkhazia similar to an autonomous Soviet republic, though it retained de facto independence from Georgia). ~~This~~ act was in keeping with the general policy of the Bolshevik authorities to fragment Georgia into a number of autonomous units to control the Georgian Government; in addition to Abkhazia, two more autonomous units of Adjara and South Ossetia were created” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 68). However, in December 1921 when Abkhazian authorities were forced to conclude a treaty of federation with Georgia, the Abkhazian quasi-independence was ended. Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia were then integrated into the



Transcaucasian Federated SSR that allowed them to become one of the founding republics of the USSR in 1922. As a result of this, Abkhazia as a union republic, but instead treated it as an autonomous entity within Georgia (Mikaberidze, 2007).

Between 1922 and 1936, Nestor Lakoba was Abkhazia's chief and created a powerful patronage in Abkhazia. He cultivated a close personal relationship with Stalin and Ordzhonikidze, and spared it most of the rigors of collectivization after 1929 (Blauvelt, 2007). As a result of the korenizatsiya policy, political representation in the Party increased from 10% in 1923 to 25.4% in 1926, and to 28.3% in 1929. (Blauvelt, 2007) By 1925, the new constitution of Abkhazia granted it extensive autonomy within Georgia, but this status was never implemented. In 1931, its status was changed from a union republic into an autonomous republic within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. In response to this change, some communist Abkhazians held demonstrations and called for the restoration of republic status or incorporation into the Soviet Union (Mikaberidze, 2007).

In December 1936 Lakoba died suspiciously after dining with Lavrenti Beria, who was the head of the Communist Party in Transcaucasia and later became a state security administrator and chief of the Soviet security and secret police apparatus (Mikaberidze, 2007). →New Abkhazian authorities, under the close supervision of Beria, subjected the region to the policy of Georgianization that banned the Abkhaz language and cultural rights and encouraged Georgian migration to Abkhazia" (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 69). As a result of this, many Abkhazian assumed the Georgians wanted to eradicate their identity and culture, facilitating the spread of anti-Georgian sentiment and the rise of Abkhazian nationalism (Mikaberidze, 2007).

After the deaths of Stalin and Beria, the Abkhazians gained many rights and took a larger role in the governance of the autonomous republic, allowing them to foster the Abkhazian culture

and language. For example, the Abkhazian State University, Abkhaz national television, theater, and a museum were established. Many books and newspapers were published in the Abkhazian language, though of course subject to Soviet censorship. Furthermore, ethnic quotas were established for government positions, privileging Abkhazians and providing political representation disproportionate to their population size (there were 57 Abkhaz, 53 Georgians, and 14 Russians in the Supreme Soviet while the Abkhaz constituted one third of city and regional soviet officials. This privilege led to increased tensions with the other ethnic groups who resented this unfair distribution of power. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Abkhazian separatist groups sought a way for secession from Georgia and demanded the restoration of its union republic status not within Georgia, but within or incorporation into the Soviet Union (Mikaberidze, 2007).

By the late 1980s, Georgian nationalism had gained momentum and become a major force, escalating conflicts between Georgians and Abkhazians, who perceived each other with distrust. In the middle of 1989, tensions between the two groups reached a peak when Abkhazian nationalists called for full independence from Georgia. On April 1989, a large-scale Georgian demonstration took place in the capital of Georgia, proclaiming Georgian independence and opposing the Abkhazians' demands. The demonstration was gorily suppressed by Soviet troops, which enflamed Georgian nationalism. In 25 August 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia passed the Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia. On April 1991, Georgia proclaimed its independence from the Soviet Union, repealed its Soviet Socialist constitution, and adopted the 1918 constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, which was perceived by Abkhazians as a threat to their autonomous status (Mikaberidze, 2007).

According to Mikaberidze (2007), the dissolution of central government in Georgia and the coup against Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia in 1992 contributed in large measure to

Abkhazian separatism. The Chairman of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet, Vladislav Ardzinba, took advantage of the Georgian turmoil to implement measures in order to establish *de facto* independence. In July 1992, the Abkhazian rulers declared the restoration of the 1925 Constitution and a sovereign republic. In response, the Georgian rulers intervened militarily in Abkhazia, clashing with Abkhazian troops, a conflict that eventually escalated into a full-scale war. Abkhazia received considerable military and political assistance from Russia, and many volunteers came from the Confederation of the Mountain People of the Caucasus to help. In 1994, Abkhazian troops defeated the Georgian forces and established control over the territory. As a result of widespread ethnic cleansing, virtually the entire Georgian population in Abkhazia was expelled (Mikaberidze, 2007).

It is clear that Russia's involvement in this war was crucial. Even though Moscow denied any involvement in the conflict and claimed that their intervention was only to protect Russian citizens, Russia's policies in the region disproved this. Russia actively participated in the war and later provided plenty of weapons and training to the Abkhazian troops. Furthermore, the Russian government extended citizenship rights to Abkhazians. Currently, Moscow provides Russian passports to the majority of Abkhazians. In addition, the Russian-Abkhazian border is open in both directions, with Russian businesses and travel agencies freely operating in the region. The frequent meetings of Abkhazian rulers with Russian politicians reveal their dependence on Russia in the decision-making process. The Russian legislative body (Duma) recently considered, but later rejected, incorporation of Abkhazia into Russian Federation. Hence, for Georgians, the conflict with Abkhazians is a struggle against Russia, and the Abkhaz leadership are seen as pawns of Moscow's strategic interests in the Caucasus (Mikaberidze, 2007).

## **The History of South Ossetia and Ossetian Ethnic Identity**

The Soviet 1989 census is important since it was taken just before the first phase of the conflicts in the 1990s among the parties and it at least provides a basis for understanding the ethnic division of Georgia in the 1990s. According to that last Soviet census in 1989, approximately 98,000 people lived in South Ossetia. In total, there were almost 164,000 Ossetians in Georgia (3.2 % of the Georgian population at that time). Fewer than 65,000 Ossetians lived in South Ossetia, while the remainder resided in other territories of Georgia. In South Ossetia, Ossetians constituted two-thirds (66.61%) of the general population, with Georgians 29.44% of population and the remaining 4% made up of Russians, Armenians and Jews (Hewitt, 1999).

The Ossetians, who are known as Oss or Alans, originated from the Iranian/Indo-European speaking group (De Waal, 2013); their language “is distinctly related to Iranian but uses the Cyrillic alphabet with Ossetian modification” (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996, p.6). Only a small number of Ossetians (14 percent) speaks the Georgian language, and even if their language is Ossetian, the Russian language is used more commonly (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996). When Russia annexed Georgia, the Georgian language became the official state language, with other minority languages having equal status in territories where minority groups were predominant (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996).

Ossetians migrated from Central Asia in ancient times and settled in the North Caucasus. Georgians influenced the Ossetian principality since its founding. Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there had been friendly and sociable relations between the Georgians and the Ossetians. The majority of Ossetian populations had converted to Christianity, whereas a large number of

Ossetians had chosen Islam, but not too many of them lived in South Ossetia (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996; De Waal, 2013).

There is disagreement regarding who came first and who historically owns Ossetian territory. Georgians claim that the Ossetians mostly arrived in the last three centuries. This claim was latter expressed in an aggravating fashion by the Georgian nationalist leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, –who called the Ossetians ‘\_ungrateful guests of Georgia’, having their historical homeland in North Ossetia’” (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996). Georgian authorities have asserted that the Ossetians are newcomers and their historical homeland is North Ossetia, and therefore, –they have no right to territorial autonomy” (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996, p.7). This Georgian claim contrasts with their position on the case of Abkhazia, –which is recognized by the Georgians as the historical homeland for the Abkhaz and a territory which the Abkhaz are entitled to have” (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996, p.7). According to Ossetians, they have been living in South Ossetia for centuries and they see themselves –as descendants of the Alans, a Scythian tribe that came to the Caucasus in ancient times and merged with the local population” (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996, p.7). Georgians agree that the Ossetians are descendants of the Alans, but they emphasize that they merged with the people of North Caucasus, not with South Caucasus’ local population. According to Georgian historians, Ossetians only first began to migrate across the mountains as recently as the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996; De Waal, 2013).

According to Georgian scholars, when the Mongol-Tatar invasions took place in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the first time, the Ossetians tried to occupy the regions of southern Georgia but were repelled by Georgian forces. Later, the Ossetians started living in Georgia in the 1860s in the lands of Georgian feudal lords (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996; De Waal, 2013).

Georgia declared its independence and became a democratic republic after the collapse of Tsarist Russia in 1918. According to Georgian sources, a treaty of alliance was signed between Russia and Georgia on 7 May 1920 in which South Ossetia was recognized as an integral part of Georgia (De Waal, 2013): “it was named as Tiflis Gubernia and included the district Shida Kartli, therefore including what was to become the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast” (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996, p.8) after the annexation of Georgia by the Bolsheviks.

However, the Ossetian interpretation of events in Georgia is quite different from the Georgian one. According to Ossetians, Ossetia voluntarily joined the Tsarist Russian Empire in 1774. Therefore, they claim that it is natural that South Ossetia is not part of Georgia (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996). South Ossetia was annexed by the Russian Empire in the last quarter of 18<sup>th</sup> century through a separate treaty between the parties before Georgia became a part of Tsarist Russia in 1801. Therefore, South Ossetians assert that “the region remains a part of Russia since it never agreed to secede from either the Russian empire or the Russian Federation” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 499). South Ossetian authorities claimed that they did not want to be part of Georgia when Georgia ceded from the Russian Empire in 1918. An insurgence emerged in the Roki district (Dzau in South Ossetia)) in October 1919 and advanced to Tskhnvali (the capital of South Ossetia). In reply to this, the Menshevik government counterattacked and suppressed the revolt. In late April 1920, another uprising occurred in the Roki district and South Ossetia declared its independence as a Soviet Republic on 8 June 1920 (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996; De Waal, 2013). The Georgian government suppressed it again. The territory remained almost calm for the next few months. Later Georgia was taken over by the Bolsheviks in February 1921.

The conflicts resulted in important consequences for the future relations of Georgians and Ossetians. As Mikaberidze (2007) puts it,

The Ossetians perceived it as a denial of their right to self-determination, and, claiming some 5,000 Ossetians killed and 13,000 more dead from hunger and epidemics, they consider the conflict to be the “first ethnic cleansing” committed by the Georgians. From the Georgian perspective, the conflict was due to the Ossetian attempt to seize Georgian territory as well as the Russian attempt to destabilize Georgia by encouraging separatist tendencies of its minorities. (498)

Indeed, Georgians perceived Russia’s scheme to fragment Georgia by encouraging minority groups to secede (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996).

Bolshevik activity in South Ossetia was at a high level. After Georgian first gained independence in 1918, Menshevik government had to struggle with them to sustain Georgian territorial integrity. Following the annexation of Georgia by the Red Army in February 1921, the Ossetians voluntarily joined Russia. Ossetia was granted the status of an autonomous district in April 1922 (Mikaberidze, 2007; De Waal, 2013). In Soviet times, the Ossetians were subjected to a high degree of discrimination by the Georgians and the Russians. As a result of this they sought greater autonomy. In 1989, the Ossetians saw the lack of central authority as an opportunity to revise their status within Georgia (De Waal, 2013). Their pursuit of autonomy led to an ethnic conflict and “the establishment of an unrecognized republic under Russian protectorate” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 499). Currently, South Ossetia has its own political institutions (constitution, president, and legislative body).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted that Georgians, Abkhazians, and South Ossetians each have a unique identity. In terms of the formation of Georgian nation, Georgians, as an ethnic group, call

themselves *Kartveli* and call their land *Sakartvelo* or “land of *Kartvels*” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 3). Many scholars agree that this term (*Kartveli*) emerged from the *Karts*, “one of the proto-Georgian tribes” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 3) that gradually became a dominant group in the region.

The Georgians are divided into four linguistic groups: Kartvelians, Mingrelians, Laz/Chans, and Syans (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 3). Kartvelian (*Kartveluri*), known as ethnic Georgian, is derived from an original, proto-Georgian language that began to separate into several distinct but related languages about 4,000 years ago (Suny, 1994). The Georgians’ history is impressive, an epic that begins with their first appearance on the world stage in ancient times and features a centuries-long struggle for survival with numerous great powers.

The Abkhazians or Abkhaz are one of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus. Since ancient times the Abkhaz have called themselves *Apsua* and their territory *Apsny* (land of the Abkhaz.) In terms of their language, in the study of the origin of the Abkhazian people, Vjacheslav Chirikba (1998) asserts that the common root of the modern Abkhazo-Adyghean languages, a part of the proto-West Caucasian, might be dated approximately to the third millennium BCE. Their language belongs to the Abkhazo-Adyghean group of the Caucasian language family.

The Ossetians, who are known as Oss or Alans, originated from the Iranian/Indo-European speaking group; their language “is distinctly related to Iranian but uses the Cyrillic alphabet with Ossetian modification” (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996, p.6). Only a small number of Ossetians (14 percent) speaks the Georgian language, and even if their language is Ossetian, the Russian language is used more commonly (Sammut & Cvetkovski, 1996). Ossetians migrated from Central Asia in ancient times and settled in the North Caucasus.

For centuries, the Georgians, Abkhaz and Ossetians were able to maintain their distinctive cultures and identities, refusing to assimilate into the cultures of other, more powerful,



groups. Their possession of distinct languages and cultural characteristics shaped their self-consciousnesses and their desires for statehood, which came to the fore when appropriate conditions appeared after the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. It is clear that for centuries, the majority of disputes between the Georgians and the Abkhazians and the Georgians and the South Ossetians derived from their ethnic, cultural, and historical demands on one another and over the territories they had long inhabited.

## CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA

### Introduction

Georgia has been home to many ethnic groups who have lived in specific territories in Georgia and had their own linguistic, cultural, and historical structure. The multi-ethnic structure of Georgia set the stage for ethnic clashes over territories when nationalistic tendencies started to rise throughout the world and these tendencies led ethnic groups to embrace the idea of “the right to self-determination” (Lenin in 1917). When a consciousness of their right to self-determination emerged at the same time among different ethnic groups in Georgia who shared territory with each other, later ethnic conflicts among these groups became inevitable. Therefore, a consciousness of the right of self-determination is one of the main reasons of why ethnic conflicts were inevitable in Georgia, as Nodia and P. Scholtbach (2006) wrote: “the emergence of Georgian nationalism was paralleled by development of counter-nationalist programmes in the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia” (9).

Abkhazians and South Ossetians, who were minority ethnic groups within the borders of Georgia, first articulated their desires for independence from Georgia when Tsarist Russia was overthrown by the Bolsheviks and Georgia declared its independence. In the absence of central power, both groups started to show secessionist tendencies and ethnic uprisings against the Georgian majority erupted in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the Bolsheviks annexed Georgia, these ethnic clashes were brutally suppressed and did not reemerge until the 1990s.

The births of new states from the wreck of the USSR were painful ones. As Emil Souleimanov (2013) puts it, the dominant ideology of Communism had helped to bind society and state together until the 1980s; however, after the 1980s it was increasingly discredited. The ideological vacuum left by the failure of Communism was filled by an explosion of ethnonationalism in the 1990s. In multiethnic Georgia, ethnic discord had been suppressed by Soviet rule, but it surfaced as the USSR began to crumble. A common belief among many Caucasians is that ~~the~~ gradual collapse of Soviet power--which, in conjunction with the unclear policy of Moscow, tended, to incite the conflicts rather than resolve them--created the political and ideological opportunity for the emancipator efforts of both the ‘titular\_\_large nations of the South Caucasus and for the smaller nationalities’ (Souleimanov, 2013, p.78). In terms of the rise of ethnopolitical conflicts in Georgia, Souleimanov (2013) argues that ~~the~~ ideological power vacuum” which appeared upon the collapse of the Soviet Union further deepened as a consequence of the inability and unwillingness of the Communist Party government to effectively prevent and suppress interethnic disputes within the outlying territories of the former Soviet Union. This failure likely contributed to the gradual discrediting of local Soviet rulers and to the parallel emergence of nationalist groups, especially in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Well, the Soviets tried with regards to Baku (Sumgait) and Nagorny Karabakh, but seem to have concluded as a result of their inability to solve the problems there (and even before the collapse of 1991) that they had no answer to the welter of nationalist uprisings, or, at a minimum, nationalist demands for independence (Gorbachev tried something in his last months in power—new union treaty of June 1991-- , but was de-facto deposed by the GKCHP of Yazov C.S.; and Yeltsin's Ham-Fisted actions toward Chechnya in 1994 and 1995 show that any durable solution might not be through the military route, indeed). Of course, you can annihilate a people, as Putin more or

less tried to do in 1999-2000, but then you have no one left at the end. And even Putin has had to bow toward one Chechen faction, led by Kadyrov.

Vamik Volkan asserts in his seminal work, *Killing in the Name of Identity*, that specific sub-identities in provinces coexisted with more general national Georgian identity and “was not necessarily a basis for being ‘less Georgian.’” What he saw as the leading reason for the conflict is that “perestroika and glasnost [or openness] caused the concept of nationalism vs. ethnonationalism and independence vs. democracy to become increasingly problematic” (Volkan, 2006, p. 26).

The ethnic groups in Georgia were not all united under a common roof and a single national principle. The autonomous republic of Abkhazia and the semiautonomous region of South Ossetia, which were given their autonomous status by the Soviet Union, were subdivisions of Georgia, but both desired to follow their own destiny of ethnonationalism and sought full independence from Georgia. While the ethnic Georgians believed that they were victims of russification policies during the Soviet era, many Abkhazians and South Ossetians similarly felt that the Georgians had been domineering them. Both ethnic minority groups, which traditionally speak a different language than Georgians and have a unique culture distinct from that of Georgians, “perceived their culture and homeland--their large group identity--as being threatened” (Volkan, 2006, p. 28) by Georgians.

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s desire for autonomy escalated when Georgian Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power in 1991. Gamsakhurdia was one of the most prominent Georgian politicians thanks to his fervent nationalistic rhetoric and his support of Georgian nationalism. As Vamik Volkan puts it, “Gamsakhurdia received popular support by accentuating the ‘we-ness’ of his own ethnic group” (Volkan, 2006, p. 28). Further, Gamsakhurdia’s policy regarding language,

declaring the Georgian language as the official language, increased tension among already disaffected groups. Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric and policies increased anxiety about large-group identities throughout the region and tainted relations on every level, accelerating societal regression (Volkan, 2006).

In the last years of the Soviet Union, Georgian elites were successful at developing powerful opposition to the Soviet regime, but fostering a single and united nationalist movement helped to create deep cleavages among Georgia's numerous ethnic groups. These cleavages had been suppressed through the Soviet period, but severe strains had alienated ethnic minorities from the idea of single and united Georgia. In the words of Suny (1994);

The policy and rhetoric of leaders, the choices and use of potent symbols, would either work to ameliorate these divisions in a unified struggle for independence and democracy or reinforce and exacerbate the interethnic divisions within the republic. Tragically, Georgians made political choices that deepened social and ethnic divisions. Peaceful demonstrations ended in violence, and what began as a movement for greater democracy descended precipitately into ethnic and civil war (318).

Before the Gorbachev reforms, the Georgian ruling Communist elites were ethnically and personally cohesive as being Georgians. This cohesiveness was able to create the solidarity of the elites that was later "directed upward against Russians and downward against minority nationalities" (Suny, 1994), such as Abkhazians and South Ossetians. The "official" nationalism was tolerated in favor of Georgians rather than other minority groups and the neglect other minority groups was encouraged by the Georgian leadership.

When the Soviet Union started to collapse, many ethno-political conflicts were bound to occur and the ethnic conflict rapidly spread throughout the territories of the former Soviet Union. Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian ethno-political conflicts are two of these conflicts. In order to deeply examine these conflicts in Georgia, we need to study their historical roots. In this chapter, the origins of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts will be examined respectively through the lens of history.

### **The Ethnic Conflict in Abkhazia**

Ethnic conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians is seen as one of the most decisive events in the modern history of Georgia and has had a profound impact on the Georgian nation. From the Georgian side, it is not a conflict incited by ethnic hatred alone but rather a political struggle against the “imperial forces” of Russia that attempt to suppress the Georgian pro-Western vision and regain or secure Russian dominance over the region. For the Abkhazian side, the conflict is also not ethnic but rather related to self-determination and their right to determine their own political future. The Abkhazian people perceived the Georgians as invaders and oppressors that threatened their culture, language, and very presence.

According to the Soviet Census (1989), the percentage of the population by ethnic groups in the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1989 consisted of: Abkhazians 17.8% (93,267), Georgians 45.7% (239,872), Armenians 14.6% (76,541), Russians 14.2% (74,913), Greeks 2.8% (14,664), and Ukrainians 2.2% (11,470) (Hewitt, 1999).

As George Hewitt (1999) puts it, “in the case of the Abkhazians, determined efforts this century by (Menshevik, Bolshevik, or post-Soviet nationalist) Tbilisi and/or the Kremlin to

implement a vicious assimilatory process of ‘\_kartvelianization’, culminating in the Georgian and Abkhazian war of 1992-93, have opened up a major fault-line between the NW and the S. Caucasian peoples” (466). Through the assimilatory project of local people into the Georgian nation by means of the ‘\_kartvelianization’ process, the ethnic Abkhazian population in the Abkhaz ASSR was reduced drastically from 27.8 per cent in 1926 to 15.1 per cent in 1959 (Hewitt, 1999; Fowkes, 2002).

According to Souleimanov (2013), the ethnic conflicts in Georgia also lack of deep historical roots. The first emergence of the Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia conflicts, in the former Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, can be dated back to the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when such conflicts were instigated by Russia. Relations between Georgians and the Abkhaz worsened during the short term independence of Georgia during the Republic of Georgia (Democratic Republic of Georgia) period of May 1918 to February 1921. Under the leadership of Noe Zhordania, head of the Georgian Menshevik party organization, the Georgian Republic struggled with secessionists who were incited by the Bolsheviks and, supported by Russian “comrades,” intended to establish Socialist rule in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali provinces (South Ossetia) (Samkharadze, 2016). That is, during the years of Georgian independence from 1918-1921, the Georgian Republic had to struggle with a small group of Abkhazian secessionists and with local Bolsheviks, as well as to fight the army of Russian Soviet General Anton Denikin, who refused to recognize the existence of independent Georgia (Souleimanov, 2013; Samkharadze, 2016). Denikin’s troops were defeated at the end of 1919, and “political groups loyal to Georgia prevailed in Abkhazia and negotiated a quite advanced constitutional status of autonomy for that period of history” (Samkharadze, 2016, p. 126).

In connection with the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, the Abkhazian National Assembly declared the formation of an Abkhaz parliament, which was known as the Abkhazian National Council, and later adopted a constitution. By the May of following year, the Abkhazian parliament was formally declared part of the newly emerging North Caucasian Mountainous Republic, in spite of the fact that struggles continued among various political groups (~~pro-~~Russian Bolsheviks, pro-Turkish aristocrats, and pro-Georgian Socialists (Mensheviks)” (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 114). By the spring of 1918, Sukhumi, capital of Abkhazia, was occupied by pro-Bolshevik Abkhaz militias, but Georgian armed forces later took control of the city. Nevertheless the central Georgian government offered Abkhazia a level of autonomy under the constitution of the independent Georgian Republic with very wide privileges to Abkhazia in the following spheres: budget and taxes, local and municipal self-government, public education, local finances, public order, local roads and communications, and public health (Samkharadze, 2016) ~~–~~Georgian-Abkhazian relation nevertheless worsened again after the failed landing in Sukhumi in June of that year by Ottoman-Abkhaz (Muhajir) troops (an invasion organized by Abkhaz aristocrats and nationalists), and in the wake of an unsuccessful coup attempt by several Georgian officers of Abkhaz origin” (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 114). As a result of these events, Georgian rulers resorted to repression: many pro-separatist Abkhazian representatives and elites were arrested, and the Abkhazians’ autonomous status was suspended (Souleimanov, 2013).

A couple of weeks after the occupation of Georgia by the Red Army, ~~the~~ Bolsheviks declared the founding of the Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic: Abkhazia thus gained a status equal to that of Georgia, with which it duly formed a sort of confederation” (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 114). In 1931, that status was terminated by the Committee for the Caucasus by the order of Stalin, and Abkhazia territory was annexed to Georgia as a result of the so-called Union Treaty. A decade later, ~~–~~Abkhazia was directly incorporated into the framework of the Georgian Soviet



Socialist Republic, on the principle of autonomy; South Ossetia likewise gained the status of an autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic” (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 114).

Despite existing threats to the Democratic Republic of Georgia from the inside--the result of being a weak state--and the outside—the result of Bolshevik disruptive actions--the Georgian government managed to exert control over the region of present-day Abkhazia and South Ossetia during its short existence. Despite official denials in 1920 from the Bolsheviks of any territorial claims to Georgia and recognition of Georgia’s independence and regional integrity (including the Abkhazian territory) in February of 1921 the Red Army occupied the capital of Georgia and ended Georgian independence and integrity.

Under Soviet rule, the tensions between Georgians and Abkhazians were largely suppressed but they flared up as a result of a constitutional reform that was initiated during Leonid Brezhnev’s tenure that would have abolished Georgian as a state language in Soviet Georgia in 1978. Ending of Georgian as an official language in Soviet Socialist Georgia helped minorities to promote their own language. The Abkhazians used this in favor of their linguistic rights, and some secessionists called for Abkhazian’s incorporation into the Soviet Union to be a separate Socialist Republic or autonomous territory from Georgia. Furthermore, some 130 Abkhazian intellectuals sent a letter to the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union in 1977 complaining about “the influx of Georgians into Abkhazia and the Georgianization policies” (Mikaberidze, 2007). In response to the Abkhazians’ claim, a commission was constituted under Ivan Kapitonov, a Party Central Committee Secretary, to investigate the claims. The commission instituted several changes that provided privileges to Abkhazians, including additional cultural rights and a proportional quota system of government. As a result of this, Abkhazians gained control of government ministers in Abkhazia with 67% of the seats and 71% of regional officials

were now Abkhazians, despite the fact that Abkhazians were a minority in the Abkhazian Semi-Autonomous Region (Mikaberidze, 2007). However, these reforms did not maintain the peace. In October 1978, Georgians' unrest blew up in Abkhazia, and while the demonstrations were quelled another uprising took place in Tbilisi three years later against Abkhazian concessions that were giving Abkhazians. A violent conflict was prevented by law enforcement forces owing to the authoritarian system of the Soviet Union (Mikaberidze, 2007).

It is clear that growing tensions in Abkhazia reached their peak in the last years of Soviet Union as a result of Abkhazians' dissatisfaction with their status as a national minority group within Georgia as well as Georgians' fear for the unity, integrity, and survival of their national republic. A common belief among the Georgians was that Russian rulers have instigated or encouraged ethnic conflict zones to prevent them to secede from the Soviet Union. Such sentiments fed a widespread sense among Georgians that ethnic minority groups were pro-Russian and were supported by the Moscow government (Mikaberidze, 2007). As a result of these sentiments, Georgian nationalists often appealed to the public by making radical demands, such as abolishing all autonomous regions within Georgia and driving all minorities out of Georgia in order to ensure the unity of Georgia. Such radical demands naturally antagonized the ethnic minorities. For example, tensions between Georgia and Abkhazia got out of control in the spring of 1989 as Abkhazians again demanded independence. On 18 March 1989, the popular forum of Abkhazia (Aydgilara) organized a demonstration in Lykhny for the restoration of Abkhazia's status as an independent soviet socialist republic (SSR). The drafting of a "Lykhny Letter" outlining their demands is often regarded as one of the major events leading to the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict" (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 72). In response, on 9 April 1989 in Tbilisi, a large-scale Georgian demonstration in favor of Georgian independence and calling for the full integration of Abkhazia into Georgia occurred (Souleimanov, 2013). However, it fizzled out

when Soviet troops interfered to brutally suppress it (nineteen people, mostly women, died in the attack by Soviet troops) (Souleimanov, 2013). The violent crackdown on the demonstration sparked massive protest and intensified Georgian nationalism (Mikaberidze, 2007), leading to a radicalization of public opinion against Soviet Russia as well as minorities (Souleimanov, 2013).

In October 1990, Gamsakhurdia's movement won the parliamentary election with 53 percent of the popular vote. After that, he was elected chairman of parliament in November. Finally, in March 1991, he organized a referendum on independence, in which 90 percent of those polled voted in favor of independence for Georgia. On April 9, the Georgian parliament promulgated a formal declaration of independence, and a month later Gamsakhurdia was elected the first president of the republic of Georgia with 86 percent of the votes. Separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia boycotted both the referendum and the election (Souleimanov, 2013).

In order to protect Georgia's territorial integrity, Gamsakhurdia followed the same nationalist policies that had increased tension with Abkhazia. In 1989, Abkhazia requested that "Gorbachev recreate an independent Abkhazian Soviet Republic such as existed between 1921 and 1931 when Abkhazia and Georgia were separate" (Volkan, 2006, p. 29). This was not accepted by Gamsakhurdia since the population of Georgians in Abkhazia was more than two times the population of Abkhazians as a result of Russian conquest and Russian's deportation policies. In the wake of these events and the establishment of a separate Georgian division within the University of Sukhumi violence erupted in the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi. Abkhazian politicians reinstated the 1925 constitution that gave Abkhazia complete autonomy from Georgia, bringing the crisis to a head (Volkan, 2006). The Georgian army entered the capital and a violent armed conflict occurred. Thousand of Georgians, who had lived in the region for generations, had

to flee the destructive civil war. Two different ethnic groups, who had lived there together for centuries, now became enemies (Volkan, 2006).

As a result of the autocratic and antagonistic policies of Gamsakhurdia, such as attacking opponents through newspapers controlled by him and referring to opponents overtly as “enemies of the State” and agents of Russia, a growing hatred of Gamsakhurdia’s administration emerged across the whole of the political spectrum. Finally, at the end of the 1991, the forces of opposition staged a coup d’etat and seized control of government buildings, deposing him (Souleimanov, 2013).

### **The Ethnic Conflicts in South Ossetia**

During the initial phase of their escalation, it was possible for observers to believe that the conflicts among groups in Georgia were primarily based on socioeconomic factors. The conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia can be traced back to the period of the short-lived Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921). As we saw, there were three major insurrections (in 1918, 1919, and 1920) during that period in the Shida Kartli region where South Ossetians resided. Souleimanov (2013) asserts that dissatisfaction at the beginning was raised in response to the economic policies of the central government, which the South Ossetians believed, favored the interests of big landowners, most of whom were ethnic Georgians. This dispute soon escalated into an armed upheaval. As Souleimanov (2013) put it,

The conflict played itself out between two ethnically homogenous groups: the South Ossetian peasants, on the one hand, who were generally without land and were striving, under the influence of developments in Russia, to gain greater

freedom and the right to own cultivated land; and the local Georgian aristocrats, on the other hand, to whom the land had originally belonged. Thus, before long, the conflict became ethnic in character. (112)

When the South Ossetian uprising began in 1920, it was led by Ossetian Bolsheviks who took over Tskhinvali and battled the Georgian National Guard; the sole purpose of these Bolsheviks was to make South Ossetia part of the Soviet Union. The rebels defeated the armed forces sent to South Ossetia by the Georgian government, and took over the administrative center in Tskhinvali, despite the fact that the ethnic Georgian population outnumbered that of Ossetians in South Ossetia. Many Georgians living in the region became the target of attacks, and during the fighting any victories won by the Georgian armed forces were followed by vindictive massacres that cost the lives of countless South Ossetians. Souleimanov (2013) asserts that the nationalist feelings of the South Ossetians were escalated by ethnically motivated murders and ethnic cleansing committed by the Georgian army and extreme nationalists. A growing proportion of South Ossetians believed that their only hope of winning the escalating conflict with the Georgians lay with support from Soviet Russia, as the Russians had always been interested in control over the South Ossetian territory, an area with strategic importance as it straddled across the North and South Caucasus. The socioeconomic interests of the South Ossetian peasants triggered their ethnopolitical sympathies for the Russians and their antipathies towards the Georgians. The dissatisfaction of the South Ossetian population with the policies of the central Georgian government in Tbilisi reinforced public sympathy for Russia, with whom the Ossetians had had a good relationship for centuries. As Souleimanov (2013) puts it Ossetian sympathy for Russia and Russian interest in the strategic location of South Ossetia made it possible for the Ossetians to count on the military and political support of Moscow. During the uprisings in 1919, and especially during the massive uprising in the 1920s, the South Ossetian

rebels received substantial--though covert--material support from the Red Army, and the Ossetian political elite directly proclaimed their goal as being annexed by the Soviet Union indeed, at the end of 1919 this did partially occur.

In the middle of 1920s Moscow refrained from interfering in South Ossetia in order to avoid inevitable military conflict with Georgia, giving the Georgian rulers an opportunity to initiate a widespread counteroffensive against the South Ossetians. This military campaign led to ethnic cleansing and the deaths of many South Ossetians, mostly civilians, while approximately 20,000 South Ossetians fled to the Soviet Union. In retribution, South Ossetian volunteers accompanied the Red Army when it marched into the Caucasus and forcibly annexed Georgia into the Soviet Union in February of 1921 (Souleimanov, 2013).

In 1922, as part of the overarching framework of Sovietized Georgia, the South Ossetian Autonomous Region was established. As a reward for the South Ossetian Communists, who had sought to join their homeland with North Ossetia and the USSR, the administrative borders of the territory were expanded, including several communities with a mainly Georgian population (Souleimanov, 2013).

In spite of the traditionally friendly relations between the Ossetians and Georgians, there were then violent ethnic clashes in the second decade of 1900s. Any further conflict was suppressed by Soviet rule for seventy years. In the early 1990s, ethnic conflicts between Georgians and the South Ossetians escalated as a result of the Georgian national movement that had begun in the late 1980s and the growing demands of South Ossetians for unification with North Ossetia (Mikaberidze, 2007). In May 1989, the first armed conflict between the South Ossetians and Georgians occurred on the anniversary of the independence of Georgia in 1918. In August 1989, an anti-Soviet demonstration in Tbilisi took place where people demanded some

privileges for Georgians, such as greater use of the Georgian language in public spheres, promotion of Georgian history, and the resettlement of Georgians in territories dominated by minority groups. This demonstration was suppressed by Soviet troops, resulting in 19 deaths and hundreds of injuries (Mikaberidze, 2007). The Ossetians perceived such demands as a threat to their own security, feeling such reforms would likely lead to enhanced Georgian chauvinism over minority groups.

In response to these Georgian demands, the South Ossetian Popular Front (the *Ademon Nykhas*) applied to the USSR Supreme Soviet and the USSR Council of Ministers to protest the Georgian actions and demand unification of North and South Ossetia. In November 1989, a resolution was passed by the Supreme Council of South Ossetia demanding that Ossetian be the official language of the Ossetian oblast. The Supreme Council issued an additional demand, that South Ossetia's status be changed from autonomous district to autonomous republic. These South Ossetian actions had a deep impact on the Georgians, who were then sure that Moscow would organize and support separatists in order to divide Georgia (Mikaberidze, 2007). In late November 1989 there was a large scale demonstration in Tskhinvali (capital of South Ossetia) organized by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was the leader of national liberation movement. Thousands of Georgians participated in the protest, which was perceived by the South Ossetians as a show of force and a threat to their interests. Some Georgian demonstrators were stopped by the South Ossetian militia forces and armed clashes took place, and the first blood was spilt (Mikaberidze, 2007).

Alexander Mikaberidze (2007) describes Soviet policy in 1990 as opening a "Pandora's box of nationalistic movements":

In April 1990, the USSR Supreme Council adopted the Law on the Resolution of Issues of Secession of Union Republics from the USSR, which gave the autonomous regions and republics within the Soviet Union an opportunity to actively participate in determining their political status as independent subjects of the union, including their secession from the union republics to which they were subordinated (491).

In September 1990, secessionist South Ossetian “proclaimed the foundation of the South Ossetian Soviet republic and requested that Moscow annex this new republic” (Volkan, 2006, p. 29) to the Soviet Union from Georgia as a result of growing tension and refused to participate in the first Georgian national elections. Gamsakhurdia’s leadership was characterized by autocratic policies, antagonistic anticommunism, and intolerance for opposition to his administration. Thus, in response to the South Ossetians, he made a statement that rejected their autonomous status, and several days later imposed martial law in Tskhinvali (the capital of South Ossetia). It is a good example of how “group identity and how to protect it became increasingly politicized” (Volkan, 2006, p. 29). Following the imposition of martial law tensions reached their peak, with violent armed conflict erupting and escalating in South Ossetia.

As a result of this Law, many dormant conflicts in the defiant union republics were reactivated by Moscow, giving the Soviet Union an excuse to intervene in union republics politically and militarily. The South Ossetian authorities saw the advantages of this law and stated to organize their status. In August 1990, Mensheviks government in Tbilisi banned the regional parties, including the leading Ossetian national movement known as Ademon Nykhas (The South Ossetian Popular Front). Thereupon, “the South Ossetian Soviet declared the region the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic on 20 September and appealed to Moscow for



help and protection” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 491). In October 1990, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, won the election in the Georgian Supreme Soviet, and blocked the South Ossetian election. On 9 December, in response to this, South Ossetia reorganized elections. According to Ossetian sources, 72% of the population participated in the election, even though only a minority of people in South Ossetia are of Ossetian ethnicity. A couple of days later, the Georgian Supreme Soviet passed a law abolishing South Ossetian autonomy; this political decree led quickly to conflict between parties, and the Georgian authorities declared a state of emergency in South Ossetia (Mikaberidze, 2007).

In December 1990, Georgian army forces entered Tskhinvali, the Ossetian administrative center, and engaged in clashes with the local Ossetian population. On 7 January, Moscow interfered in the disorder in the region, and with the intent of quelling the growing tension, ~~annulled~~ annulled the South Ossetian Supreme Soviet’s decision to proclaim a secessionist republic and the Georgian Supreme Soviet’s decree on abolishing of the Ossetian autonomy. Both sides were ordered to withdraw their military forces but neither complied” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 492). Later, Rafik Nishanov, president of the Committee of Nationalities of the USSR Supreme Soviet, was dispatched to mediate between the parties, and according to a new agreement, Georgia had to obey the national security forces, and giving those national security forces control of security of Georgia in internal issues. However, Georgian authorities continued to act independently, and in ways that intensified disagreements with the Ossetians; for example, they arrested and imprisoned Torez Kulembegov, chairman of the Ossetian Supreme Council, even though he had been given guarantees of immunity to participate in a meeting with the Georgian authorities in Tbilisi on 29 January.

In March 1991, South Ossetian authorities held an all-Union referendum in South Ossetia on the fate of the USSR, which resulted in the great majority South Ossetian choosing in favor of staying in Soviet Union, which was boycotted by ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia and Tbilisi. Later, in the same month when Georgia held a referendum for independence, South Ossetians boycotted it (Mikaberidze, 2007).

Taking advantage of Georgian turmoil, in January 1992, despite local ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia, the Ossetian ruling elites held another referendum on accession to the Russian Federation. On 29 May 1992, the Supreme Council of South Ossetia published its declaration of independence and seceded from Georgia. As result of this, a kind of Civil War erupted. Fighting continued through June 1992 and resulted in the destruction of several Ossetian and Georgian villages and a refugee problem on both sides. The widespread chaos reached its peak when the strategic pipeline between Russia and Georgia was destroyed and the insurgency in Abkhazia broke out. Moreover, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus organized volunteer militias to fight against Georgians in support of Abkhazia (Mikaberidze, 2007). In response to these chaotic conditions, “Russia also warned that if Georgia failed to stop the violence in the region, the Russian Parliament would consider granting South Ossetia’s request to join Russia” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 493) which would make Russian military intervention inevitable.

In order to avoid large-scale military conflict with Russia,

–The Georgian side agreed to attend a Russian-mediated meeting in Dagomys and signed the Sochi Agreement on 24 June 1992. Both sides agreed to the deployment of Joint Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian Peacekeeping Forces (JPF) and established the Joint Control Commission (JCC) comprised of Russian,

Georgian, and South Ossetian members. The JPF included three battalions; two battalions of Georgian and Russian servicemen and the third battalion of Russian citizens of North Ossetia. The Russian side appointed the commander of the JPF” (Mikaberidze, 2007, p. 493).

In 1997, several negotiations were conducted between parties; very little progress in resolving the conflict was achieved because both sides adopted irreconcilable positions on the status of the region (Mikaberidze, 2007).

As a result of the bloody ethnic conflicts from 1989-92 between South Ossetians and Georgians, more than one thousand people died and tens of thousands of people became refugees (Souleimanow, 2013). South Ossetia separated from Georgia, though without gaining the recognition of the international community, currently, according to international law, South Ossetia is regarded as a part of the Georgian state. It remained unresolved conflict in the literature.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this chapter provided detailed information regarding the origins of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts through the lens of historical events. The first emergence of the Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia conflicts can be dated back to the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when such conflicts were instigated by Russia. Relationships between the parties worsened during the short-term independence of Georgia from 1918 to 1921. The Bolsheviks of Russia openly supported Abkhazian secessionists and local Bolsheviks in order to retake breakaway Georgia and establish Socialist rule in Georgia. After the Bolsheviks’ annexation of Georgia, ethnic conflict within Georgia was suppressed until the final years of the

Soviet Union. In the 1980s and 1990s, Abkhazian and South Ossetian demands for secession were openly expressed, and pursued, resulting in bloody clashes with Georgians.

## CHAPTER 3: SOVIET NATIONALITY POLICY

### Introduction

After the Bolsheviks seized power in the 1917 Civil War, one of the first tasks they took up was maintaining the geographic integrity of the multiethnic Russian Empire. The Bolsheviks were well aware of the power of nationalism, which they had successfully exploited against the Tsarist regime. The power of nationalism had already showed its influence in the Caucasus, Georgia having already declared its independence after the collapse of Tsarist Russia—holding together all the nationalistic states of the new Soviet empire was going to be a major problem for the Bolshevik regime. It was seen as a necessity by the Bolsheviks to implement a federal structure in order to protect and maintain control over the USSR's component members (Cornell, 2001), but for such a structure to work the problem of nationalistic tendencies in the states under Soviet rule would have to be solved. As Lapidus (1984) indicates, the Soviet system was able to solve the impact of ethnic self-assertion, to a certain extent. Thus, as a founding father of the Soviet Union, Lenin was aware of this problem, and in order to solve it the nationalities policy was implemented. Hence, as Richard Pipes wrote it, “the first modern state to place the national principle at the base of its federal structure” emerged (as cited in Cornell (2001), p. 24).

Between 1925 and 1935 the Soviet Union was able to consolidate its control over the Caucasus. As Zurcher (2007) puts it, a new political map was imposed on the region, one based on the “territorialization of ethnicity” that created administrative units out of the old nations and ethnicities now under Soviet rule. As Martin (2001) describes, “the Soviet state created not just a

dozen large national republics, but tens of thousands of national territories scattered across the entire expanse of the Soviet Union” (1). Through the Soviet nationality policy, which Martin calls an “affirmative action policy,” “new national elites were trained and promoted to leadership positions in the government, schools, and industrial enterprises of these newly formed territories” (Martin, 2001, p.1).

The Bolsheviks aimed to eliminate national and ethnic differences within Soviet borders, but at the same time the implementation of the nationality policy encouraged the development of a national consciousness among ethnic groups by supporting minorities’ cultures and languages. The Soviet nationality policy changed over time as the Soviet leadership and their perspectives changed, and its implementation led to unexpected results in the Caucasus. In order to understand the inter-ethnic relations in Caucasus, we need to focus on the impact of Soviet rule over the region. Hence, this chapter examines the Soviet nationality policy from Lenin to Gorbachev.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy in Lenin’s Administration and the Indigenization (Korenizatsiia) policy of Moscow in the Early Years of the Soviet Union**

Lenin and Stalin agreed that their victory in the Civil War was thanks to the Bolsheviks’ exploitation of nationalism. The first nationalities policy, which was adopted by Lenin and supported by Stalin until the early 1930s (Sunny, 1993), grew either from Lenin’s fear of Russian chauvinism over other nationalities, or, as Darrell P. Hammer (1997) and Svante E. Cornell (2001) put it, the hierarchical-nationality based territorial structure of the Soviet Union. This national-territorial structure was the basis for Soviet federalism. Though at first Lenin opposed it, for practical reasons and by necessity, a federal structure had to be adopted (Bremmer, 1993). The outcome of the Russian Civil War and Stalin’s idea of “proletarian self-determination,” as

well as the critical need of the Bolshevik regime for support from different nationalities left no choice but to adopt a federal system (Smith, 1996, p.6).

When the Bolsheviks came to power after the 1917 revolution, they did not yet have a nationality policy that would be inclusive of all nations and nationalities across the former Russian Empire. But they did have “a powerful slogan:” “the right of nations to self-determination” (Martin, 2001, p. 2). In order to understand the nationality policy of the USSR we must be familiar with the perspective of Lenin because, as Terry Martin (2001) puts it, “Lenin’s concern over Great Russian chauvinism led to the establishment of a crucial principle of the Soviet nationalities policy” (2), and it was Lenin who put forward and developed the solution the USSR’s nationalities question. His idea, which was the formulation of national self-determination, could be seen as politically retrogressive and divisive. But Lenin saw that the Communist Party had to work in two phases: first the centralized party must secure socialism, and then its power could be further extended. That is, Socialists think nationalism is bad, but Lenin realized that the Communist Party had to accept nationalism and allow local control to first keep the huge Russian empire and nationalities under control so capitalism and feudalism could be destroyed and socialism secured, and then after socialism was safe nationalism would be a relatively small problem to get rid of and then the central party could take control away from local authorities. Lenin believed that “a nation was trivial compared with securing within the boundaries of the Russian empire the mobilization and unity of the emerging industrial working class against tsarist autocracy, for above all else the nationality problem was viewed as a problem of securing political power” (Smith, 1996, p. 4). It was hence owing to “such a concern with providing the optimal conditions for mobilization against capitalism and other retrogressive forces that his interpretation of national self-determination was developed” (Smith, 1996, p. 4).

In order to deal with the multi-ethnic national structure of the USSR which posed a threat to the establishment of socialism, Lenin adopted a political strategy in order to resolve the national question and preserve the territorial integrity of the former Russian Empire. This strategy was to recognize the right of nations to self-determination. —By granting Russia’s minority nations the right to statehood he was in effect acknowledging national sensibilities for, according to this logic, if nations were not given this right, then, among peoples whose national consciousness was emerging as a political force, it would encourage a combative nationalism which would run counter to the establishment of socialism in Russia” (Smith, 1996, p. 5). One can see the link between the right of nations to self-determination and the right to political secession, but Lenin pointed out that granting the right of nations to secession did not mean that every or any secessionist movement should be supported (Smith, 1996). As Lenin wrote bitinglly, —the right of divorce is not an invitation for all wives to leave their husbands” (as cited in Smith, 1996, p. 5). This political strategy passed at the April 1917 conference of the Russian Communist party, which confirmed —the right of all nations forming part of Russia to free separation and the creation of an independent state” (Smith, 1996, p. 5). Furthermore, according to Lenin, even if small nations did get a chance to declare their independence, they were likely to see the benefits of being part of a larger regional unit and would seek reincorporation.

It is clear that the nation-building process after the end of the Civil War in Russia was accelerated intensely everywhere throughout the USSR. Yuri Slezkine (1994) wrote, the USSR can be regarded as a large —communal apartment in which national state units, various republics and autonomous provinces” held —separate rooms” (415). All the ethnic and national groups in this communal apartment could co-exist under the status of autonomy with their free development of cultural aspirations (Fowkes, 2002). The establishment of Soviet federations, which is based on the borders of the Russian Empire, such as the RSFSR in 1918, and the USSR



in 1922, reflected a complete reversal in Lenin's attitudes. Before 1917, Lenin had frequently disputed against the federal principle that would be an obstacle to socialism, describing that, "under the principle of self-determination, each national group had a choice of either seceding and setting up its own state or becoming part of the new international socialist state, which would be organized on a unitary basis" (Fowkes, 2002, p. 72). But after 1917 he acted in a completely different direction accepting "federation" as "the most suitable form of organization for a multiethnic state (Smith, 1996, p. 5). This policy devised to solve the Russian nationalities questions was carried through with rigorous logic during the 1920s and part of the 1930s, pursued as what Terry Martin (2001) calls a "radical strategy" of "affirmative action" promoting the local peoples with the purpose of "anchoring and fixing certain ethnic and nationalist identities which until 1917 were fluid and uncertain" (Fowkes, 2002). The policy included "indigenization" or "nativisation" (Korenizatsiya or korenizatsiia), in which every single language was identified (a total 192 by means of the census of 1926) and sooner or later became official, and one of its aims was that "even small national minorities within existing national republics should have their own cultural autonomy" (Fowkes, 2002, p. 72). As Yuri Slezkine (1994) put it,

Bolshevik officials in Moscow saw the legitimation of ethnicity as a concession to ethnic grievances and developmental constraints, not as a brilliant divide-and-rule stratagem, and confidently asserted, after Lenin and Stalin, that the more genuine the "national demarcation" the more successful the drive to internationalism. (430)

In the short run, national demarcation resulted in a puzzling and apparently limitless collection of ethnic nesting dolls. All non-Russians were "nationals" entitled to their own territorial units and all nationally defined groups living in "somebody else's" units were national minorities entitled to their own units. [...].

Secure within their borders, all Soviet nationalities were encouraged to develop and, if necessary, create their own autonomous cultures. The key to this effort was the widest possible use of native languages-"native language as a means of social discipline, as a social unifier of nations and as a necessary and most important condition of successful economic and cultural development." (430)

Implementation of indigenization policies continued systematically even after the so-called "Great Change" in 1929. More than half of all the Soviet nations were officially identified with their particular territories and therefore they became the so-called "titular nationalities" with the rights of national-territorial status. Both Lenin and Stalin saw these policies as the only way to deal with national mistrust and the nationalities question (Fowkes, 2002).

However, As Graham Smith (1996) put it;

Stalin had put forward the notion of "autonomisation", which in effect meant withdrawing state sovereignty from the independent socialist republics and providing them with only limited autonomous status. His conception of the right of nations to self-determination had also undergone refinement for now the right to its exercise was restricted to the working population. Lenin was clearly uneasy about the blanket way in which Stalin employed the notion of "proletarian self-determination", and at the 8<sup>th</sup> All-Russia Congress in March 1919 pointed out that such a formulation often exaggerated existing intra-national class differences and unity, pointing out that the right to national self-determination must also apply to socially less-developed peoples, like the Bashkirs. By 1922, Stalin, along with Kamenev and Manuilsky, was arguing for a unitary form of territorial organization

in which the non-Russian nationalities would become autonomous republics with a Russian-dominated Soviet federation. (6)

This, for Lenin, was not acceptable for the reason that it would render a privileged status to Russians and would lead to Russian chauvinism. Instead of it, Lenin adopted a middle road that was –euphemistically referred to as the federal compromise, but it was a combination of the outcome of the Civil War and Stalin’s notion of “proletarian self-determination” (Smith, 1996, p. 6). In the Georgian case, the Menshevik government successfully established an independent statehood in 1918 and was abolished in 1920 by the Red Army. As Smith (1996) points out,

The right of secession was in effect replaced by the right to unite, for it was in the interests of the workers to remain part of a larger proletarian state in which secession that was contrary to the interests of the workers could not occur.

Constitutionally, (as spelt out in the Union Treaty of December 1922), the larger non-Russian nationality groupings were offered equality of union republic status within a Soviet federation which would honour their right to secession and would grant their major nationalities considerable cultural and administrative autonomy.

In return for these guarantees, the nationalities would give up their present form of state sovereignty and become a part of a socialist federation of states. (6-7)

By way of incorporation into the Soviet Federation, Soviet rulers expected that the oppression of the nationalities would be eliminated on the grounds that “they were now acknowledged as free to develop towards fulfillment of their national aspirations” (Smith, 1996, p. 7). The policy of the equality of nations was associated with a conception of nationhood, in which the status of the territorial homeland was a vital principal, –for it was on this basis that the most important national groups were given the most meaningful administrative, constitutional

and legal expressions of nationhood in the form of union republic status” (Smith, 1996, p. 7). Indigenous peoples in particular benefited from the new policy of “indigenization”, launched in 1923 and meant to achieve “the training and development of native personnel, rather than Russian or Russified elements” (Smith, 1996, p. 7). Support for cultural pluralism in the Soviet Federation was a means to both handle the Russian nationalities problem and suppress Russian nationalism and Russian chauvinism.

Korenizatsiya was not only implemented to affect the formation of regional Communist party organizations but also allowed the ethnic groups to maintain and develop their culture and education in their self-rule territories. Therefore, the policy recognized national differences in the Soviet Union and granted the larger nationalities a limited right to protect and maintain their languages, cultures, and so on. It allowed the publishing of books, newspapers, and journals in native languages and school instruction in native languages, as long as the content of publications and education in schools was in line with Communist ideology.

Through Leninist nationality policy, a particular framework was established—state structures based on ethnicity, policies of nativization, a pseudofederal policy—in which the future history of non-Russians would be shaped” (Suny, 1993, p. 124). Suny (1993) notes that,

Though Moscow’s imperial reach often ignored the prerogatives of the republics, rendering their sovereignty a fiction, many nationalities became demographically more consolidated within their homelands, acquired effective and articulate national political and intellectual elites, and developed a shared national consciousness. These more conscious and consolidate nationalities were rooted to specific territories, with abundant privileges for the titular nations and their local Communist elites. The economic and social transformation associated with the

brutalities of Stalinism undermined but never eliminated the cultural and social gains of non-Russians. Indeed, many older forms of association were preserved, despite the catastrophes of collectivization and the Great Purges (125).

To conclude, for Lenin the Soviet nationality policy was a good apparatus to solve the Soviet nationality question. Therefore, it allowed ethnic groups in every Soviet nation to develop their culture and identity. It led ethnic groups to become more consolidated in their territories that was seen to be the first step of the consciousness of statehood.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy in Stalin's Administration**

The Soviet nationality policy designed to foster native culture slowed and essentially came to a halt in 1934. Stalin found the level of indigenization and minority nationalism occurring in non-Russian nationalities to be problematic as he believed that it would be a threat to the effective implementation of his far-reaching economic policies. Presumably a reflection of Stalin's distrust of non-Russians, in a 1934 speech he said, "survivals of capitalism in the minds of men are much more long-lived in the realm of the national question than in any other area" (as cited in Smith, 1996, p.7). Stalin deviated from Lenin's nationality policy and adopted the Russification policy, which was a type of cultural assimilation policy that included the replacement of native languages with Russian, regardless of the wishes of local people and authorities. By the late 1930s the Russian language was being adopted in schools and the number of Russian schools all over the federation was being increased.

The slogan, "the right of nations to self-determination", was created to recruit ethnic support for the Bolshevik revolution. It was not designed as a model to govern the multiethnic

state after the 1917 revolution. Although in the beginning Lenin and Stalin agreed on the usefulness of “the right of nations to self-determination,” in 1922 they came into conflict over its implementation. Before 1932, all non-Russians in the USSR whether they were in the majority or minority, enjoyed a policy of ethnic enhancement, which promoted all national and sub-national cultures equally. However, after 1932 the policy of indigenization was gradually replaced with Russification. After 1938 traditional Russian alphabet was to be used in all Soviet republics, replacing the unique alphabets of native languages. Later, it was ordered that Russian culture alone be promoted all over the USSR with the partial exception that “where indigenous non-Russian nations already possessed ASSRs (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics) within the RSFSR, their cultural institutions continued to be recognized” (Fowkes, 2002, p. 76).

According to Gail W. Lapidus (1989), the administration of Stalin marked;

A dramatic shift [was] toward greater centralization, cultural Russification and the repression of non-Russian national elites. The rights of republics and autonomous regions were whittled away, their boundaries arbitrarily redrawn, and the populations of some liquidated or forcibly resettled during World War II [...].

National histories were rewritten to emphasize the progressive character of Russian imperialism, and criticism of Great Russian chauvinism came to an end.

(96)

After Lenin’s death Soviet Nationality Policy became Stalinist policy, as Hammer (1997) wrote it, the Stalinist policy, “however, contained the seeds of its own destruction. On balance, this policy contributed to the development of a stronger sense of ethnic identity in the non-Russian republics” (3). The central Communist government in Moscow suppressed any discourse of political independence, and the Communist party apparatus remained in control in

every republic of the Soviet Union, but at the same time territorial nationalism, under the surface, grew among the native peoples of the republics. Once the central government failed to implement this control, –the republics that Stalin had created provided the framework for a nationalism that ultimately led to escalating demands, first for greater autonomy, and then for independence. The cultural autonomy tolerated by the center grew into territorial nationalism which the regime could not control” (Hammer, 1997, p. 3).

To conclude, after 1932 the policy of indigenization was gradually replaced with Russification that enhance Russian language and culture over non-Russian nationalities. However, in counter-effect, Stalinist policy clearly contributed to the development of a stronger sense of ethnic identity among non-Russian republics.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy in Khrushchev’s administration**

The Russification policy that characterized the USSR’s nationality policy during Stalin’s administration, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, was reversed after the deaths of Stalin and Beria in 1953. In the post-Stalin period, Moscow adopted political de-Stalinization, a more flexible social order that represented Khrushchev’s reaction against the personality cult of Stalin and the crimes of the Stalinist era.

The period of Khrushchev’s rule saw a rebirth of nationalism and patriotism; the de-Stalinization policy led to outcomes the Moscow government found undesirable: first and foremost, local national elites gained independent attitudes and started to openly express nationalistic sentiments (Suny, 1994). In terms of political perspective, political and economic decentralization under Khrushchev conceded more power to local parties in the national

republics; the central party was willing to reduce its control over the nationalist republics, hoping that local parties in the republics would be able find regional sources of support and provide a stable functioning government. Such a policy of indirect rule led to the emergence of nationalistic aspirations among local elites, along with ethnic expression among non-Russian nationalities (Suny, 1994).

At the twenty-second Party Congress in 1961, Khrushchev articulated his policy (the official theory of national development) toward the nationalities. Soviet nationalities would continue to evolve through the (*rasvet*) –flourishing” of their ethnic culture, (*sblizhenie*) –drawing together” of these nations until –complete merger” (*sliianie*) was achieved (Suny, 1994, p. 294). Complete merger as a goal seems to contradict your claim that Khrushchev allowed for the re-emergence of national identities within the USSR.

In essence, under Khrushchev’s administration, Moscow adopted de-Stalinization with more flexible social order, and also by means of political and economic decentralization, local parties in the national republics was able to gain more power on their territories. However, it inevitably led to the emergence of nationalistic aspiration among local elites.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy in Brezhnev’s Administration**

Even though, on the surface, the Soviet national order appeared stable in Brezhnev’s administration, the Soviet Constitution of 1977 led all antagonisms inside the Soviet borders to erupt. As Beissinger (2004) put it;

In the practice of everyday life, cultural conflict remained widespread and seemed to grow more salient over the 1970s and 1980s. Diffuse contention took place over



such issues as cultural and linguistic expression, religious freedom, the right to return to one's homeland from politically imposed exile, discrimination in the workplace, the distribution of investment between federal subunits, representation of nationalities within elite posts, the right to emigrate, and the territorial boundaries of federal subunits.

The discourse of Russian dominance grew considerably more muted during these years. Russian nationalists began to question whether Russians were reaping the benefits from the Soviet regime that a dominant group should expect, and in localities indigenization once again became the expected norm within the sphere of personnel policy. Efforts by the regime to foster dual language competency and even linguistic assimilation (particularly within non-Russian Slavic populations) accelerated during these years, laying the basis for many of the claims for cultural revival that would later emerge under *glasnost*'. But patterns of demographic and linguistic vibrancy among non-Russians raised growing doubts about the regime's ability to achieve universal Russian-language fluency and therefore integrate non-Russians into a common identity community, at least as such a community had traditionally been conceived. (54)

It is clear that Soviet nationality problem had gradually been growing on the eve of *perestroika*, at the time ethnic problems inside the Soviet borders appeared to be unmanageable.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy in Gorbachev's Administration**

Before Gorbachev's administration, the Soviet Union had suppressed the nationalistic discourses of non-Russian nations but had not totally resolved the nationalistic problem. In Gorbachev's administration, the pent-up hatreds of distinct nations came to the surface as an

unexpected side effect of the policies of perestroika and glasnost. The common consensus has been that Gorbachev did accept the existence of the nationality problem (Lapidus, 1989) that brought the end of the USSR and later led to the inevitable ethnic conflicts and civil wars inside the post-Soviet nations.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 he inherited many socio-economic problems. Thus, he initiated a period of major reforms in hopes of revitalizing the Soviet Union's tattered economy and society. Melissa Gayan (2004) asserts that "his policies of *perestroika* (restructuring), *glasnost* (openness) and *demokratizatsiia* (democratization) made changes to the structure of Soviet government and society, welcomed free and uninhibited communication, and enacted electoral reforms" (419). The purpose of Gorbachev's reforms was to recreate socialist life and achieve the original goals of the Bolsheviks, but in this they failed. On the contrary, his reforms undermined the USSR's authoritarian system of rule and the Soviet citizenry's sense of certainty about and reliance on their government. Most importantly, his reforms led to an extraordinary expression of anti-government sentiment, which encouraged non-Russian nationalities to demand autonomy and full independence, leading the inevitable disintegration of the Union (Gayan, 2004). Gorbachev's policies provided an opportunity for inter-ethnic conflicts that had as their source other social, economic and political problems to come out in the open, and exacerbated them

With *glasnost* and *perestroika*, titular nationalities within the Soviet Union were able to express and propagate their ideas and demands for conceptions of statehood that had previously been suppressed. Briefly, Gorbachev's reformist policies created a condition of relative political freedom that allowed various movements and organizations to further galvanized nationalist sentiments in the Soviet Republics and among ethnic groups inside those republics.

## Conclusion

One of the first tasks taken up by the Bolsheviks after seizing power in the 1917 Revolution was maintaining the geographic integrity of the multiethnic Russian Empire; they could see that holding together all the nationalistic states of the new Soviet empire was going to be a major problem. Thus, it was a necessity to implement a federal structure and nationality policy in order to protect and maintain control over the borders of the new Soviet empire.

In order to deal with the multi-ethnic national structure of the new USSR, which posed a threat to the establishment of socialism, Lenin adopted a political strategy in order to resolve the national question and preserve the territorial integrity of the former Russian Empire. This strategy was to recognize the right of nations to self-determination. Soviet nationality policy declared that all non-Russian people were "nationals" entitled to their own territorial units and that all nationally defined groups living in "somebody else's" units were national minorities entitled to their own units. Secure within their borders, all Soviet nationalities were encouraged to develop their ethnic identities and, if necessary, they were allowed to create their own autonomous units.

The Soviet nationality policy changed over time as the Soviet leadership and their perspectives changed, and its implementation led to unexpected results in the Caucasus. By granting the minority nations of the Soviet Union the right to statehood, the implementation of nationality policy, led to the emergence of national consciousness as a political force, setting the stage for ethnic conflict within the post-Soviet states when the USSR collapsed.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE OF SOVIET NATIONALITY POLICY AND SOVIET FEDERAL STRUCTURE AS AN ETHNIC CONFLICT TRIGGER IN GEORGIA AND THE FORMULATION OF STATEHOOD OF ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA**

### **Introduction**

Soviet federal structure played a fundamental role in terms of how “ethnicity” was institutionalized. Through the Soviet ethnofederal structure that was “based on territorially defined and ethnicity-based entities” (Cornell, 2001, p.25), certain ethnically defined groups with particular territories were created and vested in these territories (Zurcher, 2007). Many ethnic groups were granted different degrees of status with a certain amount of autonomy and a number of privileges. There were four main levels of autonomy given by the Communist government, Union Republics, autonomous republics, oblasts, and okrugs. After the annexation of the Baltic States in 1939, the Soviet Union consisted of 15 national states, each of which were granted the highest status, that of Union Republic; these were the constituent parts of the Soviet Union. The autonomous republics had autonomy within Union Republics with special treatments. Autonomous Oblasts or regions had a more limited cultural and social autonomy. The last category was that of autonomous Okrugs which had a lesser degree of autonomy. As Zurcher (2007) asserts, “these political institutions proved to be a powerful organizational resource that made mobilization easier along predetermined ethnic lines” (54). However, changes in the political status of these administrative units were common, such as in the cases of Abkhazia (an example of the autonomous Republic, such as Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

in 1931), and South Ossetia (an example of Oblast, such as South Ossetian Soviet Autonomous Oblast created within the Georgian SSR in 1922).

The great problems of dealing with discontent among ethnic minorities and appeasing nationalist sentiments led the Bolsheviks to implement the Soviet nationality policy. During the first ten years of the Soviet Union, the nationality policy was embodied in the policy of ~~“korenizatsiya, (“indigenization.”)~~ One of the main results of this policy was the ~~“nationalization or nativization”~~ of the state and party structures in non-Russian republics through Communist principles, which placed local nationals in leadership positions in the local Communist Party apparatus and in the governance of local areas. Through appointing local people with Soviet ideals and goals to local administrative apparatus, the Bolsheviks aimed to give republics a sense of self-determination while extending Communist control over these regions. Yet, as Suny (1993) wrote, the policy of indigenization ~~“contributed to the consolidation of nationality in three important ways: by supporting the native language, by creating a national intelligentsia and political elite, and by formally institutionalizing ethnicity in the state apparatus”~~ (102) not only in constituent nations but also in titular nations inside these nations. Moreover, Nilsson and Popjanevski (2009) assert that the initiation of perestroika reforms empowered non-Russian nations in the Caucasus to follow an aggressive ethnic nationalism as a principal ideology for statehood. ~~“The overt focus on ethnicity as a determinant of national belonging was in large part a product of Soviet nationality policy, which granted the titular nations of these Soviet Republics exclusive political rights and territory”~~ (Nilsson & Popjanevski, 2009, p. 8).

Suny (1993) discusses how the contradictory policy of the Soviet government contributed to the development of a stronger sense of ethnic identity in the non-Russian republics: the ~~“contradictory Soviet policies of nativization”~~ along with economic and social transformation had

several side effects within nationalities. One is that many nationalities went through internal consolidation and an increase of national consciousness. Another is that some nationalities underwent more extreme “state-enforced Russification” (Suny, 1993, p. 108). While their policies fostered national consciousness, the Soviet central authorities also suppressed brutally any discourse of political independence, including territorial nationalism. But once Moscow’s central authority started to lose its grip on the republics of the Soviet Union, they provided the framework for nationalism that led to separatist manifestations, first for greater autonomy, and then for political independence. In the other words, the cultural autonomy granted by the center regime later grew into territorial nationalism which escalated ethnic demands for secession not only on the macro level (republics in Soviet Union) but also on the micro level (territories in republics).

The formation of new political classes in the national republics, Bolsheviks first drew local leadership from among the local people but later replaced locals with Russians Cornell (2001) relates that ;

Moscow drew boundaries at will with the very aim of dividing and ruling territories that were seen as potential trouble-makers. Hence it was desirable to separate certain peoples from each other, in particular those with common identities such as Turkic or/and Islamic peoples. By isolating ethnic sub-groups from their kin, unified rebellion against the Soviet state was more likely to be prevented. (25)

Through the Russian nationality policy, which Martin calls an “affirmative action policy”, “new national elites were trained and promoted to leadership positions in the government, schools, and industrial enterprises of these newly formed territories” (Martin, 2001, p.1). Filling

the cadres of the territorial administration apparatus with local peoples, not only developed ethnic nationalist consciousness but also escalated ethnic mobilization among Abkhazians. Cornell (2002) emphasizes that “ethnic mobilization” among minority groups in multiethnic countries is a prominent reason for a desire for self-rule (territorial autonomy) or outright separation. This is because, “especially in defined geographical areas where minorities are compactly settled (as in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), the creation of a separate state is a feasible goal and territorial control becomes a chief issue of conflict” (Cornell, 2002, p. 245).

Parson (1982) suggests that, “nationalities policy has, it seems, merely consolidated Georgia’s attachment to its traditions and culture” (556). Further, undoubtedly, the state policy of supporting Georgian language schools and language instruction is also responsible for the consolidation of ethnic identity among Georgians (“75% of all schools teach in Georgian, while both Russian and Armenian schools account for less than 10% of the total number” (Parson, 1982, p. 556). However, it also had a negative impact on minority ethnic groups who felt that Georgians were culturally oppressing them. Thus, this chapter will examine the Soviet nationality policy as a conflict trigger in Georgia by means of focusing on Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy as an Ethnic Conflict Trigger in Abkhazia**

Even if I have shown the Soviet nationality policy to be a core conflict driving apparatus in Georgia, conflict metamorphosis cannot be understood without identifying and analyzing the whole dimension of driving forces and core causes of the conflict which generate and shape a feeling of injustice among the parties to the disputes. Besides the primary causes of the conflict,

which date back to the history of relations among ethnic groups, examined in chapter two, in this chapter I examine the relation between the conflicts and the Soviet nationality policy.

The main factor that explains the particularly sharp tensions in relations between Georgia and Abkhazia is the legacy of the Soviet Federal Structure that was based on, according to Zurcher (2007), “territorialization of ethnicity.” Martin (2001) describes how “the Soviet state created not just a dozen large national republics, but tens of thousands of national territories scattered across the entire expanse of the Soviet Union”(1). Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were two of these national territories, enjoyed an autonomy status under Soviet rule. Giving autonomy to territorial minorities set the stage for the ethnic conflicts among non-Russian republics in the future.

During Stalin’s administration, especially the period 1931-1953, the political history of Abkhazia was greatly influenced by the policies of Stalin and Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria. Beria was Stalin’s close associate and a Mingrelian born in Abkhazia near Sukhumi, who headed the party in Georgia from 1931 to 1938 and chaired the Transcaucasian Communist Party Committee from 1932-1937. The Transcaucasian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic was dissolved in 1937, and Beria became the People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs (head of the NKVD, Stalin’s secret police) in 1938. This position provided him a great influence over Transcaucasia, having appointed his comrades and satraps. From 1933 and until the death of Stalin in 1953, Beria gradually implemented an anti-Abkhaz policy (Suny, 1994). In 1931, the union republic status of Abkhazia was reduced to that of an autonomous republic under the Georgian SSR. Beria initiated a purge against Abkhaz officials, who were accused of planning to assassinate Stalin. Nestor Lakoba, the Abkhaz communist party leader, was charged with nationalist deviation and his



friends who were opposed to Stalin and Beria’s policies in Abkhazia were executed during the Great Purge between 1936-1938 (Yalcın, 1996).

From the late 1930s to Stalin’s death in 1953 the Soviet nationality policy in Georgia was one of “Georgianization” that favored Georgians, a policy strongly encouraged by Beria. The policy altered the demographic makeup of Abkhazia by forcing other nationalities, particularly Georgians and Mingrelians, to settle in Abkhaz territory. These policies reduced the share of Abkhazians in the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic to less than 20%. (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Ethnic Composition of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic in the Soviet Period (%)

Year	Abkhaz	Georgians	Russians	Armenians
1926	27.8	33.6	6.2	12.8
1939	18	29.5	19.3	15.9
1959	15.1	39.1	21.4	15.9
1970	15.9	40	19.1	11.4
1979	17.1	43.9	16.4	15.1

Source: Darrell Slider, Crisis and Response in Soviet Nationality Policy: The Case of Abkhazia, Central Asian Survey, 1985 Vol.4, No.4. p.52

During Stalin’s administration, the impact of the Georgianization policy was intensely felt in the ethnic structure of the Abkhaz Communist Party. The most dramatic decline in the ethnic Abkhaz membership in the party cadres was in 1929-1930, from 28.3 to 18.5 percent, but the decline continued steadily for years, reaching a low of 13.3 percent in 1950. The numbers of

ethnic Georgians in the party cadres increased dramatically during the same years, reaching a high of 54,8 in 1955 (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Ethnic distribution of the Abkhaz Communist Party in the Soviet Period (%)

<b>Year</b>	<b>Abkhaz</b>	<b>Georgians</b>	<b>Russians</b>	<b>Armenians</b>
<b>1923</b>	10	40,4	35	4,6
<b>1926</b>	25,4	33,3	24,8	6,7
<b>1929</b>	28,3	24,9	24,5	8,8
<b>1931</b>	18,5	25,3	36,8	9,1
<b>1935</b>	17,6	25	35,2	11,4
<b>1936</b>	21,8	26,3	29,1	11,2
<b>1937</b>	19,7	26,8	26,1	11,4
<b>1938</b>	16,9	27,2	28,1	11,8
<b>1939</b>	15,6	36,2	22,1	13,2
<b>1940</b>	16,7	42,7	16,7	15,2
<b>1945</b>	14,8	45,2	17,8	12,7
<b>1950</b>	13,3	51	15,5	14
<b>1955</b>	13,3	54,8	13,7	12,9
<b>1960</b>	14,4	51,3	15,6	12,4
<b>1965</b>	15,5	50,5	15,1	12,4
<b>1970</b>	16,8	50,5	14,4	11,9
<b>1975</b>	17,6	50,3	14,5	11,3
<b>1978</b>	18,2	50,9	14,2	10,5
<b>1979</b>	18,2	51	14,1	10,5
<b>1980</b>	18,5	51,2	13,8	10,3
<b>1981</b>	18,9	51,2	13,8	10,1

Source: Darrell Slider, *Crisis and Response in Soviet Nationality Policy: The Case of Abkhazia*, *Central Asian Survey*, 1985, Vol 4, No. 4, p. 53

With the passage of the 1936 USSR Constitution, the Abkhaz region became an autonomous republic within the Georgia SSR. One year later, Moscow issued a decree that the Abkhaz language, which used a Latin alphabet, should be written in the Georgian alphabet. The Abkhaz (along with the South Ossetians) were forced to use the Georgian script until the death of Stalin in 1953 (Yalcin, 1996).

The structural legacy of the Soviet nationality policy enacted during the Stalinist era, –with its built-in contradiction between the principle of ethnoterritorial federalism and the actual repression of national aspirations” was an essential contributing factor in the emergence of the Abkhazian national movement (Lapidus, 1998, p.9). A hierarchy of ethnoterritorial units was created by the Soviet nationality policy, from the union republics down to autonomous regions and oblasts with local concessions that fostered development of national elites and cultures in ethnic-based territories. Especially, by the late era of Stagnation in Chernenko’s administration in 1984-1985, as Lapidus (1998) asserts;

The rising aspirations of increasingly educated and capable elites of the titular nationalities had become a source of tension and competition with Russians for key positions not only in the fifteen union republics but also in a number of the autonomous republics, many of whose elites had long pressed for an elevation of their status. As political constraints were lifted by the liberalizing impact of perestroika, national loyalties and solidarities displaced communist ideology and become a potent basis for political mobilization around a combination of ethnopolitical and national demands” (9)

The Abkhazians had fought against Georgian rule in the years of an independent Georgia (1918-21), but before the annexation by the Bolsheviks of Georgia in 1921, the Abkhaz enjoyed their own political and cultural autonomy. Later under Stalin’s rule, they suffered the loss of their native leaders, forced collectivization of lands, persecution of intellectuals, and indoctrination in the Georgian culture and language. In 1932, the status of Abkhazia was demoted from that of a Soviet Socialist republic to that of an autonomous republic. During the Stalinist era Abkhazian identity was suppressed by the government, but after the end of the Stalinist terror after the

Stalin's death, Abkhazian rulers and elites resumed efforts to promote Abkhazian identity. Abkhazian rulers and elites initiated efforts to make the republic more Abkhaz. In 1956, The Abkhaz language was restored in schools and media, despite some resistance from Georgian authorities. In 1978, Abkhaz rulers on several occasions tried to convince Moscow to annex them to Russia (Suny, 1994).

The struggle over the political status of Abkhazia was triggered by the growing wave of national self-determination throughout the region resulting from the legacy of the Soviet Federal structure and Soviet nationality policy from the administrations of Lenin to Gorbachev. Both historical experiences and the impact of Soviet national policy were able to consolidate and reinforce group identity and solidarity among "titular nationalities" and even inside of titular nationalities, especially in Abkhazia, a solidarity in which identification with growing ethnic Abkhaz identity as separate from Georgian played a fundamental role in the state-building process. Preservation of ethnic Abkhazian identity against cultural pressures from Georgians had served the emergence of the demand regarding continuity of self-determination as a separate unit after collapse of the USSR.

National Abkhaz identity had been already been developed over the centuries, but the idea of independent statehood had been gradually developed among Abkhazians during the implementation of Soviet nationality policy. The policies of the Gorbachev era (glasnost and perestroika) opened up a space in which such aspirations for independence for Abkhazians could be powerfully expressed. As Gayan (2004) points out that Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika policies not only encouraged a discourse of independence among Georgians but also among Abkhazians.

In early 1988, when nationalistic consciousness rose throughout the entire Soviet Union, it also escalated in Georgia. In the case of Abkhazia, nationalistic consciousness was transformed into an expression of political dissent. In June of 1988, a letter demanding the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia was signed by fifty-eight members of the Abkhaz ruling elites and intellectual class and sent to the Nineteenth Party Conference in Moscow (Suny, 1994).

According to last Soviet census in 1989, ethnic Abkhazians were only 17 percent of the ASSR population, compared to ethnic Georgians, who accounted for 45 percent, Armenians 14 percent, and ethnic Russian 12 percent. After historian Vladislav Ardzinba was elected chair of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet in December of 1990, a new electoral law was adopted and established a sixty-five-seat parliament (Cornell, 2002). Ethnic Abkhazians gained the plurality of seats in the Abkhaz parliament as a result of the parliamentary election in fall 1991 (twenty-eight seats for ethnic Abkhaz, twenty-six seats for Georgians, with the remainder held by Armenians, Russians, and Greeks (Cornell, 2002). Thus, even if ethnic Abkhaz constituted 17 percent of the whole population, they controlled 43 percent of the parliament. These election results led to unrest in Tbilisi that are likely to have been a factor in the fall of the nationalist Gamsakhurdia regime in Georgia (Cornell, 2002).

A dispute arose over a Moscow- promoted referendum on a proposal to restructure the Soviet Union to avert an end of the Soviet Union. Ethnic Georgians just refused to go to the polls, as they sought the independence, and refused to hold the referendum, but Abkhazians and South Ossetians chose to participate. Ethnic Georgians loyal to Tbilisi boycotted the vote. Furthermore, in order to develop regional relations, the Abkhazians hosted a congress of Mountain People of the Caucasus with the representation of Ossetians and North Caucasus people, including Chechens, which adopted a document establishing a –Confederative Union of Mountain Peoples

of the Caucasus” (Cornell, 2002, p. 264). Throughout in the early 1990s, the Abkhazians endeavored to distance themselves from Georgia and build up their own political system and independent relations with ethnic Russians and Armenians. As a response to these Abkhaz actions, the Georgian government sent a high-level delegation to the Abkhazia to discuss the division of powers, but this did not ease tensions. Further, Vladislav Ardzinba, the leader of Abkhaz, articulated that the Abkhazians were strong enough to fight against Georgia, even if they lacked military equipment and training. Eventually, in the summer of 1991, the Abkhazia parliament restored its 1925 constitution that declared Abkhazia to be an independent state (Cornell, 2002).

It is clear that, despite the numerical inferiority of the ethnic Abkhaz that they were able to dominate the political life of the autonomous republic thanks to the advantages of Soviet nationality policy that allowed them to assume full control over political institutions. Such developments as the ability of the ethnic Abkhaz to control the plurality of seats in the parliament ethnic Abkhaz occupancy of more than two-thirds of the positions as ministers and local communist party department heads (Slider, 1997), allowed the ethnic Abkhaz to form alliances with Ethnic Russian and Armenian populations in Georgia, and so guarantee their control over the political life and institutions in the region.

Taking control over political life in the region, establishing an independent Abkhazia and achieving a peaceful secession were seen as challenging, especially as the Abkhaz feared a violent Georgian response, like that to Ossetian separatism efforts in 1991-1992. Furthermore, the Abkhaz did not have the resources to contend with either the Tbilisi regime or the many ethnic Georgians who inhabited the Abkhaz region and were loyal to the central government.

However, the developments that followed enabled the ethnic Abkhaz to rebel against Tbilisi. In mid-August 1992, irregular Georgian paramilitary forces attacked Abkhazia and took control of Sukhumi. With help from North Caucasian volunteers and air support and heavy weapons from Russia, the Abkhaz counterattacked in early October of 1992. Abkhaz resistance forces recaptured Sukhumi in September 1993, and almost all Georgians living in Abkhazia territory were expelled. A cease-fire agreement was declared in late 1993, though it was broken a number of times in 1994 and in 1998 (Cornell, 2002).

A number of factors had influence on ethnic mobilization and the conflict in Abkhazia. These include existing grievances with Georgia springing from Georgian chauvinism, such as Tbilisi's policies toward minorities and political discourses (an example, "Georgia is for the Georgians.") Especially in the 1990-1992 period, through the state's policies and discourses toward ethnic minorities, the Georgian elites tried to build an independent Georgia, but their policies at the same time fostered ethnic mobilization among minorities that destroyed the possibility of a united Georgia. The most important factor, however, was the autonomous structure of Abkhazia and the implementation of the Soviet nationality policy, which over the decades had enabled ethnic Abkhaz to enhance their cultural and linguistic identity and keep ethnic mobilization alive. These Soviet policies also allowed ethnic Abkhaz to form the political elite that gained control over the administration of the territory of Abkhazia despite Abkhazian numerical inferiority. As Cornell (2002) puts it,

Without autonomy, the Abkhaz elite would not have had the necessary institutions—such as the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic—with which to legitimately decide on secession from Georgia. Such institutions also enhanced the Abkhaz elites' ability to win external support. Through the

linkages and channels inherited from Soviet Communist Party structures, Abkhaz elites had access to contacts in the former Soviet military forces that were crucial in securing support for the struggle (266).

It is clear that the Abkhazians had autonomy to have the necessary institutions, and later shaped national consciousness due to the Soviet federal structure and nationality policy.

### **Soviet Nationality Policy as an Ethnic Trigger in South Ossetia**

Due to the Soviet federal structure and nationality policy, South Ossetia enjoyed an ethnically based autonomous Oblast granted limited de facto independent status during the Soviet period. This de facto status, as in Abkhazia, provides South Ossetians with institutions, political infrastructure (Cornell, 2002; Nilsson and Popjanevski, 2009), and a qualified political elite class. Through these South Ossetia was able to resist the nationalizing policies of the central Georgian government in the 1990s and claim its independence along with Abkhazia. This resulted in the outbreak of ethnic clashes. This ethnic conflict remains unresolved and South Ossetia (along with Abkhazia) has gained de facto independence.

The relationship between the Georgians and South Ossetians has been in very poor condition for centuries. As a result of the collapse of Tsarist Russia, the South Ossetians declared their independence from Georgia and announced their desire to become a Soviet Republic, basing their claims on the fact that Ossetia voluntarily joined the Russian Empire in 1774. Georgia saw this as an uprising that challenged the territorial integrity of Georgia and sent its army to suppress the Ossetians; in the fighting about 5,000 Ossetians were killed (13,000 subsequently died from hunger and epidemics that are considered by the South Ossetians to be the first genocide



committed by the Georgians) (Sammut and Cvetkovski, 1996). Russia only condemned Georgian intervention due to the power conflict in Russia in that time (Sammut and Cvetkovski, 1996).

During the period of Soviet rule, there was scarcely any conflict between Georgians and South Ossetians. But at the end of the 1980s a law strengthening the position of the Georgian language in South Ossetia stimulated a dispute between the two groups (Cornell, 2002). As permitted under the new perestroika policies, in 1988 the South Ossetian Popular Front, also known as Ademon Nykhas, was created. In spring 1989, the leader of the South Ossetian Popular Front, Alan Chochiev, addressed an open letter to the Abkhaz people requesting support for their secessionist policy. After these developments, during the summer of 1989, guerilla attacks in Ossetian territories by both groups were reported. In August, the Georgian government declared the Georgian language the sole official language of public life (Cornell, 2002). This policy would have affected South Ossetians severely, as only 14 percent of Ossetians spoke the Georgian language, though this was a higher proportion than Georgian speakers in Abkhazi. This oppression from the government in Tbilisi caused a resurgence of South Ossetian desire for unification with North Ossetia, their ethnic brethren in the North Caucasus in the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia in Russian Republic. Ademon Nykhas sent a request to Moscow that the two Ossetians be united (Cornell, 2002).

As can be seen, the Soviet nationality policy contributed to the revival of a strong sense of ethnic identity in the non-Russian republics and ethnic territories inside these republics, such as South Ossetia. Because, when Georgia was one of the first republics of the Soviet Union to see the opportunity presented by the glasnost policies of Gorbachev to call for total independence, South Ossetia wanted to stay within the framework of the USSR and unite with North Ossetia.

By late September, tensions escalated and inter ethnic clashes erupted. At the same time, the South Ossetian Supreme Soviet demanded its status be upgraded to that of an autonomous republic. When Georgia declared its independence and seceded from the Soviet Union, conflicts in the Ossetian territories grew more intense. The Gamsakhurdia government in Georgia responded by organizing a “March on Tskhinvali.”

## **Conclusion**

Analyzing nation-building in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with close attention to the Soviet nationality policy provides an opportunity to reinterpret major turning points in that nation-building process. As a natural consequence of the demolition of the central authority of the Russian Empire after the Bolshevik uprising, Georgians sought to build their own independent state. At the same time, however, the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia saw an opportunity to create their own independent states. Later, Russian annexation of Georgia and implementation of the USSR’s nationality policies led both Abkhazians and South Ossetians to gain the status of territorial administrative autonomous units under the Soviet Federal system. This allowed them to create their own cultural and educational institutions that enhanced their self-identity as well as their own bureaucratic elites. The combination of all these later served as the basis for self-determination as an independent unit after the fall of the Soviet Union.

## CONCLUSION

The primary objectives of this study have been threefold: first, to provide an overview via brief histories of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia; in doing so, I aimed to examine the historical basis of the structure of these groups and how their ethnic identities have been shaped and developed from ancient times to the modern day; second, to explain the historical background of inter-ethnic conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians and Georgians and South Ossetians through the lens of historical events. Finally, I examined the Soviet nationality policy from Lenin to Gorbachev to make sense of ambiguity surrounding the contemporary debate over the relationship between ethnic conflict and the Soviet nationality policy. In doing so, this study sought to unveil a causal mechanism between the Soviet nationality policy and ethnic conflict in Georgia.

To recapitulate, although the struggles over the political statuses of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were triggered by the growing wave of national self-assertion fostered by the Soviet nationality policy that, from Lenin's administration to Gorbachev's, granted ethnic minorities some level of privileges, they were shaped by a long historical relationship between the Georgian people and the Abkhaz and Ossetian minorities. A number of factors explain the particular inter-ethnic conflicts in Georgia among ethnic groups. I argue that the foremost factor was the role of the Soviet nationality policy in the emergence of Georgian, Abkhazian, and South Ossetian national movements. Due to the Soviet nationality policy, a great number of ethnoterritorial units were created as union republics, autonomous regions, and districts with some corresponding hierarchal privileges largely regarding cultural issues. What Roger Brubaker (1998) calls the

–institutionalization of nationhood” allowed these units to be defined as the homelands of specific ethnic groups, each with its own constitution, territory, cultural institutions, bureaucratic elites, national intelligentsia, and so on.

Indeed, Soviet rulers unintentionally allowed these units to foster the development of national cultures and elites, but on a limited scale. As Lapidus (1998) asserts, “by the late Brezhnev period, the rising aspirations of increasingly educated and capable elites of the titular nationalities had become a source of tension and competition with Russians for key positions not only in the fifteen union republics but also in a number of the autonomous republics, many of whose elites had long pressed for an elevation of their status” (9). The adoption of liberalization policies under Gorbachev lifted political constraints, and a natural consequence was a replacement of Soviet communist ideology with national loyalties and solidarities, which were an effective basis for political mobilization inside ethnoterritorial units of the Soviet Union at every level.

Historical disputes and experiences among the different ethnic groups and the impact of the Soviet nationality policy all served to consolidate and reinforce group identity and solidarity among Abkhazians and South Ossetians. In the case of the Abkhazians, there was an intense solidarity with a strong consciousness of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic relation to the Circassian nationalities of the northwestern Caucasus. For centuries, the preservation of ethnic group identity was partly the result of the linguistic and religious differences from Georgians as well as the experience of deportation, but was obstructed by the experience of becoming a minority population in their own homeland after the massive deportation and departure of mostly Muslim Abkhazians. Group identity may well have been strengthened by the brutality of Stalin’s rule when, as Suny (1994) explains, they suffered the loss of their native leaders, forced

collectivization of their lands, persecution of intellectuals, and indoctrination in Georgian culture and language. Abkhazian identity may have declined in Stalin's era, but after the death of Stalin, Abkhazian elites attempted to make the territory more Abkhaz.

In the case of South Ossetia, there was also intense solidarity in which identification and kinship with North Ossetians through their cultural, ethnic, and linguistic characteristics played a significant role. Their ethnic group identity was also preserved due to socio-cultural characteristics. Georgian-South Ossetian antagonism dated back to the years of the establishment of the Democratic Georgian Republic in 1918 and was based on economic conflicts between Georgian aristocrats who were landlords of territories and landless South Ossetian peasants who claimed ownership of those territories. Georgian economic policy that favored the landlords resulted in Ossetian protests in Shida Kartli, to which the Georgian government responded brutally (Souleimanov, 2013). The demonstrators became rebels, and even the Georgian population was subject to their attacks. Hundreds of South Ossetian civilians were killed when the Georgian government intervened and perpetrated retributive massacres (Souleimanov, 2013). These events can be seen as the beginning of the ethnic hatred between the Ossetians and Georgians. In 1922, after the Bolsheviks took over Georgia, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast was created as part of the Soviet Nationality Policy.

During the 70 years of Soviet hegemony, South Ossetians enjoyed within the framework of the Soviet Federation that provide them with an autonomy they had never had before. Abkhazia had already had autonomy granted by Georgians due to the 1921 constitution, but during the Soviet period, Abkhaz ethnicity and identity were supported by Moscow, except during Stalin's administration. These de facto statuses in the Soviet period provided both Abkhazian and South Ossetians with institutions, political infrastructure (Cornell, 2002; Nilsson and Popjanevski, 2009), and a qualified political elite class. These institutions gave Abkhazia and

South Ossetia the ability to resist the nationalizing policies of the central Georgian government in the 1990s and declare their independence. The result was outbreaks of ethnic clashes, which remain unresolved, though both South Ossetia and Abkhazia have gained de facto independence.

To conclude, the Soviet nationality policy, intended to diffuse nationalism's strength by allowing nationalist enthusiasm to run its course until people understood how class was more important than ethnicity, instead had the opposite effect and aided the formation of a national identity among all of the ethnic communities in the Soviet Union. It set the table for nationalist demands for independence toward the end of the Soviet era and had the tragic consequence in Georgia of pitting Georgian nationalists against Abkhazian and South Ossetian nationalists. The only solution to the ethnic conflicts in Georgia seems to be Georgian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent units, and a willingness to forget the past and develop long-term trade and economic relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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