ETHNO-TERRITORIAL AND SECESSIONIST CONFLICTS
Causes and trajectories

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Introduction

Although it was accompanied by a variety of ethnic, regional and political tensions the collapse of the Soviet Union was, on the whole, surprisingly peaceful. The Caucasus was a significant exception to this pattern, however, witnessing high levels of nationalist mobilisation and five violent conflicts. In the south, the devolution of sovereignty led to three secessionist wars in Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Central governments lost control over these areas, up to 40,000 people in total were killed, and more than one and a half million people – nearly 10 per cent of the population in Soviet Transcaucasia in 1989 – were forcibly displaced. Unrecognised republics were established in all three secessionist spaces (see Chapter 16), but as renewed episodes of violent crisis in 1998, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2016 show, they remain fundamentally contested. Prospects for negotiated solutions to these conflicts in the foreseeable future are extremely dim.

In the north, the rise of the Chechen secessionism posed a direct threat to the state integrity of the Russian Federation. Internally, the existing political order and territorial delimitation were contested by Ingush, Balkar and Karachai national leaders, with the Ingush engaging in bloody conflict with the Ossetians. In polyethnic Dagestan, a consociational model of governance, which for decades ensured the republic’s political stability, was challenged by Avar, Kumyk and Lak national movements. Nogai national leaders in Dagestan, Chechnya and Stavropol’ krai pushed for the creation of a separate Nogai polity, while their Lezgin counterparts questioned the existing border between Dagestan and newly independent Azerbaijan and called for the creation of unified Lezgistan (Yemelianova 2002: 140–46).

The exceptional concentration of ethno-territorial tensions and conflicts in the Caucasus demands explanation. In the 1990s some Western policy-makers and commentators reached for tropes of ‘ancient hatreds’ and ‘medieval struggles’ to describe Caucasus conflicts. Scholars rightly reject these explanations, although some emphasise the centrality of emotion-laden ethnic symbols and historical myths to modern ethno-political mobilisation (Kaufman 2001). Poverty and terrain-based explanations also explain little, as the Caucasus was not poor by Soviet or global standards, and terrain played an inconsequential role in decisive battles fought largely in flatter areas. A prominent narrative in the South Caucasus
has depicted violent secessionist conflict as the work of external forces, ‘hidden hands’ and geopolitical projects to ‘divide and rule’.

Yet while geopolitics assumes increasing importance as an explanation of why conflicts have eluded resolution, applied to the early 1990s geopolitical story-telling both underestimates the power of local agency and overestimates the coherence of external influences in that earlier period. A popular explanatory framework in Western scholarship has focused on Soviet ethno-federal institutions, highlighting for example that there was no violent conflict in the Caucasus without autonomy (Cornell 2002; Rezvani 2015). In other parts of post-Soviet Eurasia, however, the causal linkage between autonomy and violent conflict is weak, suggesting that other factors may be as, or more, important. Another ‘institutionalist’ approach synthesises the legacy of ethno-federal structures with the extreme weakness of post-Soviet states (Zürcher 2007). Outside of Western academic discourse a multitude of explanatory paradigms for the region’s particular propensity to conflicts oscillates between profound primordialism informed by Lev Gumilev’s theory of passionarnost’ (‘ethnic energy’) (Gumilev 1990) and a constructivist emphasis on the role of ethnic elites (Tishkov 1997; Zdravomyslov 1998).

Assessing the importance of different variables has been encumbered by a common tendency to conflate several distinct questions. These can be parsed as: (1) Why did conflicts emerge in the Caucasus in the late 1980s and early 1990s? (2) How far back do today’s conflicts go: are they ‘ancient’ (if so, how old?), modern or post-Soviet? (3) Why did some of them turn violent? This chapter considers the Armenian–Azerbaijani, Georgian–South Ossetian, Georgian–Abkhaz, Ossetian–Ingush and Russo-Chechen conflicts in the light of these questions.

The Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict

The first incidents of communal Armenian–Azerbaijani violence occurred in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1905 (Swietochowski 1985: 38–45; Sargent 2010). However, it was the dissolution of the Russian Empire, the failure of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR), which included both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the emergence, by default, of the sovereign Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) and the Democratic Republic of Armenia (DRA) in May 1918, that contributed to the emergence of violent conflict involving opposed territorial claims. Through to 1920 a series of multi-sided international, civil and partisan conflicts saw extreme levels of violence, with large-scale communal reprisals killing and expelling thousands of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Border disputes between the DRA and ADR focused on three areas, Nagorny Karabakh, Nakhichevan and Zangezur. These conflicts were not resolved, but subsumed within the wider project to Sovietise Transcaucasia as the Bolsheviks won the Russian Civil War and expanded southwards in 1920 (see Chapter 8).

Seeking tactically expedient solutions to conflicts in Transcaucasia, the Bolsheviks’ strategy was essentially to leave contested territories in the hands of those who controlled them at the time of Sovietisation, while compensating rebellious minority groups with territorial autonomy (Saparov 2015: 137). This was the context for the 5 July 1921 decision by the Kavburo, the Bolshevik body tasked with Sovietising the Caucasus, to leave Nagorny Karabakh within the borders of Soviet Azerbaijan, but to acknowledge its Armenian population’s demands – neither reconciled to Azerbaijani sovereignty nor completely pacified in 1918–20 (Mikaelyan 1992; Hasani 2018) – by granting it autonomy. The eventual outcome of this decision was the founding of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast’ (NKAO), an Armenian-majority (89.1 per cent in 1926) island within Soviet Azerbaijan, in 1923. This
was a solution that had expedited Sovietisation, but satisfied neither Armenians nor Azerbaijani. Repeatedly whenever the Soviet Union went through periods of relative liberalisation, Karabakh Armenians and elites in Soviet Armenia would raise the question of the NKAO’s allocation. Armenian grievances focused on perceptions of curtailed cultural rights and economic discrimination (Libaridian 1988) and growth in the NKAO’s Azerbaijani population to the detriment of its Armenian majority, which had declined to 76 per cent by 1979.

There were consequently considerable structural strains in the Armenian–Azerbaijani relationship by the time Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his perestroika policy in the mid-1980s. The formal discourse of perestroika, moreover, conceded the possibility of ‘correcting’ Stalinist deviations from the founding principles of the Soviet Union. Karabakh Armenians saw their call for unification (or re-unification as they put it) with Armenia as an ideal test-case (Welt 2004: 50–51). A campaign of letter-writing, petitions to Moscow and demonstrations in the NKAO culminated in the passing of a resolution on 20 February 1988 by the local regional assembly calling for the oblast’s unification with Armenia. It was an unprecedented act from a lower-level unit in the Soviet Union’s administrative hierarchy. Within a week a pogrom in the Baku suburb of Sumgait claimed the lives of twenty-six Armenians and six Azerbaijanis on 28–29 February (Shahmuratian 1990). Over the next eighteen months, communal violence and mass forced displacement resulted in the mass mutual expulsion of some 200,000 Azerbaijanis from Armenia and 360,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan (Yunusov 1991; Oganezov and Kharatyan 2014). This violence had little to do with contested borders in the NKAO, and was perpetrated against what were locally small and non-dominant minorities – largely by ordinary citizens and not soldiers or paramilitaries. This raises the question of why ordinary people who had lived together peacefully turned violently on each other. Wider structural factors or democratisation do not appear to be able to explain this variation, which may be better captured by theories emphasising the roles of emotions and affective dispositions (Petersen 2002). Communal Armenian–Azerbaijani violence in 1988–90 can be interpreted, in large part, as the expression of the resentment felt by Azerbaijanis towards the Armenians as a minority group perceived as traditionally favoured by Russian imperial and Soviet regimes, and over-represented in Azerbaijan’s political structures. In Armenia, it can be interpreted as being motivated by a historical schema of violence involving ‘Armenians and Turks’, drawing on the symbolic fund of traumatic memories related to the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire. In Nagorny Karabakh itself fear characterised both communities, exacerbated by settlement patterns that saw both strategically encircled by the other (see Broers 2019: Chapter 4).

In 1988–91 the Soviet centre enacted a variety of different approaches to solving the problem. These included the refusal of political concessions to Armenian appeals, economic subsidisation of the NKAO, the imposition of direct rule in the territory and support of Azerbaijani counter-insurgency measures (de Waal 2013). These both exposed, and in their ineffectiveness exacerbated, the wider legitimation failure engulfing the Soviet state. Into this gap stepped emerging national movements, drawing for the first time on a popular legitimacy outside of the communist party’s unitary structure. The over-arching context of the Karabakh cause eased conflict between the Armenian communist elite and the emergent opposition, leading to a peaceful power transition to the Pan-Armenian National Movement (PANM). In May 1990, the PANM won elections to become the first non-communist government in the Soviet Union, under the leadership of Levon Ter-Petrosian. In Azerbaijan, communists held on in a bitter power struggle with the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF), led by Abulfaz Elchibey (Agaev and Alizade 2006). This struggle provided the backdrop for the twin tragedies of ‘Black January’ 1990 in the Azerbaijani capital: a pogrom
claiming the lives of some 90 Armenians, and the Soviet military intervention in Baku that followed, claiming the lives of 137 Azerbaijanis. Under the new leadership of Ayaz Mutali- 
bov, the Azerbaijani communist elite traded support for Gorbachev’s plans to preserve the 
Soviet Union for Moscow’s support in a number of operations in spring 1991. These were 
formally aimed at pacifying Armenian guerrilla units operating in and around the NKAO, 
but also involved deportations of Armenian villagers (de Waal 2013: 108–24).

The potential to resolve the conflict within a Soviet frame of reference came to a definitive 
end with the putsch of August 1991. With the dissolution of the Soviet state imminent, secur-
ing the borders of successor states became paramount. The Karabakh Armenians proclaimed 
the founding of a Nagorno-Karabakh Republic on 2 September 1991; Azerbaijan abolished 
the NKAO on 26 November. Armed with weaponry from fragmenting Soviet forces, full-
scale war broke out in Nagorno Karabakh in early 1992. The Azerbaijani war effort suffered 
several significant early losses. These included the massacre of hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians 
by Armenian forces near the town of Khojaly in February; the symbolic loss of the Azerbaijani 
cultural and demographic citadel of Shusha in May; and the strategic loss of the region of 
Lachin, interceding between the former oblast’ and Armenia, also in May.

This string of losses gave the APF the opportunity to finally oust Azerbaijan’s communist 
leadership and come to power. Under President Abulfaz Elchibey the Azerbaijani war effort 
saw a temporary revival in military fortunes in the second half of 1992. Territorial gains 
were later lost, however, as insurgent warlord factions forced Elchibey from office (Goltz 
1998: 356–65). Former Communist Party First Secretary Heydar Aliyev returned to Baku to 
etually take control, but Armenian forces were to take advantage of Azerbaijani turmoil 
to occupy, in addition to Lachin, another five regions surrounding the former oblast’: Kelba-
jar, Agdam, Fizuli, Jebrayil and Qubatly/Gubadli. Although Aliyev mounted a major coun-
ter-offensive over the winter of 1993–94, Armenian forces ended the war in control of 
these and another province, Zangelan/Zangilan. All of these regions’ Azerbaijani populations 
– more than half a million people – were expelled in their entirety, and over the 
course of the war more than 25,000 people had been killed. Exhausted, the belligerents 
agreed to a Russian-brokered ceasefire coming into force on 12 May 1994. Armenian– 
Azerbaijani negotiations began under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-
operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1992, and continue to this day.

The Georgian–South Ossetian and Georgian–Abkhaz conflicts

The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia also have a prior history of conflict over the 
political status of both areas. In May 1917, inspired by the February Russian bourgeois-
democratic revolution of that year, both Abkhaz and Ossetians, alongside the mountain 
peoples of the northern Caucasus and Dagestan, joined the Union of Mountain Peoples – 
a newly established polity separate from Georgia. In May 1918 the Union was transformed 
into the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus (“The Mountain Republic”) 
(Lak’oba 1999: 90). Between November 1917 and April 1918 Georgia was first part of the 
Transcaucasian Commissariat, then the TDFR. Then, in May 1918, following the dissol-
ution of the TDFR, Georgia emerged as a separate polity – the Democratic Republic of 
Georgia (DRG, 1918–21).

Inclusion of the Ossetian-populated areas south of the Caucasus into the DRG incited 
conflict owing to long-standing social tensions between largely peasant Ossetians and the 
local Georgian land-owning nobility (Saparov 2015: 66–67). Following the independence of 
the DRG, three major revolts focused on Tskhinvali and surrounding areas ensued in
February 1918, October 1919 and April 1920 (Saparov 2015: 67–74). These suffused what had been an essentially social antagonism with revolutionary and ethnic content, leading to local demands for separate ethno-territorial status. Although Ossetians accepted the principle of autonomy within an independent Georgian state in August 1918, inconclusive negotiations were superseded by the aftermath of the final Ossetian rebellion in April 1920. Coinciding with Bolshevik Russia’s recognition on 7 May 1920 of the DRG’s international borders (including the area contested by Ossetians), the revolt was left to face DRG forces alone. In autumn 1920 the Georgian authorities enacted a programme of what Cory Welt calls ‘selective ethnic cleansing’, clearing the region of the ethnically Ossetian population and moving ethnic Georgians in (Welt 2014: 223). In all, some 5,000 Ossetians – that is, 6–7 per cent of the Ossetian population in Georgia – died, scores of villages were destroyed and as many as 20,000 fled the region.

In Abkhazia, provisional agreements that this territory could form part of a Georgian state in February and June 1918 were de-railed by pro-Bolshevik rebellions (Welt 2014: 216–19). The DRG’s introduction of direct rule, and the incursion of the Georgian National Guard under General Mazniashvili in June 1918 compounded Abkhaz perceptions that Georgian ambitions were to annex Abkhazia, rather than negotiate with it. The degree of violence was nevertheless significantly less severe than in South Ossetia. As the tide of the Russian Civil War turned, Bolshevik support offered an alternative orientation to the ethnic Abkhaz faction committed to separation from Georgia. The Georgian Social Democrats, meanwhile, damagingly delayed defining the terms of Tbilisi’s future relationship with Abkhazia, in the end conceding autonomy only days before the DRG’s annexation by the Bolsheviks. It was too little too late, and many in Abkhazia – like the Ossetians – welcomed the Bolsheviks as saviours.

In South Ossetia, the Bolshevik approach to solving the conflict was again to leave the contested area in the hands of the party that held it at the time of Sovietisation – Georgia – but to compensate Ossetians with territorial autonomy (Saparov 2015: 86–87). The eventual product of this compromise was the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast’ (SOAO), founded on 20 April 1922, an entity significantly larger than those discussed by local Ossetians and Georgian Social Democrats in 1918–19. It was the first administrative unit in the history of the southern Caucasus to bear the name South Ossetia, and was unsurprisingly seen by Georgians as a Bolshevik imposition. Whereas the constitution adopted by the DRG in its last days as an independent state had affirmed autonomous status for Abkhazia and the Muslim-populated regions of Achara (Adjara) and Zakataly (Zaqatala), no such provision had been foreseen for South Ossetia.

In Abkhazia’s case the fact that the DRG had conceded autonomy appears to have mediated an idiosyncratic approach to defining Abkhazia’s status within the young Soviet state. In order to ‘outbid’ the DRG’s offer, the Bolsheviks conceded Abkhazia’s founding on 31 March 1921 as a full union republic, equal to – that is, separate from – Georgia. This was seemingly accompanied ‘by some verbal agreement [that the Abkhaz would then] denounce this independence and join Georgia on the basis of federation’ (Saparov 2015: 50). On 16 December 1921 Abkhazia became one of a kind in the Soviet Union: a ‘treaty republic’, federated with Georgia on the basis of a ‘special union treaty’. As such, Abkhazia temporarily retained certain privileges, such as the adoption of its own constitution in 1925, which symbolically at least upheld a relationship of equals with Georgia. This was countermanded by Georgia’s own constitution of 1926, which depicted a more hierarchical relationship. These ambiguities were settled in a revised Abkhazian constitution in 1927, affirming a subordinate status for Abkhazia and providing the legal justification for the
subsequent reduction of Abkhazia’s status from ‘treaty republic’ to autonomous republic within Georgia on 19 February 1931. The Soviet state had, in effect, come to the same modus vivendi between Georgia and Abkhazia as the DRG before it. Yet it did so via a circuitous route, making Abkhazia not only a fascinating technical anomaly in the Soviet ethno-federal hierarchy, but endowing it with an important symbolic legacy of having lost a more desirable status than the one it eventually received (see Chapter 9).

This legacy was subsequently politically charged by a ‘Georgianisation’ campaign in the 1938–53 period. This was a multifaceted process involving the conversion of recently devised Latin scripts for the Abkhaz and Ossetian languages to the Georgian alphabet, rather than Cyrillic as occurred elsewhere in the Soviet Union; the introduction of Georgian as the main language of instruction in both autonomies; the closure of Abkhaz and Ossetian native language schools between 1944 and 1952; the curtailing of radio broadcasting and publishing in these languages; and in Abkhazia, the establishment of a Migration Authority tasked with increasing Abkhazia’s population, largely (though not exclusively) through the influx of Georgian (Mingrelian) settlers (Sagariya, Achuba, and Pachuliya 1992). These policies were exceptional in the Soviet Union, supporting the political hegemony of a majority group culture other than Russian. Culturally, Stalinism in both autonomies consequently took on a specifically Georgian hue – seemingly corroborated by the Georgian and Mingrelian origins of Stalin and his security chief Lavrenty Beria respectively. After Stalin’s death language planning in both autonomies rejoined the Soviet mainstream, and the Abkhaz and Ossetian languages were belatedly Cyrillicised.

At this point the trajectories of the Abkhaz and South Ossetians diverged. In Abkhazia protest would be a recurring feature of post-Stalinist interethnic relations. In 1957, 1965, 1967, 1978 and 1988 Abkhaz protested the marginal status of Abkhaz culture; the demographic marginality of the Abkhaz, whose share of Abkhazia’s population had nearly halved from 28 per cent in 1926 to just 15.1 per cent in 1959; the lack of local access to higher education in Russian; and low levels of economic development among ethnic Abkhaz. These concerns culminated in a crisis in 1978 with widespread demonstrations accompanying Abkhaz elite appeals for Abkhazia to be attached to Russia. These were not heeded, but Moscow implemented a wide-ranging programme of measures including elevating the status of Abkhaz culture, increasing economic investment, and promoting the Sukhumi Pedagogical Institute into an expanded Abkhaz State University (Slider 1985). Moscow’s response temporarily quelled Abkhaz complaints but engendered perceptions of discrimination among Abkhazia’s Georgian community, who by 1989 accounted for 45 per cent of the republic’s population compared to the Abkhaz at 17.8 per cent. Culturally, a complex struggle for hegemony unfolded in Abkhazia between Georgian and Russian, the latter effectively standing in for an Abkhaz ‘high culture’ that under the weight of late development, multiple script changes and political marginality was largely symbolic even for many Abkhaz (Nodia 1998).

The context for Ossetians was significantly different. By the late 1980s Ossetians had become one of the most integrated minority groups in Soviet Georgia. Sixty per cent of Georgia’s 164,000 Ossetians lived outside the SOAO; the republic’s largest single community of Ossetians was in Tbilisi. There was no history of letter-writing and petitioning campaigns prior to the late 1980s of the kind that since the 1950s had regularly signalled Karabakh Armenian and Abkhaz dissatisfaction. Ossetians did not lag significantly behind Georgians across parameters such as urbanisation, class composition and higher education (Broers 2004: 95–96). Culturally, 20.5 per cent declared Georgian to be their first language in 1989 (SRUSASIK 1991: 62–63). This was exceptional for Georgia: among the republic’s other minorities only small, dispersed nationalities without a homeland in the USSR
demonstrated similar degrees of language shift to Georgian (for example Jews at 29.2 per cent and Assyrians at 24.5 per cent). Nearly a third of all Ossetians in Georgia claimed fluency in Georgian as a second language. However, Georgian’s integrational pull was significantly less in the SOAO itself: here speakers of Georgian as a first or second language numbered only 1.4 per cent and 13.8 per cent respectively, and Russian predominated (SRUSASIK 1991: 128–29). The SOAO thereby preserved a more Russian-oriented cultural space, diminishing the integration processes characterising the wider Ossetian population in Georgia.

By the late 1980s, then, Georgia exhibited structural strains due to the low dependency on Russian culture at the Georgian core but high dependency in the peripheries of the republic. In Abkhazia, there was also was a deep disjunction between a Georgian demographic majority and political over-representation of Abkhaz, which made any shift towards democratisation or away from the privileges that Soviet nationalities accorded to titular groups likely to lead to conflict. This was evident already by June 1988, when Abkhaz intellectuals sent an ‘Abkhazian letter’ to Moscow calling for the restoration of Abkhazia’s one-time union republican status, and by implication separation from Georgia. In December the public organisation Aidgylara was formed to pursue this goal, and on 18 March 1989 some 30,000 people rallied in support at the village of Lykhny, where the autonomous republic’s communist party elite also publicly indicated its support for the Abkhazian letter. Political conflict was inevitable, yet there was no history of mass interethnic violence in Abkhazia, and where such a history did exist in the SOAO, it had been nearly forgotten. In understanding how Georgia’s structural vulnerabilities were transformed into violence, two factors specific to the context of the devolution of political authority to Soviet Georgia in 1989–91 are particularly important.

The first is the capture of the Georgian national movement by its most radical elements. This contingent outcome was facilitated by the violent crackdown by Soviet Interior Ministry forces on demonstrators in Tbilisi peacefully protesting Abkhazian calls for elevated status on 9 April 1989 (Aves 1992: 162; Wheatley 2005: 44–46). Under the leadership of dissident intellectual Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the radicals who came to dominate the Georgian national movement – referring to themselves as ‘the irreconcilables’ – eschewed gradualism in the pursuit of Georgia’s independence in favour of a lurid extremism. Preoccupied with indigenousness, Gamsakhurdia’s messianic nationalism reserved particular wrath for the South Ossetians as a historically migrant group. In a febrile atmosphere, Gamsakhurdia staged a march by thousands of his supporters on Tskhinvali in November 1989, leading to a standoff outside the city; 19 Ossetians were reported wounded, while a further six people were reported killed and 27 wounded in the aftermath (Denber 1992: 7). These events in turn legitimated the maximal demands put forward by Adæmon Nykhas, a popular front organisation based in the SOAO, which included the upgrading of the SOAO’s status and consideration of unification with the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic in Russia (Welt 2004: 71). A war of laws between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali ensued, culminating in the former’s abolition of the SOAO in December 1990 after Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table party had won elections to the Georgian parliament. This was the trigger for the onset of intermittent violence in South Ossetia and the blockading of the capital Tskhinvali over the winter of 1991–92.

The second factor specific to the transition context was the extreme weakness of the emerging Georgian state. Fragmented, radical and shunned by a deeply entrenched communist party, nationalist factions relied heavily on informal networks of supporters. This created the opening for the entry of paramilitary groups into mainstream politics. As
Gamsakhurdia won elections in October 1990 and then became president in May 1991, he became leader of a state lacking both an army and funds to create one. His nationalist state became a free-rider on the privatised violence of ‘warlord armies’, rooted in the Soviet criminal underworld, motivated by plunder, and prone to brutality and military-strategic incompetence (Human Rights Watch Arms Project 1995; Zürcher 2007: 137–43; Driscoll 2015). Under the leadership of the colourful Tengiz Kitovani, a nationalist association, the ‘White George Society’, was institutionalised as the Georgian National Guard. Militarily mediocre, the National Guard had little success against better organised Ossetian paramilitaries (Zürcher 2007: 125–26). Kitovani soon quarrelled with Gamsakhurdia, joining forces with fellow warlord Jaba Ioseliani to oust the president in Georgia’s brief ‘civil war’ in December 1991. As former communist party first secretary Eduard Shevardnadze returned to Georgia, Kitovani initiated another round of violence around Tskhinvali in May-June 1992 prolonging the disorder essential to war profiteering (Broers 2004: 170). Shevardnadze eventually brought the conflict in South Ossetia to an end with the Dagomys Agreement of 24 June 1992, signed also by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and representatives of both North and South Ossetia. Around 1,000 people had died in the conflict.

Gamsakhurdia’s messianism has prompted a focus on ‘militant Georgian chauvinism’ as the source of Georgia’s conflicts. Grotesque as much of the Georgian nationalist rhetoric was under his rule, in Abkhazia Gamsakhurdia was nevertheless able to come to a power-sharing agreement. In July-August 1991, Tbilisi came to an agreement by which 28 seats in a new single chamber parliament would be allocated to Abkhaz, 26 to Georgians and 11 to Abkhazia’s other nationalities. Combined with the regulation that a two-thirds majority was needed to make constitutional changes, this plan ostensibly ensured that neither Abkhaz nor Georgians could impose their will on the other. Recalling the experience of 1920, this agreement showed that despite polarisation and a destructive nationalist environment, the question of Abkhazia’s status within Georgia was not insoluble. Yet just two months after Shevardnadze had brought hostilities in South Ossetia to a close in June 1992, Kitovani’s National Guard marched into Abkhazia, initiating a new war there.

The causal conjuncture leading to the onset of war in Abkhazia is complex. By mid-1992 the viability of the power-sharing agreement was deeply compromised by its association with Gamsakhurdia, now yesterday’s man, the collapse of the Soviet state, and Georgia’s recognition and entry into the United Nations (UN) within its Soviet borders in July 1992. These developments overtook a legal struggle to define the Georgian–Abkhaz relationship, as Tbilisi had reverted to its 1921 constitution (which stipulated but did not define autonomy for Abkhazia) in February and Sukhumi reverted to its 1925 constitution (which evoked special treaty status for Abkhazia) on 27 July 1992. There was political turmoil at the Georgian centre, as Shevardnadze struggled to control infighting warlord factions led by Ioseliani and Kitovani, who were also his only backing. Locally in Abkhazia, Abkhaz and Georgian factions were deadlocked in parliament, and there was an active insurgency in neighbouring Mingrelia in support of Gamsakhurdia, to whom Abkhazia’s Georgian faction was also loyal. It was on the pretext of securing railways and recovering senior Georgian ministers taken hostage by pro-Gamsakhurdia insurgents in Abkhazia that Kitovani’s National Guard entered Abkhazia on 14 August 1992. Georgian marines landed at Gagra on the Abkhaz coast a day later. It should nevertheless be recalled that the onset of actual war was not expected in Abkhazia, and was met with surprise by both Georgians and Abkhaz in the territory (Odisharia 2009; Shesterinina 2016).
The Georgian incursion was initially successful, containing Abkhaz forces in the cities of Sukhumi, Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli within a week. Only Gudauta remained under Abkhazian control. Systematic human rights violations and wanton cultural vandalism by the Georgian National Guard made a small local war into an existential one for the Abkhaz. Mobilising Cossacks, rogue Russian servicemen and North Caucasians from the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (1989–2000), the Abkhaz waged a guerrilla war taking back territory piecemeal and eventually holed the Georgians up in Sukhumi and Ochamchira. Sukhumi fell to Abkhaz forces on 27 September 1993; Shevardnadze was flown out of one of the last helicopters to leave the besieged city. Up to 240,000 ethnic Georgians fled Abkhazia as Abkhaz forces took control, effectively resolving through forced displacement the demographic dilemma that had confronted any project to democratise Abkhazia. The conflict claimed some 10,000 lives in total. Georgian–Abkhaz negotiations under the aegis of the United Nations had in fact already begun in Geneva in November 1992, but the war would not come to a formal conclusion until the Moscow Agreement of 14 May 1994.

The Ossetian–Ingush conflict

Although located within the political borders of the Russian Federation, the Ossetian–Ingush conflict was closely intertwined with the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict since both involved the Ossetians, albeit those living on different sides of the Great Caucasus mountains. The territory of present-day North Ossetia was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1774 and that of South Ossetia in 1801. As noted above, immediately after the demise of the Russian Empire, the Ossetians were for a short period part of the Mountain Republic. In 1921–22, the Bolsheviks divided them by assigning those who lived south of the mountains to the newly established SOAO within Soviet Georgia, while those to the north of the mountains were assigned to a variety of administrative units formed in the northern Caucasus. Thus, in January 1921 they were included, alongside Chechens, Ingush, Kabardians, Balkars, Karachais and Cossacks, into the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Mountain ASSR) with its administrative centre in Vladikavkaz (the present capital of North Ossetia) and its industrial centre in Grozny, both centres being given special administrative status. Following the dissolution of the Mountain ASSR in July 1924, its Ossetian population was assigned to the newly formed North Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, and the Ingush population to the Ingush Autonomous Oblast. Vladikavkaz, which retained its special status, was designated as the administrative centre for both oblasts. Up until that period, the relations between the Ossetians and the Ingush were not very different from their relations with various other mountain peoples of the Caucasus.

In the 1930s Ossetian–Ingush relations became strained through the Stalinist administrative re-arrangement of the North Caucasus. In 1934 the Ingush lost their own polity when the Ingush Autonomous Oblast was joined with Chechnya into the Chechen–Ingush Autonomous Oblast with its centre in Grozny, which was politically, economically and culturally dominated by Russians and Chechens. (In 1936 the Oblast was upgraded to the Chechen–Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ChIASSR) with its capital in Grozny.) At the same time the North Ossetians retained their own polity in the form of the North Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (NOASSR) with Vladikavkaz, which had been the Ingush’s political and cultural centre, being made its capital. This designation of Vladikavkaz as the capital of North Ossetia was widely perceived among Muslim Ingush as a sign of the Russian centre’s traditional favouritism towards Christian Ossetians (Tishkov 1997: 372).
Ossetian-Ingush relations worsened further during the Second World War (Great Patriotic War of 1941–45) when Ingush, alongside Chechens, Karachais, Kalmyks, Balkars, Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans and some other ‘untrustworthy’ peoples, were arbitrarily accused by the Stalin leadership of collaboration with Nazi Germany and were deported en masse to Central Asia and Siberia (see Chapter 9). In February and March 1944 around 500,000 Chechens and Ingush were deported to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The deportation and resettlement were executed in the most inhumane and brutal manner, leaving many thousands of deportees dead (Flemming 1998: 66). In the northern Caucasus, the forcible removal of a significant part of the population was accompanied by a new wave of administrative and territorial ‘adjustments’. The ChIASSR was disbanded and some of its territory was transformed into the newly created Grozny oblast’ with its centre in Grozny. (The Grozny oblast’ also included southern and eastern areas of Stavropol’ krai). The ChIASSR’s other parts were distributed between Russia’s autonomous republics of Dagestan and North Ossetia and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (GSSR). Most importantly, traditionally Ingush-dominated Prigorodnyi raion, as well as the towns of Malgobek, Achaluk, Nazran and Psedakh, were transferred to the NOASSR.

In January 1957, in the context of the Khrushchev ‘thaw’, most deportees, including Ingush and Chechens, were officially rehabilitated and allowed to return to the northern Caucasus. However, the borders of the resurrected ChIASSR were significantly modified. From now on the ChIASSR acquired the Kargalinskii, Shelkovskii and Naurskii raions, which, prior to 1944, were part of the Stavropol’ krai, although it now lost the Prigorodnyi raion. The latter was retained within the NOASSR and was repopulated by Ossetians from Georgia and ethnic Russians. As a result, the Ossetians turned into the dominant ethnic group, constituting over 50 per cent, followed by ethnic Russians who made up over 30 per cent of the total population in the Prigorodnyi raion (Tishkov 2002). Moscow’s decision regarding the administrative allocation of the Prigorodnyi raion to the NOASSR was influenced by the North Ossetian Communist Party and the Soviet elite who strengthened their regional positions in the absence of their Chechen and Ingush counterparts and enjoyed preferential treatment by the Kremlin. From the late 1950s they were able to push through a series of legislative and administrative policies aimed at obstructing the return of Ingush to the NOASSR, and the Prigorodnyi raion in particular. In March 1982, Moscow was pressurised to restrict the Ingush’s propiska (‘registration of address’) in the Prigorodnyi raion. Emboldened by the Kremlin’s backing, the North Ossetian leadership unleashed a propaganda campaign against Ingush returnees, who were depicted as trouble-makers and as socio-economically and culturally inferior to Ossetians. Nevertheless, the Ingush continued to arrive and settle illegally in the Prigorodnyi raion. By the end of the 1980s Prigorodnyi raion became the republic’s most densely populated area where the competition for land between Ossetians and Ingush was especially acute (Tishkov 1997: 373–74).

In the context of perestroika and glasnost policies this competition over resources acquired a political dimension. In September 1989 Ingush activists under the leadership of Issa Kodzoev, a renowned writer and poet, established a social-political movement, Niyskho (Justice), which advocated equal rights for Ingush in the region, including their right to their own Ingush polity, separate from Chechnya and within the borders of their historical habitat which included the Prigorodnyi raion. Ingush national leaders evoked the ‘Declaration on Recognition of Deportations as Unlawful and Criminal Acts’, adopted by the USSR Supreme Soviet on 14 November 1989, and the ‘Law on the Rehabilitation of the Repressed Peoples’, issued by Russia’s Supreme Soviet on 26 April 1991, as the legal basis for their demands. Those documents qualified the forced resettlement of Ingush and other ‘punished’ peoples as ‘genocide’ and legitimised
their return to their ancestral land and homes. Regrettably, these long-awaited pronouncements were not accompanied by a blueprint for the realisation of the deportees’ rights. A corollary was the radicalisation of the Ingush communist party and Soviet leadership and their rapprochement with Ingush nationalists who called for the creation of a separate Ingush republic and the military mobilisation of Ingush against the ‘Ossetian occupiers’ of their ancestral land. In June 1991, in Nazran, the Congress of People’s Deputies proclaimed the establishment of the Ingush Autonomous Republic within the pre-1944 borders, that is including the Prigorodnyi raion and the right-bank part of Vladikavkaz (Tishkov 1997: 377). Following the anti-Gorbachev coup in Moscow in August 1991 the Ingush nationalists seized the political initiative and began to push for the appointment of their candidate, Bembulat Bogatyrev, as the acting head of the Ingush Republic.

Meanwhile, the Ossetian ruling elite under Akhsarbek Galazov intensified the political and media campaign against the Ingush, who were dubbed ‘aggressors’ pursuing the acquisition of land perceived as Ossetian. The North Ossetian army and law enforcement commanders, some of whom had combat experience in South Ossetia, advocated the ethnic cleansing of Ingush by the army (Tishkov 1997: 386, 389–90). In the following year North Ossetia witnessed the de facto collapse of governmental and socio-economic institutions, and a spontaneous militarisation and privatisation of violence (Kaldor 2006), accompanied by widespread killings, plundering and other forms of criminal activity among both Ossetians and Ingush. In October 1992 the fusion of inter-communal violence with competing national projects sparked a full-fledged armed ethnic conflict between Ossetians and Ingush. The catalyst was the arrival in the Prigorodnyi raion of thousands of South Ossetians fleeing the conflict zone in Georgia. In the course of the conflict both sides resorted to barbaric practices, including killing, hostage taking, rape and the burning of houses with their inhabitants inside. During the peak of the conflict between October and early November 1992, 583 Ingush and Ossetians were killed, over 650 people were severely wounded and over 3,000 houses were destroyed (Tishkov 1997: 395; Cornell 2001: 258).

During the rest of the 1990s the conflict was gradually de-militarised. Under the recentralising policy of President Vladimir Putin (in office since 2000), the existing administrative borders between North Ossetia and Ingushetia have been re-confirmed, while the traumatic post-conflict relations between Ossetians and Ingush have been mediated at the political level by Moscow and at the grassroots level by elders. In September 2004, the Beslan school tragedy set back the relations between the two communities, as the North Ossetian authorities sought to link it to the return of the Ingush in the republic (‘Osetino-Ingushskii Konflikt’ 2017). Overall, the post-conflict process of rebuilding trust between Ossetians and Ingush has been slow and the problem of the comprehensive return of the Ingush to the Prigorodnyi raion and Vladikavkaz has not been fully resolved.

Still, despite the structural causes, the identity politics and the war-mongering rhetoric on both sides, the violent conflict between Ossetians and Ingush could probably have been avoided, had Moscow pursued a balanced and concerted policy towards diffusing inter-communal tensions. Instead, the Russian centre – in its drive for decentralisation of the Russian state under Yeltsin’s notorious slogan of ‘grab as much sovereignty as you can manage’ – lost control over the situation on the ground and failed to intervene in the critical period preceding the eruption of violence. Subsequently, at the height of the violence the Russian military under the command of its then Defence Minister Pavel Grachev did not actively intervene to separate the warring sides and, instead, perceived the unfolding conflict as a potential springboard for Russia’s military invasion into rebellious Chechnya under President Dzhokhar Dudaev (Aushev 2016).
The Russo-Chechen conflict

The Russo-Chechen conflict, which was marked by the successive devastating wars of 1994–96 and 1999–2009, has been the most reported and researched of the Caucasian conflicts in the West. This was no doubt due to several factors, including the direct military involvement of the Russian federal centre, the wars’ huge human and material devastation, and the frequent portrayal of the conflict as part of a Huntingtonian Christian-Muslim ‘clash of civilisations’. Many academics and analysts emphasise the special historical role of the Chechens in the anti-Russian struggles of various Caucasian peoples (Russell 2007: 29; Galeotti 2014), pointing to the role of the Chechen sheikh Mansur, who headed the anti-Russian rebellion in the 1780s, and, in particular, to the perceived centrality of Chechens in the Caucasus War of 1817–64 (see Chapter 5). It is worth noting, however, that although Chechens played an important role in the anti-Russian resistance it was the Avars who provided its leadership, including the legendary Imam Shamil (Bennigsen-Broxup 1992: 34; Zelkina 2000: 179). Given this fact, it is ironic that during the post-Soviet ‘parade of sovereignties’ the Avars, unlike the Chechens, remained among the most fervent advocates for the retention of the northern Caucasus within the Russian Federation (Yemelianova 2003: 96). Another frequently mentioned reason behind the Chechens’ particular grievance towards the Russian centre relates to their collective deportation to Central Asia by the Stalin and Beria leadership in 1944. Nevertheless, it is problematic to draw a direct causal link between a particular people’s deportation and their quest for independence from Moscow since neither the Balkars, the Karachais nor the Chechens’ ethnic brethren, the Ingush – who were also deported en masse to Central Asia – have exhibited secessionist tendencies (Yemelianova 2005: 60–61). But of course this is not to say that the experience of deportation did not contribute to the ethno-national and religious consolidation of Chechens and other deported peoples (Smith 2013: 329).

Arguably, then, the underlying causes of the Russo-Chechen conflict were not much different from other post-Soviet ethno-territorial conflicts and included the disintegration of the Soviet state, the centrifugal impulses emanating from Moscow and the rise of nationalism as the political and ideological alternative to communism and the now discarded pan-Soviet citizenship. It was the convergence of these factors with the particular political assertiveness and mobilising potential of the Chechen nationalists under the leadership of General Dzhokhar Dudaev, as well as the personal animosity between the latter and the Russian President, that conspired to cause this conflict to spiral out of control with such devastating consequences. No doubt other aggravating factors played their part, such as Chechnya’s strategic place in the transportation of Caspian oil and gas and its role in the illegal export of cash. Some members of Dudaev’s inner circle were involved in the highly profitable illegal export of Caspian oil through the territory of Chechnya (Tishkov 1997: 446–47). It is likely that the signing in the autumn of 1994 by Baku of the ‘Contract of the Century’ which opened the Caspian oil’s extraction and transportation to major Western companies precipitated the Yeltsin government’s decision to invade Chechnya in December of that year (Cornell 2001: 223). Also, some of the ruling elites in Moscow and other parts of the former USSR, directly benefitted from Chechnya’s de facto withdrawal from Russia’s political and legal control, using it as a convenient outlet for laundering large sums of money acquired through the uncontrolled privatisation of state property and for onward transfer to the Virgin Islands and other off-shore havens.

In May 1990, in an atmosphere of perestroika-inspired democratisation and national and religious awakening, General Dudaev, a Soviet Air Force commander, returned to Grozny from rapidly de-Sovietising Estonia and joined the All-National Congress of the Chechen
At this stage the NCChP did not pursue independence from Moscow, advocating instead the upgrading of the administrative status of Checheno-Ingushetia to that of union republic. The lack of response from Moscow prompted the Chechen national leadership to radicalise their campaign and in November 1990 they convened the First National Chechen Congress which adopted the Declaration of the Chechen Republic, separate from Ingushetia. The Congress positioned itself as the alternative centre of power to the ChIASSR’s leadership of Doku Zavgaev. In July 1991 the Second Chechen National Congress proclaimed the establishment of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) and elected General Dudaev as the leader of the NCChP’s Executive Committee. In September 1991, in the aftermath of the anti-Gorbachev coup d’état in August, the Dudaev leadership, who resented Yeltsin’s refusal to take them seriously, declared Chechnya’s independence from the USSR.

In the context of the centre’s political paralysis, Dudaev’s supporters declared the Supreme Soviet of the ChIASSR illegitimate and seized control of government, TV and radio buildings. In October 1991 the NCChP staged presidential and parliamentary elections, in which only around 10–12 per cent of voters from 70 constituencies participated out of a total of 360. On 1 November 1991 General Dudaev, as the newly elected president, issued a decree on the ‘Declaration of Sovereignty of the Chechen Republic’ and dissolved the NCChP. Subsequently, the period between August and November 1991 became widely known as the ‘Chechen National Revolution’, although some scholars and analysts defined it as a coup d’état, masterminded by President Yeltsin’s inner circle (Akaev 2010: 79). From November 1991 till December 1994 the ChRI acted as a de facto state with its own legislative, executive and judicial powers, state symbols and currency, functioning on most of the territory of Chechnya. Confronting it was the Kremlin-backed Provisional Council of Chechnya (PCCh) under the leadership of Umar Avturkhanov which largely controlled Chechnya’s Nadterechnyi and Urus-Martanovskii raions, but failed to extend its power to Grozny. Another important factor contributing to the escalation of Russo-Chechen tensions into a full blown war was the impotence, or even the direct collusion with the Chechen rebels, of the Russian military and its Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, who de facto oversaw the transfer to the Chechen national guard of large quantities of Soviet heavy and light arms stationed in the ChIASSR and the North Caucasian military district. The ChIASSR’s disintegrating energy sector, which had been the largest employer in the past, produced thousands of unemployed young men ready to convert into armed fighters.

A large-scale Russian military invasion sparked the First Russo-Chechen War which lasted two years. The conflict, which ended with Russia’s defeat, left many thousands dead and wounded among both the military and civilian population, destroyed Grozny and many other towns and villages and turned a large number of people into refugees. The reasons for the Chechen fighters’ astonishing victory over the many-fold larger Russian military were multiple, including the former’s advantages in terms of their strategic planning, their mobilisation patterns and employment of guerrilla tactics in an urban environment, and their high morale underpinned by the ideology of national liberation. In this respect, the First Russo-Chechen War of 1994–96 was an ethno-national conflict between the Russian centre and the Chechen nationalists. Notably, other North Caucasian peoples, including the Ingush, who were ethnically close to Chechens, distanced themselves from the Chechen struggle. While the Dudaev leadership attempted to Islamise the Chechen cause by linking it to the nineteenth-century Caucasians’ ghazawat (‘holy war’) against the Russians, it actually mobilised its fighters through taip (teip, ‘ethno-territorial community’) and ethnicised wirid (‘Sufi branch’) networks rather than through cross-national pan-Islamic solidarity.
Thus, Dudaev’s core supporters came from his own taip Yal’khoi, as well as from associated teips Ma’likhi, Albakov and Merzhoev, all of which belonged to the Qadiri wide of Kunta-hajje, Chimmirza and Vis-hajje (Akaev 2010: 68).

The actual Islamisation of the Chechen secessionism along supra-national Salafi lines occurred after the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Chechnya following the Russo-Chechen peace treaty, known as the Khasaviurt Accord, signed on 31 August 1996 by the Head of the Russian Security Council, Alexander Lebed, and Ichkeria’s influential commander, Aslan Maskhadov. Contributing factors behind the Islamisation of the Chechen resistance were the death in April 1996 of Dzhokhar Dudaev as the charismatic secular-minded national leader and the increased presence inside the Ichkeria leadership of professional international jihadists such as Fathi al-Shishani, Abu Omar al-Saif and al-Khattab. Under their pressure Ichkeria’s successive presidents, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev and Aslan Maskhadov, made Islam the state religion and oversaw the shariatisation of Chechnya’s legal system and the ‘Salafisation’ of Chechen Sufi Islam, which was now proclaimed as bid’ah (‘unlawful innovation in Islam’). A corollary was the discursive morphing of the Chechen national liberation struggle into intra-Islamic fighting between proponents of Salafi ‘global Islam’ and Chechen Sufi Islam. This explains why during the Second Chechen War, which began in 1999, mufti Kadyrov, a Sufi of the Qadiri tariqah (‘brotherhood’), who had been an adamant supporter of General Dudaev, sided with the Russian centre against the proponents of ‘global jihad’ (see Chapter 18). The Second Russo-Chechen War of 1999–2009 ended with Russian victory and the re-integration of Chechnya into the Russian Federation.

**Commonalities versus specifics**

As the above analysis of each conflict demonstrates, there is no single over-riding theory which explains why they emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is probably reasonable to assert that the key common trigger of these conflicts, as well as other cases of ethno-territorial and ethno-religious tensions, was the introduction of Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost policies. This prompted a universal effect across the Soviet Union, weakening the power vertical and the Communist Party as its holding structure and leading to the legitimization failure of existing institutional arrangements; the economic collapse leading to mass unemployment and impoverishment; and the rise of ethno-national and ethno-religious nationalism as alternative ideologies to the discarded supra-ethnic Soviet citizenship and communist internationalism. In the Caucasus, however, these processes converged with locally specific factors such as the historically contested delimitation of territorial borders, mythologised narratives of communal antagonism, majority-dominated cores and peripheral minorities (with many in possession of autonomous institutions), relationships between immediate neighbours as well as with the Russian/Soviet centre, and the personalities of national leaders that led to radicalisation rather than peaceful contestation within institutionalised channels.

As to the issue of when these conflicts had their beginnings there is no straightforward answer since all of them exhibit historical, modern and post-modern characteristics (Derluguian 2005). History was particularly present in the Chechen and Armenian national discourses linking the Russo-Chechen and the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflicts to the eighteenth-century Chechen struggle against the Russians and the persecution of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks from the late nineteenth century. Primordially perceived ethnic solidarity was in evidence in all five conflicts. The politico-administrative delimitation of the Caucasus by the Bolshevik modernisers also played an important part in engendering these
conflicts. Thus, the dissolution of the effort to federalise Transcaucasia in May 1918 and the emergence of the ADR, DRA and DRG, as well as a series of Bolshevik ethno-territorial re-arrangements of the Caucasus in the 1920s and 1930s, created major territorial fault lines in the relations between Georgians, on one side, and Abkhaz and Ossetians, on the other, as well as between Ossetians and Ingush and Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The deportations of 1944–57 were pivotal to the ethno-national mobilisation of Chechens and Ingush against the Russians and Ossetians respectively. The impact of postmodern globalisation was evidenced in the politics of PANM and the wider Armenian diaspora in the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict and in the role of secessionist Ichkeria. Another aggravating factor was the particular weakness of the relevant political and military elites, leading to persistent security dilemmas and the privatisation of violence.

Notes

1 Outside the Caucasus, violence was present in the ethno-territorial conflicts between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks in 1989 in Uzbekistan; between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 1990 in southern Kyrgyzstan; between pro-Russian and pro-Moldavian forces in 1992 in Transnistria and in the inter–Tajik civil war of 1992–97.

2 For a fuller discussion on the state of the Caucasian studies in the West see Kemoklidze, Moore, Smith, and Yemelianova 2014.


5 Among the NCChP’s other key figures were a writer, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, a Soviet apparatchik, Yaragi Mamodaev and a policeman, Bislant Gantamirov.

6 The name ‘Ichkeria’ derives from ‘Nokhchiimokh’ in Chechen. It refers to the historic habitat of the nine largest Chechen tukhums.

7 Thus, in June 1992 General Grachev ordered the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Chechnya while de facto allowing the Dudaev supporters to appropriate 240 military planes, five fighter jets, two military helicopters, 42 tanks, 18 multiple rocket-launchers BM–21 ‘Grad’, 55 armoured personnel carriers, over 40,000 heavy and light machine-guns and assault rifles, 135 cannons and mortars and over 130,000 hand grenades. In addition, Dudaev’s supporters were able to purchase at a huge discount Soviet weaponry from other parts of the former USSR (Tishkov 1997: 441).

8 There are considerable discrepancies in the assessment of the war’s losses. According to the official Russian sources, during the war over 4,000 Russian troops were killed, over 1,200 were unaccounted for, and around 20,000 were wounded. However, according to the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers the number of killed among the Russian army exceeded 14,000. The Russian sources estimate losses among Chechen fighters at over 17,000 dead, while the pro–Dudaev sources put it at 3,000. According to the human rights organisation ‘Memorial’ the war-inflicted losses among the civilian population exceeded 50,000 (Krivosheev 2001: 582–84).

9 The ‘Chechen jihad’ was declared in December 1994 by the then Chechen mufti Magomed Husein–hajjee Alsabekev at the instigation of President Dudaev. Given the communist and atheistic background of Dudaev and his entourage and their ethno-national, rather than religious, political agenda the main rationale behind this declaration was to solicit financial and other assistance from Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Muslim countries for Chechen ethno-national separatism from Moscow.

10 Historically Chechens were divided into 135 taips which differed in terms of their size and economic and political influence. The most influential were taips Benoi, T’semtoroi, Gendergeroi and Ch’antiy, while the least influential were taips G’atai, Nikhaloi, Kh’akkoi, Shuonoi and Yal’khoi. Parallel to taip affiliation over 80 per cent of Chechens and Ingush belonged to various winds of the Qadiri and Naqshbandi tariqahs (Akaev 2010: 64).
References

Ethno-territorial and secessionist conflicts


