Time of Troubles

It was, of all places, between Tbilisi and Baku that I lost my political innocence.
Arifbuz Kandil (1954)

What is most important in the history of the world? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?
Zbigniew Brzezinski (1998)

The Caucasus in the last quarter of the twentieth century was defined by the long tenure of the Communist Party first secretaries in the three union republics of the south: Karen Demirchian in Armenia (1974–88), Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan (1969–82), and Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia (1972–85). Each held the prime party post for more than a decade, a period in office rivaling that of the generation that came to power in the wake of the Beria purges of the late 1930s. All three were beneficiaries of the desire for stability following the disruptions caused by de-Stalinization. Until the Gorbachev reforms of the late 1980s, they managed to carve out virtual fiefdoms in their own domains, governing the south Caucasus under the aegis of Leonid Brezhnev, the party’s general secretary, and his immediate successors.

All three also turned out to be remarkable survivors. Returning to politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they occupied major positions in their old homelands, now independent countries: Demirchian as speaker of the Armenian parliament and Aliyev and Shevardnadze as presidents of Azerbaijan and Georgia, respectively.

Demirchian and Aliyev left office in coffins, the former at the hands of an assassin in 1999, the latter from natural causes in 2003. Only Shevardnadze managed to have a life after politics. In 2003 he was swept from power in a peaceful revolution but was allowed to spend his retirement living quietly in the old presidential compound on the outskirts of Tbilisi.

During the late Soviet era these figures led the process of modernization, industrialization, and social change in their republics. Roads and other transport systems were upgraded. New factories were opened. Agricultural production was upgraded, providing much-vaulted models for the rest of the Soviet Union. Grand new building projects—such as the completion in 1979 of an Armenian nuclear power plant at Medzamor and the unveiling in 1984 of one of the world’s tallest hydroelectric dams, located on the Inguri River in Georgia—highlighted the republics’ progress. A generation that had no memory of Stalin began to enter the party and state machinery. As in the past, elites from the republics also found leadership positions at the top of the Soviet hierarchy. Aliyev left the office of party secretary to join the all-union Politburo (the first “cultural Muslim” holder of such a position), while Shevardnadze rose to the post of Soviet foreign minister. Throughout their careers the three first secretaries also spent much of their tenure combatting precisely the phenomenon that would occupy them in the post-Soviet period—corruption.

Brothers and Rivals

Postwar scarcity in the early 1920s—exacerbated by collectivization in the late 1920s and early 1930s and compounded by the purges and the Second World War—created a social system based on the need for access to limited goods. In such an environment, having privileged connections was indispensable. Moreover, in an economy dominated by the state, there was ample opportunity for overreporting the consumption of raw materials in industry and then skimming off the surplus for private gain, underreporting production and directing the
profitable. For example, a roadblock on the way to a fashionable restaurant outside Tbilisi or to Lake Sevan in Armenia commanded the highest price because citizens were reckoned to be carrying a significant amount of cash on their way to these destinations. The officer would then recoup his initial financial outlay, plus a profit, through the collection of fines.

This entire system, a form of what economists would call tax farming, could have particularly perverse effects. The GAI would hardly ever give chase if someone ignored a baton-waving officer, but the fear of police power was such that most people complied with the officer’s demands and stopped, knowing full well that they were in for a shakedown. Daring souls driving expensive cars—a large, late-model Volga, for example, rather than the diminutive Zhiguli—might attempt to speed through the checkpoint, waving smartly as they passed. Officers rarely objected in these cases since the assumption was that only someone of importance and connections would dare ignore the GAI’s order to halt. Flouting a lawman’s power was often a way of avoiding being fined for driving cautiously and respecting police authority.

In some areas the entire GAI system was rooted in preexisting social networks. One might allow a relative to purchase a plum roadblock spot at a reduced price. GAI members active in ethnic minority areas—such as Azerbaijanis in eastern Georgia or Lezgins in northern Azerbaijan—might be persuaded not to levy a fine if both driver and police officer belonged to the same minority group. It was not so much that the Caucasus had never moved beyond the clan and “tribal” forms of social organization of the nineteenth century. Rather, the structures of Soviet governance helped breathe new life into them. The GAI, although renamed, survived well into the post-Soviet period. In fact, it was not until 2004 that the Georgian government abolished the institution of the standing automobile checkpoint, replacing it with roving patrol cars. The result was a considerable increase in public confidence in the police and no noticeable decline in road safety.

Alongside the deepening of traditional networks and the waves of anticorruption campaigns, there were important social changes taking place during the tenures of Demirchian, Aliyev, and Shevardnadze. The republics were growing and, with them, their burgeoning capital cities. Tbilisi grew from 695,000 people in 1959 to over 1 million in 1979. During the same period, Yerevan and Baku both grew to a little over 1 million people. By the time of the 1979 census, all three republics had become more urbanized than ever before. On average, in the south Caucasus 56 percent of the population lived in towns and cities. Those trends would continue into the Gorbachev era. At the time of the last Soviet census in 1989, Baku had a population of 1.8 million, Tbilisi 1.3 million, and Yerevan 1.2 million. Regions that less than a century earlier had been largely rural, with towns floating in a sea of nomads and peasant farmers, now had urban spaces that proclaimed the cult of modernity and development that was a central message of Soviet power.

In addition, as time went on all three south Caucasus republics were becoming more “national.” By 1989 only Armenia was close to being ethnically homogeneous, at 93 percent Armenian, but even Azerbaijanis and Georgians were living in union republics that, more than at any time in their history, were dominated by the ethnonational group for which they were named. Ethnic Azerbaijanis accounted for 83 percent of Azerbaijan’s population and Georgians for 70 percent of Georgia’s population—figures that had increased, on average, by nearly 9 percentage points over the previous thirty years. The cities, too, were coming to look more and more like the republics in which they were situated. Migration from the countryside to urban environments had been a constant feature of the postwar period (and even earlier), but now the cities were attracting more new migrants than ever before. The cultural contours of the urban landscape changed as newly arrived Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians villagers found themselves in competition with more established communities in towns and cities.

The ethnic homogenization of the south Caucasus in favor of the so-called titular nationalities was largely replicated north of the mountains. There the same ethno-territorial system was in place. Almost all the administrative units of the region were named for one or more ethnic groups—Adygea (Circassians/Adygys), Karachaev-Cherkessia (Karachaei and Circassians), Kabardino-Balkaria (Circassians/Kabardians and Balkars), North Ossetia (Ossetians), and Checheno-Ingushetia (Chechens and Ingush)—even though the precise administrative status of these regions and their borders changed over time. Of all the territories included in the old imperial delineation of the Caucasus, only the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions (krais) and the Dagestan autonomous republic had ethnopic minorities. Almost all these units were becoming more indigenous with the passage of time. By 1989, with the exception Circassians/Adygys in Adygea, titular nationalities formed an absolute majority in their homelands. Most dramatically, the Chechen and Ingush populations increased
from around 41 percent of their region’s total in 1959 to 80 percent in 1989. The proportion of ethnic Russians, by contrast, had fallen precipitously during the preceding decades. Emigration by Russians and other minorities, higher birth rates among some Muslim groups, and the return of formerly deported peoples from Central Asia all contributed to the relative homogenization of the north Caucasus. According to official rhetoric, the Soviet Union was meant to encourage the fusion of nationalities into a single Soviet people. In reality, the Soviet experience made the political units of the Caucasus considerably less ethnically diverse and more clearly national than they had been in the past.

“It is a magical place, Georgia,” wrote John Steinbeck during a visit in the late 1940s, “and it becomes dream-like the moment you have left it.” After the Second World War, plenty of writers and artists would have agreed. As it had been during the Russian imperial era, the Caucasus remained a peculiar kind of fantasy, a place of freedom and liberation of sorts, but one that could now be visited on workers’ holidays. For people from other parts of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus was an attractive venue for tourism and relaxation. State-sponsored recreation areas were built alongside tsarist-era resorts, which had already begun to flourish in the nineteenth century. The spas of Mineral’nye Vody in the Stavropol region, the end point of pilgrimages by both Pushkin and Lermontov, were still a desirable destination. Building projects in the 1930s created a grid of new streets in towns such as Kislovodsk. Bathhouses, public gardens, and sanatoria were rebuilt after the war. Visitors to Lermontov’s old haunts in Piatigorsk were promised relief from cardiovascular, digestive, and gynecological disorders, all within refurbished spa facilities dating from the tsarist period. Sochi, on the Black Sea coast, became the largest health facility in the entire Soviet Union. Formerly the site of a Russian imperial fort, it received its new name in 1896 and, during the waning days of the empire, became a fast-growing beach resort and holiday center. Gazebo, scenic overlooks, parks, and hotels were constructed during the early Stalin period. The city was transformed into a military convalescence station during the Second World War. After the war it flourished as the premier retreat for both party elites and average Soviet citizens, the jewel of the Red Riviera.

With a state-sponsored tourist industry spreading throughout the region, the Caucasus now shaped how Russians and other Soviet citizens conceived of their own country. North Caucasus dance troupes with their tight-fitting cherkeska tunics and fuzzy papakha hats; Georgian wine and the institution of the supra, or feast, and the tamada, or ebullient toastmaster; buttery Armenian brandy and souvenirs made from the republic’s ubiquitous tuff, or volcanic rock; an entire genre of well-known jokes that featured the credulous announcers of a fictional “Radio Yerevan”; dinners of shashlyk and lavash, or shish kebab and flatbread; colorful carpets and kilims from Azerbaijan—all became not simply recognizable cultural artifacts of the Caucasus but also aspects of a broader Soviet way of being and feeling.

The appeal of the Caucasus lay not just in its perennial exotism but also in the degree to which that exotism could now be made one’s own. It could be embraced and celebrated—even satirized—rather than feared. Popular films solidified the image of the Soviet south as the home of good-natured locals with a zest for life. In the comedy Mimino (1977), directed by Giorgi Danielia, a Georgian helicopter pilot realizes his dream of flying jetliners for Aeroflot, only to discover that travel abroad intensifies his longing to return to his bountiful homeland. The Caucasus even figured in the adventures of Shurik, the lead character of several Soviet slapstick comedies. In Leonid Gaidai’s wildly popular Prisoner Girl of the Caucasus (1966), an old trope is given a comic treatment as Shurik rescues a beautiful and sporty Communist maiden from the clutches of hawk-nosed but harmless kidnappers.

While comedy and adventure were important trends in portrayals of the Soviet Caucasus, they were not the dominant ones in the region itself. If there is a unifying thread in the development of art, literature, and the imagination in the Caucasus after 1945, it is the escape into abstraction and high art on the one hand, and into the past on the other. There was a tradition of experimental literature and art in the south Caucasus that went back to prerevolutionary times. Georgian writers in particular were solidly in step with—and, in some cases, led—the cutting-edge movements of the immediate postrevolutionary era. This tradition survived the rise of socialist realism and sprang into full bloom following the Second World War. The work of the filmmaker Sergei Paradjanov, who was born into a Tiflis Armenian family in the 1920s, provided some of the most evocative representations of the Caucasus, as well as some of the signal contributions to world culture by a Soviet artist. His first major film, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (1964), was set in western Ukraine but developed themes of retribution and remembrance that would inform his later work. The Color of Pomegranates (1969) explored the life of Sayat Nova, the
eighteenth-century Armenian troubadour and Persian court poet. Imprisoned as a dissident for part of the 1970s and 1980s, Paradjanov continued to create art that combined themes of the non-Russian, national past with experimental narrative forms. His *Legend of the Suram Fortress* (1984) retold a Georgian folk tale in high-art style, while his *Asik Kerib* (1988), based on a work by Lermontov, was a filmic homage to Andrei Tarkovsky, his peer and one of the legends of Soviet abstract filmmaking. In all his later work Paradjanov managed to combine elements of Georgian, Armenian, and Turkic Muslim culture while at the same time transcending national categories. Other intellectuals, such as the Abkhaz novelist Fazil Iskander, created indelible images of mountainous homelands and quizzical natives for adoring Soviet readers.

The past also had other uses, serving not simply as a source of inspiration but as an object of invention and glorification. Beneath the public avowals of Soviet brotherhood and friendship among peoples, intellectuals engaged in heated debates over contentious points of history and national origin. Historians argued over whether particular ancient peoples could properly be claimed as the legitimate antecedents of modern nations. Linguists debated the delineation of language families and which languages ought to be considered mere dialects of others. Alphabetics were invented, reworked, and discarded. Major events and personalities from the past—from Shamyl to early Bolsheviks—were reinterpreted and at times rehabilitated, transformed into the leaders of inchoate progressive movements or proponents of national distinctiveness within a multinational state. New public art celebrated national heroes and poets. Folk dancers and costumed choirs staged extravaganzas that explored the essence of being a member of one or another national group.

While the details differed, the way in which the peoples of the Caucasus spoke about their own past was structurally similar: from ethnogenesis in antiquity, through the rise of kingdoms, khanates, and principalities in the Middle Ages, to the birth of national movements in the nineteenth century under the beneficent tutelage of Russia, and finally toward incorporation into the enlightened and liberating Soviet Union. In virtually any major history text published in the Soviet Caucasus after the Second World War, the narrative is essentially the same except for the proper nouns. The Caucasus thus moved into the late 1980s with versions of history that privileged the nation, underscored its connection to a particular piece of real estate, and fundamentally excluded other ways of interpreting historical truth. Moreover, all this was taking place in cities and republics that were more national, in demographic terms, than at any point in the recent past.

Both routes of escape—toward abstraction and toward the invention of a straight line from the ancient past to the present—could at times produce profound works of art, literature, and scholarship. Yet they also set the Caucasus on a perilous path. Almost without exception the region lacked the crucial set of voices for liberal values, tolerance, and public engagement that allowed other parts of the Communist world to weather the simultaneous collapse of an ideology, a political order, and an economic system. Even the peculiarly Caucasian variants of the early twentieth century—the social democratic orientations of the Dashnaks, Mūsāṭ, and Menaevski—were now discredited in the Soviet Union. Where they still held on—for example, among old Dashnaks and their children in the Armenian diaspora—they tended to inflame nationalism rather than temper it.

Of course, dissidents and occasionally dissident movements did emerge. Many individuals suffered indescribable cruelty in Soviet prisons and camps. However, their motivating ideologies were largely derived from the desire for national flourishing against what was perceived to be an antinational, Russian-dominated state. Three of the largest public demonstrations in the Soviet Union before the era of perestroika took place in the Caucasus. One, which occurred in Yerevan in 1965, commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian genocide and called on the Soviet government to recognize it. Two years later the city unveiled a large memorial with an eternal flame, the focal point for future commemoration activities. The others, in Yerevan and Tbilisi in 1978, were sparked by plans to give the Russian language a status comparable to that of Armenian and Georgian in the republics’ educational systems and administrative apparatus. The rallies successfully blocked the proposed change, and Armenia and Georgia remained the only Soviet republics with official languages—the local ones. All these events revealed the degree to which human rights issues were intertwined with, and sometimes wholly consumed by, questions of national identity and destiny. Well into the 1980s the response of the state to displays of national discontent was to issue stentorian statements about the degree to which cultural problems had been resolved in the multinational Soviet Caucasus—and to arrest dissidents who failed to agree with that claim. In 1983, for example, the two hundredth anniversary of the Treaty of Georgievsk was marked by official celebrations in Tbilisi, together with the imprisonment of
several men who had publicly denounced the treaty as a milestone in Georgia’s path toward national subjugation.6
The south Caucasus republics were rushing headlong into an era of political change, with few people who could argue convincingly for reappropriating the brand of democracy that had seemed promising, for a fleeting moment, at the end of the First World War. When Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became fully independent in 1991, they adopted the same flags that the Bolsheviks had pulled down seventy years earlier: the red-blue-orange tricolor in Yerevan, the blue-red-green tricolor in Baku, and the crimson, black, and white flag in Tbilisi. But rather than inheriting these earlier republics’ aspirations for social justice and reform, the new ones seemed to inherit only their problems: economic chaos, social discord, territorial conflicts, and international isolation.

Land and Struggle

One of the preeminent cultural artifacts of the late Soviet period is the film Repentance, directed by the acclaimed Georgian filmmaker Tengiz Abuladze. The film centers on the death of Varlam, the despotic mayor of an unnamed town. The town’s leaders gather to mourn the loss of the great man but soon discover that his corpse has a life of its own: Varlam’s body keeps escaping from its grave. The agent of Varlam’s wanderlust turns out to be a woman, Keti, who secretly digs up the body each time it is reburied. Keti is eventually caught with shovel in hand and brought to trial. On the witness stand she recounts her own story about Varlam’s persecution of her parents and her promise to take revenge. Keti is ruled insane, but the truths she has exposed eventually destroy the cult of the dead mayor.

When it was released in 1986, the film was an overnight sensation. Eduard Shevardnadze, who had become Soviet foreign minister, proved to be a key patron, encouraging the film’s public release and protecting Abudaze against official reprisals.7 The messages of the film—that the Soviet Union had yet to come to terms with its past and that ghosts of old despots were still haunting the land—were unmistakable. In the first year of its commercial release, the film was viewed by at least thirty million individuals, an astonishing achievement for a film that mixed surrealist plot elements and avant-garde techniques.8 Repentance became symbolic of Mikhail Gorbachev’s new policy of glasnost and helped spur on public conversations about history, memory, and persecution.

Beginning in 1985, the nearly seven years of Gorbachev’s tenure as general secretary of the Communist Party and later president of the Soviet Union produced the promise of systemic transformation. In time, however, what had seemed a hopeful beginning led to the dismantling of the entire state. Lithuania declared its independence in March 1990. Georgia followed in April 1991. The organizers of the Moscow coup of August 1991 hoped to reverse the disintegration of the union but instead hastened it. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and other republics soon followed the course set by Lithuania and Georgia. By the end of the year, Gorbachev was president of a country that no longer existed. Yet the remarkable fact about the end of the world’s largest state is that it disappeared from the map in a mostly peaceful manner. Dozens of civil wars did not erupt across Eurasia. The new countries that rose from the Soviet rubble did not attack one another or seek territorial aggrandizement. If the Soviet Union and its satellite states could be called an empire, it is fair to say that no empire in the twentieth century—the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Ottoman, or even the British—unmade itself in so civil a fashion.

The Caucasus was a major exception. Virtually all the armed conflicts associated with the end of Soviet power occurred there, including the territorial wars over Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, over South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and over Chechnya in Russia. The first of these was also Eurasia’s only interstate war since it involved the attempt by Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh to secede from Azerbaijan with the assistance of the Armenian republic. Even lesser conflicts—riots, pogroms, and ethnic cleansing—decimated ancient communities and left tens of thousands of refugees and displaced persons eking out an existence far from their homelands.

How could a region that had remained something of a backwater following the Second World War—the land of jolly mountaineers and holiday makers in the Soviet imagination—end up this way? The fate of the Caucasus in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was not inevitable. Rather, the violent politics and territorial uncertainties were the result of, among other things, basic structural features of the Soviet state, the decisions of key political elites, and the fact that dysfunctional politics can sometimes serve the interests of politicians themselves even as they lead the people they claim to represent toward certain ruin. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was not so much that
national movement in Azerbaijan looked to the territorial issue as one of its central mobilizing themes, so the opposition movement in Armenia—centered around a group of intellectuals known as the Karabakh Committee—used the plight of Armenians in the neighboring republic to spur street protests and calls for reform. As in other parts of the Soviet Union, nationalism provided the basic vocabulary through which political opposition could be expressed. In 1989 the Armenian parliament and the Nagorno-Karabakh district council adopted a joint resolution declaring the unification of the two administrative units. Paramilitary groups began to form inside Nagorno-Karabakh, with substantial assistance from Armenia. The Azerbaijani government responded by forcibly evacuating villages near the Armenian border and imposing a road and rail blockade on the autonomous district and eventually on Armenia as well. An attempt by Soviet authorities to calm the situation by placing Nagorno-Karabakh directly under Moscow’s control failed.

Hostilities escalated following the collapse of the Soviet center. Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh’s capital of Stepanakert announced the creation of a wholly separate Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 1991, which was confirmed in a referendum on independence several months later. Full-scale war followed. By the middle of 1992 Nagorno-Karabakh forces had opened a land corridor linking the region to Armenia and had driven the Azerbaijani army from Shusha, the last remaining Azerbaijani stronghold and a strategic highland from which the military had been able to bombard Stepanakert. Armenian successes were accompanied by atrocities committed against local Azerbaijanis, such as the notorious massacre of civilians in the village of Khoyjaly in 1992, an event that came to occupy the same position for Azerbaijanis as the Sumgait and Baku massacres for Armenians. A major offensive in 1993 created an Armenian-controlled buffer zone around the old autonomous district, essentially bringing most of historic Karabakh, both highland and lowland, under Armenian control—and denuding it of Azerbaijani inhabitants in the process. After several unsuccessful mediation attempts, in May 1994 Russia managed to secure a lasting if imperfectly enforced ceasefire. Negotiations on a final settlement were launched under the auspices of a multinational coalition that included Russia and the United States, but those talks wound on for more than a decade with little real progress.

The pattern of events in Nagorno-Karabakh paralleled those in the autonomous republic of Abkhazia in northwestern Georgia. Abkhazia had a special administrative status going back to the Bolshevik seizure of power, even though the precise nature of that status changed over the course of the Soviet period. Repeated attempts were made by local intellectuals and activists to separate from Soviet Georgia and join the Soviet Russian federal republic. Unlike in the Nagorno-Karabakh case, however, the history of Georgian-Abkhaz relations was perhaps one of the more peaceful ones in the south Caucasus. There was a history of violence from the time of the First World War and the Russian civil war, but those conflicts were not generally drawn along ethnic lines. Georgians did not view the Abkhaz as illegitimate interlopers—as some Armenians were inclined to see Azerbaijanis inside Nagorno-Karabakh—nor did the Abkhaz typically stoke anti-Georgian sentiment. Religious distinctions were likewise not clearly drawn. Most Abkhaz, if they claimed a religious affiliation at all, were Orthodox Christians, as were Georgians. But when a revitalized Georgian national movement emerged in the waning days of Soviet power, eventually staging a referendum on Georgia’s exit from the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz population demanded the opportunity to leave Georgia and take their territory with them.

The biggest difference between Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh was demographic. Armenians comprised a majority of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh, but ethnic Abkhaz represented only a fraction of Abkhazia’s (about 18 percent in 1989). The Abkhaz had been a minority group in the region for the better part of a century, following the expulsion of Abkhaz communities by the Russian Empire in the 1860s. The policy of the Soviet government, particularly under Beria, had been to encourage the immigration of ethnic Georgians into the autonomous republic, in part to help boost agricultural production there, in part to alter the ethnic balance further in favor of Georgians. To Abkhaz intellectuals and regional leaders, Georgia’s exit from the Soviet Union promised to diminish further their influence in their own homeland. The coming to power of a new, more vocally nationalist leader in Tbilisi in the person of Gamsakhurdia also deepened Abkhaz fears.

Clashes soon erupted between Abkhaz and local Georgians. Gamsakhurdia, perhaps acting against type, made progress in dampening these disputes, but his ouster in a coup in Tbilisi scuttled any chance for a peaceful settlement. In early 1992 Eduard Shevardnadze returned from Moscow and assumed power as leader of the Georgian government. Shevardnadze proved incapable of controlling those politicians who called for a quick military solution to the Abkhaz
problem. Georgian troops and paramilitary forces marched into Abkhazia—the proximate cause of the incursion is still debated on both sides—and succeeded in capturing and holding the capital of Sukhumi. By the end of 1993 Abkhaz militias, assisted by Russian government forces and irregular troops from the north Caucasus, had pushed back the ill-prepared Georgian troops to the Inguri River, the dividing line between Georgia proper and Abkhazia. A Russian-brokered agreement in May 1994 provided for the deployment of a peacekeeping mission of the Commonwealth of Independent States— although in practice wholly Russian—to monitor the security zone along the river. Negotiations on Abkhazia’s final status, brokered by the United Nations, were soon set in motion. However, as in Nagorno-Karabakh, the ceasefire continued well into the 2000s with little sign of a final resolution.

Unlike the Abkhaz, the Ossetians were historically tied to a region outside Georgia, the autonomous republic of North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. The autonomous district of South Ossetia, in Georgia, maintained a relatively steady ethnic makeup throughout the Soviet period (two-thirds ethnic Ossetian), but Georgian popular opinion tended to see the Ossetians as newcomers who demanded more than their fair share of Georgian real estate. Georgian historians and writers pointed to the long-ago migration of Ossetians across the mountains to the south and their privileged status as reliable partners in Russian imperial expansion, both of which were marveled to support claims that Ossetians should be no more than grateful guests inside Georgia. Despite a history of strong intercultural ties between Georgians and Ossetians, the political climate of the late 1980s encouraged escalating demands for local autonomy and independence. In 1988 and 1989 the Georgian government adopted measures to strengthen the use of the Georgian language in public life. Shortly thereafter it rejected calls by district leaders for an upgrade in South Ossetia’s status from autonomous district to autonomous republic, the same as Abkhazia’s.

The spark that touched off violence occurred in 1990, when the South Ossetian district administration declared a separate South Ossetian republic within the Soviet Union, moved to unite with the Russian republic of North Ossetia across the mountains, and shortly thereafter held elections for a separate parliament—a variation on the Nagorno-Karabakh theme. In response, the Georgian parliament voted to revoke South Ossetia’s existing autonomous status. Gamsakhurdia ordered troops to the district, but their entry met with the fierce resistance of Ossetian irregulars and their supporters from North Ossetia and other parts of Russia. In July 1992 a ceasefire agreement provided for the cessation of hostilities and final-status negotiations. As in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, those negotiations wound on throughout the 1990s and early 2000s with occasional flare-ups in violence among the contesting sides.

For more than a decade following the end of large-scale conflict, the political elites who had engineered these wars, both in the national capitals and in the secessionist regions, mostly remained the same. Eduard Shevardnadze was Georgian president until 2003, the same year that saw the death of Heydar Aliyev. Robert Kocharian, the former president of Nagorno-Karabakh, became president of Armenia in 1998. Many people in the Caucasus continued to refer to the events of the perestroika period as explanations for why a stable settlement remained elusive. Nagorno-Karabakh’s leaders spoke of the revival of their local autonomy and massacres of Armenians in Azerbaijan. Abkhaz and Ossetians listed Georgia’s oppressive cultural policies and the dilution of local autonomy. Ethnic majorities talked of the treachery of minority populations intent on tearing apart their states.

None of these views was completely wrong. In all these conflicts, there were repertoires of violence that defined the basic issues, delineated the contending sides, and provided ready justifications for war. Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia were sites of ethnic conflict in the truest sense of the term: wars that sometimes involved neighbors killing neighbors, even door to door. The minority populations believed that the weakening of the Soviet center would lead to a concomitant expansion of the power of ethnic majorities in the union republics. Republican governments, in turn, were convinced that the minorities were either tools of a revitalized Russia—fifth columns that would be used by Moscow to undermine their newfound independence—or simply ungrateful citizens intent on redrawing borders to realize their own national designs. Moreover, the presence of significant prewar populations of Georgians in Abkhazia, Georgians in South Ossetia, and Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh gave these conflicts an additional complicating factor. In denying secession to the Abkhaz, Ossetians, and Karabakh Armenians, the governments of Georgia and Azerbaijan could also claim to be protecting the interests of ethnic Georgians and ethnic Azerbaijanis who once lived in the secessionist regions.

At various points in the late 1980s and early 1990s, violence might have been hewed had visionary leaders proved more assertive and those most committed to fomenting conflict less able. In many ways,
however, the Soviet system itself sanctioned violence as a viable instrument of politics. In two infamous instances Soviet troops attacked pro-independence demonstrators in Tbilisi in April 1989, leaving more than twenty people dead, and intervened in Baku in January 1990, killing more than a hundred. Those incidents were not directly related to the brewing territorial struggles, but they did signal Moscow’s desperation in a part of the Soviet Union that seemed to be spiraling out of control. In such a context, the escalation of territorial disputes to all-out war was not fated, but those arguing for peace—and there were such voices on all sides—were increasingly drowned out by those intent on violence.

Tens of thousands of people were killed in fighting inside the three conflict areas. Refugees flooded out of them: some 1.2 million from Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, and the occupied territories; 270,000 from Abkhazia and surrounding areas; and 50,000 from South Ossetia. Many spent the rest of the decade (and beyond) living in allegedly temporary housing in old Soviet hotels and dilapidated resorts in other parts of Georgia and Azerbaijan. The most visible of these refugee camps—the multi-storey Hotel Iveria in downtown Tbilisi—stood as a stark reminder of the unsettled nature of these disputes and the enormous human cost of the end of Soviet power. (It was subsequently renovated and reemerged as a luxury hotel in the early 2000s). The cruel irony of Soviet-era tourist complexes being used as refugee centers was not lost on the victims of war themselves.

After the early 1990s, most central governments and international organizations did virtually everything that the conventional wisdom on conflict resolution suggested in order to reach an equitable solution. Generally stable cease-fires, monitored by outside parties, were put in place. Regular negotiations were set up under the aegis of international organizations, with the support of the United States and the Russian Federation. To varying degrees governments amended their constitutions, citizenship laws, educational statutes, and local administrative structures to provide for civil rights guarantees and local autonomy.

The real block on a final settlement was the fact that, beneath the facade of unresolved grievances and international negotiations, political elites in the secessionist regions were going about the process of building states that, in some instances, functioned about as well as the recognized countries of which they were still formally constituents. Moreover, these unrecognized entities were shielded by independent military forces large enough to fend off an attack by the recognized states: fifteen to twenty thousand men in Nagorno-Karabakh; between fifteen hundred and five thousand in Abkhazia; and anywhere from a few hundred to two thousand in South Ossetia—all with supplies of armor and equipment either inherited from Soviet forces or purchased from Russia or on the international market. At the same time, interest groups outside the conflict zones learned to live with the effective division of their countries by finding ways to profit from a state apparatus that was chronically weak—and, in the process, ensuring that it remained so. The history of the south Caucasus in the 1990s and early 2000s was thus not simply about state collapse and territorial secession but about how people learned to survive and even thrive in otherwise miserable circumstances—and how this adaptive mechanism ended up perpetuating the status quo.

The politics of state disintegration produced violence, not the other way around. There would have been no post-Soviet wars in the Caucasus if elites at the republican level had not tried to prevent their regional counterparts from claiming rights to secession and sovereignty—the very rights, of course, that the republican elites were claiming vis-à-vis Moscow. In no case did war break out because one ethnic group suddenly decided to slaughter another. Large-scale violence came about because of the weakening of the Soviet state and the commitment of its successor governments—both those that had achieved international recognition and those that had not—to use force to realize their goals. These wars were fundamentally about controlling turf, not more rarefied questions of history, identity, or national destiny. Each of the disputed areas was blessed with having an autonomous administration at the time the Soviet Union began to falter, and local elites in each of these regions set about transforming their Soviet-era institutions into the accoutrements of independent statehood. Regional councils became parliaments. Factory managers and local intellectuals became ministers and presidents. Without those administrative structures and the personal ambition of those who held pivotal positions within them, the post-Soviet wars might have never gotten off the ground.

As the conflicts progressed, what had been quintessentially political disputes took on an ethnic tinge. Today the conflicts are memorialized as victorious wars of national liberation or tragic struggles for the integrity of the fatherland. An entire generation of schoolchildren has grown up imbibing one or another of these narratives. In the secessionist regions history curricula have been redesigned to highlight the citizens of the unrecognized states as the indigenous inhabitants of their territory and to strengthen the connection between previous and current forms of statehood. Children who were not even born when
the conflicts began have been schooled to believe that the republics they inhabit represent ancient nations now reborn through war and sacrifice. As a South Ossetian textbook proclaimed in 2000: "The war killed and maimed thousands of our citizens; left tens of thousands of innocent people without shelter, work, and means of survival; razed our infrastructure; robbed the people of kindergartens and schools; and made peaceful citizens into refugees. Nevertheless, these years have a special historical significance for us, because we not only managed to defeat the aggressor but also to build our own statehood." This way of seeing the past, though, is little different from the equally tendentious arguments used to justify the existence of many other new Eurasian states.

Overall, the post-Soviet order in the Caucasus was not the natural outcome of individual nations striving for independence but rather a reflection of the international community's capacity to tolerate one kind of secessionist but not another. In the end, the narratives of the successful secessionists—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—were legitimated through international recognition and membership in multilateral organizations. Those of the unrecognized regimes—Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia—were viewed by outsiders as desperate attempts to rationalize the whims of separatists. One obvious difference, however, was simply size. All of the secessionist regions were tiny: under two hundred thousand people each in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh; perhaps as few as seventy thousand in South Ossetia. Still, they represented significant parts of the recognized states, accounting for roughly 15 percent of the territory of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Yet well into the early 2000s it was difficult for a visitor to tell the difference between life in an unrecognized state and life in a recognized one—at least outside the national capitals. Electricity was often in short supply, roads went unrepaired, government was capricious, and politics was intertwined with corrupt businesses. State weakness, arbitrary governance, and economic uncertainty had little to do with territorial status. These ills were experienced equally by citizens across the Caucasus regardless of whether their countries were real or imagined.

Whose Nations? Whose States?

During the first decade following independence, the rise of nationalist extremists, hesitant democratization, multiple coups d'état, the consolidation of control by Soviet-era elites, and the passing of power to a new generation of politicians were the major signposts in the fractious affairs of the south Caucasus. In the 1990s and early 2000s, amid the twists and turns of post-Soviet change, the region had become less a collection of independent countries and unrecognized republics than a constellation of city-states—Yerevan, Baku, and Tbilisi. These cities were the principal recipients of external aid and foreign investment, the main destinations for migration from the countryside, and the central arenas in which fitful reform and reaction were played out. Somewhere between a third and half the republics' total populations resided in the capitals, making the south Caucasus appear demographically far closer to the developing world than to many other east European states. In the far corners of these countries entire towns and neighborhoods lay abandoned. If one asked what people did for a living, the answer was nearly universal in both the recognized countries and the secessionist zones. For men it was driving taxis, working abroad, or lugging merchandise to and from the capital cities. For women it was, in Russian, "Nu, torguem"—"Well, we sell stuff"—trying desperately to make ends meet by buying and selling cheap consumer goods in a local bazaar.

The three capitals experienced something of a renaissance, however. Aid programs helped transform urban landscapes. Foreign investment picked up. In Baku in particular the promise of profits from Azerbaijan's rich oil and gas sector turned the city into a boombtown on the model of a century earlier, with foreign restaurants, luxury hotels, and casinos. The city became the largest urban environment in the Caucasus—larger than Yerevan and Tbilisi and, according to some estimates, more populous even than Armenia and Georgia. Per capita income grew in all three countries, fueled by remittances from immigrants working in Russia, western Europe, and the United States. Dire poverty continued to define life in the countryside, but to many visitors it was masked by the growth of new businesses in the three capitals and the emergence of a younger, English-speaking, often Western-educated elite. At nearly every turn, though, hopes for genuine political change, democratization, and long-term stability were dashed by the eagerness of small factions to sacrifice the interests of their countries for personal gain.

Armenia emerged as an independent country with the anti-Communist opposition in power in parliament and one of the leaders of the Karabakh Committee, the literary historian Levon Ter-Petrosian, as
president. Ter-Petrosian was among the less radical members of the
dissident movement, which had taken up the plight of Armenians in
Nagorno-Karabakh as its central theme, but his moderation was rarely
a virtue in the turbulent politics of the immediate post-Soviet period.
Months after his election in the autumn of 1991, mass rallies demand-
ing his resignation were held in Yerevan. The president soon came up
against one of the major dividing lines in the new republic—the gulf
between Soviet Armenians and diaspora returnees and their sympathiz-
ers, particularly those associated with the revived Dashnak party.
Nurtured in the centers of the Armenian diaspora, which stretched
from Beirut to Los Angeles, the Dashnaks once again became a force in
domestic Armenian affairs, seeking to regain the position they had lost
as a result of the Bolshevik invasion in 1920. Although few members of
that earlier generation were present, their successors looked to the
ideology of national rebirth as a source of inspiration following the end
of communism. The creation of an independent Armenia was the
signal event in the life of the diaspora, and community leaders from the
West flocked to Yerevan hoping to find long-lost brothers willing to
open their homes, their economy, and their political system. Armed
with funds from abroad, the Dashnaks and their associates were able to
found newspapers and start businesses, field candidates for office, and
wield significant power in the new state. Their successes worried many
local Armenians, who saw them as newcomers with little experience of
the hardships of the Soviet era and even less respect for its achieve-
ments. In late 1994 Ter-Petrosian formally moved against the party,
banning it for the alleged role of its members in the assassination of a
prominent former politician.

Faced with the residual effects of the 1988 earthquake, then a hot
war and tense standoff with Azerbaijan, along with a road and rail
embargo enforced by both Azerbaijan and Turkey, the Armenian state
spent much of the 1990s lurching from one crisis to another. Ter-
Petrosian won another term as president in 1996 in an election widely
disputed by opposition parties. Looking to outflank his nationalist
critics, he eventually named Robert Kocharyan, the former president of
Nagorno-Karabakh, to the post of Armenian prime minister. That
appointment marked the beginning of what many regarded as the
takeover of the state not by its Western diaspora but rather by its
Eastern one, specifically politicians, businessmen, and war veterans
from Nagorno-Karabakh. In early 1998 Ter-Petrosian was forced to
resign as president largely as a result of his perceived willingness to
compromise with Azerbaijan. New presidential elections marked the
ascendancy of Kocharyan, who moved from the prime ministership
to the president’s office, lifted the ban on the Dashnaks, and began
to consolidate the position of pro-presidential forces within the leg-
islature. Armenia was now moving in a direction being followed by
several post-Soviet republics: toward the concentration of power in the
hands of a president who had been placed in office through question-
able elections and with his own presidential party in control of the
national assembly.

In his resignation speech Ter-Petrosian pointed out what many
Armenian intellectuals and analysts had come to believe—that the
conflict with Azerbaijan was only one aspect of a much thornier debate
within Armenian society itself, namely, whether the future lay in a civic
definition of statehood based on principles of democracy and open-
ness or in a more radically ethnic vision that rewarded those politicians
best able to protect ethnic Armenians at home and abroad. Kochary-
ian’s ascendancy assured the triumph of the latter vision and, concom-
itantly, the militarization of Armenian society. The number of men
under arms in Armenia (along with those in Nagorno-Karabakh) had
remained broadly comparable to the number in Azerbaijan, even though
the defense budgets and populations of the two countries were widely
disparate. Increasingly, it was the needs and desires of the military es-
establishment—veterans who were now in control of key political instit-
tutions—that appeared to set the agenda of the country as a whole.
From the late 1980s through the early 2000s men from the old
Karabakh Committee gave way to men from Nagorno-Karabakh itself.

Like its neighbors, post-Soviet Armenia had its share of assassina-
tions, attempted assassinations, and armed plots to eliminate one or
another rival for political or economic reasons—or an imponderable
combination of both. The most shocking incident took place in Oc-
tober 1999. A small group of gunmen entered the parliament building
and opened fire on the floor of the assembly, leaving eight prominent
politicians dead, including Vazgen Sargsian, the prime minister, and
Karen Demirchian, the parliamentary speaker and former Communist
Party head. Although the gunmen were eventually tried and sentenced,
the origins of the plot remained murky even years after the tragic
events. Some insisted that it had been launched in an effort to fore-
stall a deal on Nagorno-Karabakh, which seemed to be in the offing
at the time of the shootings. Others claimed to see the hand of the
most powerful political figure still standing in the aftermath of the
One afternoon in 1930 the poet Osip Mandelstam found himself in a boat on Lake Sevan, the stunning Armenian lake that is home to a famously succulent species of trout. In the boat with Mandelstam were two Armenians. One was a certain Professor Khachaturian. He had formerly been director of an Armenian secondary school in Kars, but after the Bolshevik Revolution he moved to Yerevan to take up a chair in archaeology. He still dressed in an Ottoman-style black frock coat. He had never been to Russia and spoke Russian only haltingly. The other was a Comrade Karinian. He had previously served as chairman of the Central Executive Committee of Soviet Armenia. He smoked cardboard-tipped Russian cigarettes and read proletarian experimental fiction. The three men conversed freely about literature and art, but the two Armenians held radically different views of things. One, an old-world intellectual, was convinced of the power of tradition in Armenian intellectual life. The other, a member of the new Communist elite, was enamored of the revolutionary changes that Soviet power had wrought.17

The two men symbolized the choices facing Armenians in the twentieth century: One represented the old Armenia, a Near Eastern civilization tied to the heritage of the Ottoman Empire and Persia; the other, a product of migration, genocide, and Soviet state-building, looked to Russia for salvation from the horrors of the early twentieth century. Today's Armenians are a pluralistic nation bound together by a distinct Christian culture and the memory of the genocide yet divided by the same ties to place and the past that defined the professor and the comrade in Mandelstam's boat. The distinctive sights and sounds of different Armenian communities—those with roots in Turkey, Persia, or the republic—are evident to any visitor to the major centers of Armenian life. Successive waves of migration have transformed these communities. Glendale, California, once the seat of émigrés who fled the genocide, is now filled with the pop music and fashions of more recent arrivals from the former Soviet Union. Old fissures within the diaspora, some of them dating back to the murder of Archbishop Tourian in 1933, keep churches separate and social networks distinct. Who is an Armenian, who speaks for the nation, and who owns the right to define Hay Dav—the “Armenian cause”—are questions that continue to be problematic both culturally and politically.

In Armenia itself the days of the most intense struggle between the spiritual descendants of Khachaturian and Karinian have now passed. Local enthusiasm for the political program of the Dashnaks has remained muted. If the ties of nation and brotherhood were motivating factors in the early 1990s—demanding that all true patriots sacrifice themselves for the common cause of Nagorno-Karabakh—by the early 2000s it was the dire state of the economy and rampant corruption that prompted street demonstrations. During the first decade and a half following independence, what became increasingly evident was how little Armenians knew about people whom they regularly called brothers, whether in the republic, in Nagorno-Karabakh, or in the diaspora.

For Armenians abroad, the central issue has remained securing Turkish recognition of the genocide. While admitting that many Armenians were killed in the Ottoman lands during the First World War, the Turkish government has insisted that these deaths were no different from the normal, albeit regrettable, civilian casualties of any armed conflict. Moreover, as Turkish officials and many Turkish historians assert, plenty of Muslims were killed by local Armenians as well as by Balkan governments, Russia, and the occupying Allies. Nevertheless, the lack of recognition of the Armenian genocide has had terrible repercussions. For one, it has prevented the growth of an honest and sophisticated understanding of the Ottoman past and the creation of the Turkish Republic. It is possible to weave a narrative of modern Turkish history that acknowledges past crimes while valuing the republican ideal, but only a few Turkish historians—sometimes at great risk to themselves and their reputations—have slowly begun to explore these themes. In 2007 the murder in Istanbul of Hrant Dink, a well-known Armenian newspaper editor, demonstrated the deadly passion that these issues could incite.

Commemorated in popular memory and public memorials, the genocide has emerged as the defining tragedy in the history of the Armenian nation, the lens through which national history is interpreted, and the inescapable collective experience that shapes relations between Armenia and its neighbors. One cannot visit modern Yerevan—with the famed Mount Ararat peering down on the city from the other side of the tense Armenian-Turkish border—and fail to appreciate the roles that landscape, memory, and death continue to play in Armenian national consciousness. But the centrality of the genocide has hardened a narrative of loss and denial that has worked against genuinely complex understandings of the past. It has encouraged an
avoidance of themes both painful and promising, from the multifaceted nature of Armenian identity to questions of collaboration and survivorship in times of devastating violence. Most problematic, it has encouraged a patriotism built on victimhood, which in turn yields an inferior brand of patria, one worriedly building levees against the past instead of confidently looking to the future. More than a decade after independence from the Soviet Union, conflicts over different ways of being Armenian have remained at the heart of the Armenian republic and its relationship with the diaspora.

Politics in Azerbaijan has not been similarly influenced by diaspora concerns, although the status of Azerbaijani speakers in Iran has occasionally contributed to the already tense relationship between Baku and Tehran. Unlike its two south Caucasus neighbors, Azerbaijan participated in the March 1991 referendum on the future of the Soviet Union organized by the Gorbachev leadership. While Azerbaijanis voted overwhelmingly for preserving the union, that result hid deep divisions within Azerbaijani society. The major opposition movement, the Popular Front, was continually harassed by Azerbaijani authorities. Its most radical members were firmly in favor of exiting the Soviet Union and launching an all-out war against Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh controversy. When the Moscow coup thrust independence upon Azerbaijan, it was the old guard, not the Popular Front, that initially assumed control. Ayaz Mutalibov, the Communist Party first secretary, was elected president, but a string of military losses in the Nagorno-Karabakh campaign inflamed the opposition. After massive street protests in Baku in early 1992, the Popular Front succeeded in deposing Mutalibov. New elections elevated Abulfaz Elchibey, the Popular Front’s leader, to the presidency.

Elchibey’s tenure in office was no less fraught than that of his predecessor. The influx of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian-occupied territories illustrated the poverty of the government’s approach to the territorial issue. In the summer of 1993 a renegade army, partially composed of former Nagorno-Karabakh fighters and led by the military commander Surat Huseynov, seized the western city of Ganja and pushed toward Baku—a replay of the Army of Islam’s march to the sea in 1918. Fearing for his position and his life, Elchibey called on Heydar Aliyev, the old Communist Party first secretary—who by this time had become chairman of the regional assembly in his native Nakhichevan—for assistance.

Aliyev was made speaker of the national parliament in Baku, but rather than assisting the embattled Elchibey, Aliyev ended up supplanting him. Baku eventually fell bloodlessly to Huseynov’s rebel army, but that victory proved hollow, as it had in 1918. In the political turmoil that followed the army’s arrival, Aliyev managed to secure the president’s post for himself, relegating Huseynov to the position of prime minister. Allegations that Huseynov was behind yet another uprising the following year led to his dismissal and subsequent flight to Russia. Aliyev’s position as supreme leader was now secure, although another armed uprising, which the president harshly suppressed, threatened social stability. Actual or alleged coups d’état became an almost annual occurrence—in 1994, 1995, 1996, and 1998—but in the aftermath of each one, Aliyev was able to augment his power over both rivals and old associates. Unlike his many opponents, Aliyev stood at the center of a vast network of friends and colleagues from his days as Communist Party leader and, even more crucially, from his earlier career as head of the Baku branch of the KGB.

As in Armenia, the president began building a base of support within the legislature through the creation of his own pro-presidential organization, the New Azerbaijan Party. During the years following Aliyev’s rise, the party emerged as the preeminent faction in successive elections, none of which was believed by international observers to meet democratic standards. However, party politics turned out to be far less important than the clan politics that encouraged loyalty to Aliyev yet also motivated his staunchest opponents. Aliyev’s base of support remained the cadre of old friends and personal connections from the autonomous republic of Nakhichevan in western Azerbaijan. This loose community worked to secure control over state institutions, and its members also emerged as critical players in the booming energy sector. Aliyev’s son, Ilham, became vice-chairman of the state oil company, which negotiated with Western investors for access to Azerbaijan’s oil fields. When clear rivals to Aliyev’s power emerged, they did not necessarily come from the fractured democratic opposition, whose own commitment to liberal ideals was often shaky, but rather from clans that derived their base of support from parts of Azerbaijan other than Nakhichevan or from among the ranks of ethnic Azerbaijanis expelled from Armenia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Backroom machinations, not the dialectic of reform and reaction, defined Azerbaijani politics well into the early 2000s.

Political and economic success was largely a function of personal loyalty to the president. During his tenure Aliyev created a personality
cult that was generally absent from the other two south Caucasus states (although still modest compared to those of some other Eurasian rulers). His image adorned billboards across the capital and the countryside. His visionary leadership was credited with bringing Azerbaijan back from the brink of civil war and nurturing international interest in the country’s hydrocarbon reserves. None of this was exactly untrue. The country had repeatedly been on the edge of serious civil disorder, and Aliyev’s iron hand no doubt played a role in preventing chaos. However, in the process of preserving order he forged the most clearly authoritarian state in the south Caucasus.

When Aliyev announced that he would not run for another term in 2013, he chose a method of political succession familiar to authoritarian leaders around the world—he handed power to his son. Ilham Aliyev was duly elected president in a race that was again viewed by both local and international monitors as deeply flawed. The younger Aliyev spent his early years in office shoring up control within his father’s old party, pushing forward piecemeal reform, and strengthening relations with foreign investors. The oil and gas wealth of the country became the central theme in foreign relations, with revenues transforming the lives of some Azerbaijanis. It has remained an open question, however, whether the grand strategic games over the riches of the Caspian Sea will bring about a well-governed, democratic state.

In Georgia the administration of Eduard Shevardnadze spent much of the early 1990s quelling the internal conflicts that had brought fighting to the streets of Tbilisi. His predecessor, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was by training a linguist and literary historian, someone most comfortable in the arcana of medieval Georgia, who brought to the presidency a faith-based zeal for reviving the Georgian nation. Shevardnadze was in many ways his opposite. As a trained Soviet bureaucrat, he cared less about renewal than stability and saw his essential task as to consolidate Georgia’s statehood, not realize its millennial destiny. The new president managed to corral many of the paramilitary groups that had once roamed the country. By late 1993 he had defeated the major formations still loyal to the old president, who had been ousted by a military junta shortly before Shevardnadze’s arrival. (Gamsakhurdia died under uncertain circumstances—either suicide or assassination—at the end of that year.) Following the declaration of cease-fires in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the secessionist zones remained relatively quiet during the balance of Shevardnadze’s tenure—if for no other reason than the fact that the Abkhaz and South Ossetians, having effectively won the wars of the Soviet succession, were preoccupied with building their own states. The absence of open warfare, however, did not lead to a genuinely stable, multiparty, and free state even in those areas still under central government control.

The military defeats in Abkhazia and South Ossetia sobered Shevardnadze and illustrated the need for a solid political base on which to consolidate his power. That took the form of the Citizens’ Union of Georgia. Like similar pro-presidential parties in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Citizens’ Union was driven less by ties of ideology and class than by loyalty to Shevardnadze and a desire by local elites to secure their political and economic positions amid civil war and state collapse. Shevardnadze grounded the party on the network of district-level administrative personnel, factory managers, and party bosses who had proved themselves trusted friends in his role as Communist Party first secretary. The Citizens’ Union also attracted a small group of younger, reform-minded leaders from among the civic organizations that had sprung up at the end of the Gorbachev era.

For most of the 1990s Shevardnadze remained the single most important player in Georgian politics. Under the country’s strongly presidential system, he was the ultimate decision maker both within the state and within his party. Even the few political figures who openly broke with the Citizens’ Union remained staunchly devoted to the president. His leadership style was characterized by an effort to balance competing interests and to ensure that no single faction was able to challenge his authority as head of state, head of government, and head of the ruling party. At times he seemed supportive of younger reformists, even appointing them to senior positions within the government and handing them a mandate for change. At other times he repeatedly cut deals with Aslan Abashidze, one of the least progressive figures on the political scene as the local potentate of the autonomous republic of Achara along Georgia’s southwestern coast. The peculiar nature of electoral politics sometimes deepened this relationship. For example, in exchange for Shevardnadze’s recognition of his iron rule in Achara, Abashidze guaranteed a high voter turnout in his autonomous republic and aided Shevardnadze in winning Georgia’s 2000 presidential race.

Shevardnadze’s political party in effect became a mechanism for capturing the state rather than transforming it. The administrative cadres, factory bosses, and security officials who ran Georgia during the Soviet period remade themselves into a new class of entrepreneurs.
in the largely dysfunctional economy, benefiting from the opportunities to acquire old state enterprises under the country's murky privatization program. Shevardnadze helped create a state in which the ruling party and the administrative system were fused, a style of politics borrowed from the Soviet era. As was the case during his tenure as first secretary, Shevardnadze spent much of the 1990s dealing with the problem of corruption—or at least attempting to convince Western aid agencies that he was doing so. On most lists Georgia ranked as one of the world's most corrupt states; even within the former Soviet Union, it stood near the top. Despite Shevardnadze's support for well-funded public campaigns to unmask corrupt practices—from extortion by traffic police to misappropriation of international loans—the results were less than stellar. That fact was not lost on Georgians themselves. In 1996 42 percent of Georgians expressed high or moderate confidence in local government institutions; by 1998 the figure had fallen to 25 percent. In 2000 roughly 67 percent reported having no faith in parliament or the president, with some 80 percent saying the same for tax and customs officials.

In the 1990s Georgia became one of the world's largest per capita recipients of American democracy assistance and economic development aid, totaling nearly a billion dollars during the eleven years of Shevardnadze's tenure. Much of this aid was dispensed to political parties that demonstrated little ability to attract voters, local government institutions that only superficially reformed themselves, and anticorruption efforts that had little impact on both petty and gargantuan thievery that had become commonplace. However, persistent Western engagement did help solidify a new class of political entrepreneurs increasingly dissatisfied with the sclerotic leadership of a former Communist boss and his unwieldy party.

Opposition groups—many headed by onetime Shevardnadze loyalists—made the 2003 parliamentary elections into a test case of the president's commitment to genuine reform. When it became clear that Shevardnadze intended to manipulate the results, street protestors stormed the parliament building and called on the president to resign, a confrontation dubbed the Rose Revolution in honor of protestors who dispensed roses to troops guarding government offices. After first declaring a state of emergency, Shevardnadze thought better of his legacy and agreed to resign. The presidency passed to the speaker of parliament, who organized new elections early in 2004. Legitimated by international observers, the vote overwhelmingly awarded the presidential post to Mikheil Saakashvili—thirty-something, Columbia University-educated, multilingual, and one of the major figures cultivated during the previous decade by U.S. democracy-assistance programs.

The Rose Revolution was a peaceful protest modeled on the demonstrations that had brought down Yugoslav president Slobodan Milošević in 2000. It would, in turn, provide inspiration for the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Like these later political transformations, the Rose Revolution was hailed in the West as a breakthrough for democracy in the post-Soviet world. Although it did produce some immediate changes, such as a much-needed reform of the police sector, the toppling of Shevardnadze was remarkably similar to what had happened in Georgia in 1992, Azerbaijan in 1993, and Armenia in 1998, namely, a change in administration effected through street rallies and political maneuvering. More than a decade and a half following independence, most of the Caucasus had yet to install a new chief executive through free, fair, and boringly uneventful elections. The political norm remained one of being ushered out of office by a crowd—whether a cortege or a tide of protestors.

The Tragic North

Despite the turbulent politics of the 1990s, the south Caucasus entered the new millennium with some degree of justified hopefulness. Local economies—at least in the capitals—were expanding after years of persistent contraction. New, younger leaderships were taking charge as men of the Shevardnadze and Aliyev père generations passed from the scene. Territorial conflicts remained unresolved, but the threat of armed conflict seemed less severe than it had been during the previous decade. Individuals were traveling and working abroad, bringing back to their independent countries not only much-needed cash but also innovative ideas for reform, greater openness, and a more functional government. This simple desire to live in a “normal” country promised to reshape political and social life in the years ahead.

The north Caucasus was another matter. The political instability that attended the emergence of the three south Caucasus states in the early 1990s remained a fundamental feature of the north well into the early 2000s. Russia fought two full-scale wars in Chechnya, one lasting from 1994 until 1996, during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, and another that commenced in 1999 under his successor, Vladimir Putin.
Political killings and inter-ethnic discord afflicted virtually every Russian republic in the north—especially those closest to Chechnya itself, such as Dagestan and Ingushetia. For much of the immediate post-Soviet period, instability was confined to the northeast, the same areas that had demonstrated concerted resistance to Russian rule in the nineteenth century. By the early 2000s violence had spread to the center and northwest as well. In September 2004 forces loyal to Shamil Basiev, the most ruthless of Chechen field commanders, laid siege to a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, on the opening day of classes. Children and their teachers were herded into the gymnasium, where an elaborate system of explosives had been rigged to keep the hostages in check. The subsequent storming of the school building by Russian rescuers ended with the deaths of some 330 civilians, of which more than half were children. In October 2005 an armed attack against police and government buildings in Nalchik, the capital of the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, heralded the possibility of violence spreading even farther westward, into historical Circassia.

The reasons for the violent politics of the north Caucasus were varied. In some areas national revival followed lines similar to those in the south, where ethnic grievances first articulated by local intellectuals were subsequently hijacked by older political elites looking to find a way of preserving their own relevance. In other areas disputes over land and property provided the impetus for ethnic cleansing and pogroms. In still others the Russian state, seeking to forestall the same secessionist domino effect that had brought an end to the Soviet Union, responded with overwhelming force or devoted power to local authoritarian leaders, who were encouraged to stamp out opposition and ensure loyalty to Moscow. As the 1990s and early 2000s progressed, yet another source of mobilization in the form of revivist Islam was added to the mix. As in the past, the peoples of the north Caucasus were divided over their relationship with Russia and the place of religion in the social life of the region, especially the puritanical forms preached by small groups of committed proselytizers. The inescapable source of many of these problems, however, was Chechnya.

During the late Soviet period, social mobilization in Chechnya was not wildly different from the national movements that arose in other union republics and autonomous territories. Chechens, Ingush, and other north Caucasus nationalities had ample reason to oppose continued Russian control once the Soviet Union began to weaken. Few groups had a longer list of grievances or a richer history of armed opposition—from the legacy of Shamil’s activities in Chechnya in the 1840s and 1850s, to anti-tsarist and anti-Bolshevik uprisings from the 1870s to the 1920s, to the Stalinist deportations of the 1940s. Still, the form of early Chechen mobilization had little in common with these historical antecedents. Instead, it proceeded largely along the lines found in other republics and regions. Indeed, in opposing first the Soviet and later the Russian center, the Chechens were following a pattern set in other parts of the Soviet Union and, more important, one also followed in almost every major administrative unit on the other side of the mountains, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as in most of these republics’ sub-units, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. To ask why the Chechens chose to defy Moscow is to miss a basic point: Defying central authority and questioning old forms of sovereignty were what nearly everyone was doing in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In 1988 Chechen and Ingush intellectuals, calling for greater attention to environmental issues, cultural freedom, and openness, established their own Popular Front to support Gorbachev’s perestroika initiative. Local party and state elites united in a common cause with the Popular Front and managed to use the growing social movement in order to push for control of government institutions by ethnic Chechens. Again following a model found in other Soviet regions, the Popular Front quickly produced its own rivals in the person of other intellectuals who demanded more far-reaching reforms and genuine national renewal. The poet Zelimkhan Yandarbiev created a rival organization, the All-National Congress of the Chechen People, which in turn assembled an armed guard headed by Jokhar Dudaev, a Soviet air force general of Chechen origin. Yandarbiev’s organization was more radical than the Popular Front in the sense that it sought free elections and the transformation of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic into a sovereign administrative unit outside Russia but still within the Soviet Union. At this stage, however, neither of the major opposition organizations sought full independence.

During the August 1991 coup in Moscow, Communist Party authorities in Chechnya followed the example of many other elites on the periphery, initially supporting the putschists and then denouncing them when it became clear that Gorbachev was still in control. This wavering provided an opening for Dudaev, the most vocal leader on the scene. His irregular soldiers stormed the local parliament, ousted the authorities, and made plans for new presidential and parliamentary elections, which he and his supporters won handily. In November the
new parliament proclaimed a fully independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria—the name derived from the highland region of Chechnya—with Dudaev as its founding president.

By this stage the Russian Federation had also declared its independence from the Soviet Union, and its president, Yeltsin, was loath to accept Chechen self-determination. He declared a state of emergency in the republic and dispatched troops to the capital of Grozny. However, Yeltsin quickly backed away when it became clear that violence would be opposed from above and below—by Gorbachev, still in his lame-duck role as Soviet president, and Dudaev, in his post as the elected Chechen leader. The key issue at this point was the relationship between Yeltsin and Dudaev but rather the internal politics of Chechnya itself. Dudaev's efforts to consolidate power in Chechnya bore remarkable resemblance to those being pursued by Yeltsin in Moscow: a shaky president, faced with serious internal opposition, who was not shy about using military force to disperse his rivals—even elected parliamentarians. To many local observers Yeltsin's decision to shell the Russian parliament in 1993 simply replayed, on a much grander scale, Dudaev's attack on Chechnya's legislature two years earlier.

Scholars and journalists have offered a variety of explanations for the origins of the first Chechen war, from the capriciousness of the mustachioed, trilby-sporting Dudaev, to the history of Chechen rebellion, to the martial culture of highland peoples in general. All of these no doubt played some role. Dudaev was far from a committed democrat and actively sought confrontation with Moscow in order to buttress his own power. Chechen leaders self-consciously resurrected the memory of Sheikh Mansur and Shamil. The social networks of trips, which had grown stronger during the period of Chechen exile, served as lines along which political forces could mobilize—even though people from the same clan might equally see themselves as mortal enemies.

These explanations, however, miss the mark. They might account in part for why Chechens proved to be vocal opponents of Moscow precisely when other Russian republics and regions were cutting advantageous deals with the federal center. But the origin of the Chechen wars was much simpler, namely, the decision by a small coterie of military men and policy makers within the Yeltsin administration to respond to Dudaev with force. Personalities, social habits, and historical antecedents allowed Chechens to seek independence, but it was the political decision of Kremlin planners to attack Grozny that turned popular mobilization into large-scale violence. One need not take a position on the legitimacy of Chechen self-determination to accept a basic counterfactual proposition. Had Mikhail Gorbachev chosen to respond to the secession of union republics the way that Boris Yeltsin handled Chechnya, the creation of an independent Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia would have been far bloodier affairs than they actually became. Gorbachev was content to let the union republics go. Yeltsin was not prepared to follow the same course in Chechnya. Over time, what had begun as a military intervention by federal authorities was transformed into an intractable guerrilla conflict, fueled by the same mix of sunk costs and war profiteering that makes any war harder to end the longer it goes on.

More than three years elapsed between the initial Chechen declaration of independence and the Russian invasion of December 1994. Up to that point Yeltsin had mainly been concerned with consolidating his power in Moscow and patching together compromises with regional leaders in other parts of the federation in order to prevent Russia's complete disintegration. By 1994 Yeltsin had established the supremacy of the president over the Russian parliament. He had also come to see Dudaev as an intransigent local politician and Chechen defiance as a virus that might spread to other parts of the federal state. He worried that if Chechnya could effectively secede, the copycat effect in other restive areas would be irresistible. Moreover, the rise of clear, armed opposition to Dudaev within the republic—organized by former Communist Party elites, old members of the Popular Front, and disaffected Dudaev loyalists—eventually convinced a small cadre within the Kremlin that a military response was both necessary and sure to succeed.

The decision to invade the republic seems to have been made in haste, with little thought to the operational requirements of the task at hand. Revealingly, the attack on Grozny—launched on New Year's Eve—was not even assigned an official code name. Russian tanks and troops rolled into the city and quickly seized control of the major road and rail links. Soon, however, the inexperienced conscripts who formed the bulk of the Russian force found themselves pinned down by snipers, their tanks and other armor ripped apart by rocket-propelled grenades. The mutilated cadavers of Russian soldiers littered the city.

Yeltsin's response to this humiliation was to intensify indiscriminate attacks against the Chechen capital, the first instance of heavy aerial bombing of a European city since the Second World War. Dudaev had slipped away at the beginning of the invasion, but the civilians who
remained, many of whom were ethnic Russians, spent the winter huddled in cellars, creeping out to find food and water in a city devastated by an army that vanished, after all, their own. Grozny—built by Ermolov to showcase imperial Russia's ferocity to the mountain tribes—now demonstrated post-Soviet Russia's astonishing disregard for human life.

The outrage in other parts of Russia was palpable, both at the government's bungling of the military operation and its later attempt to recoup its losses by using even more devastating force. Sergei Kovalev, a longtime human rights campaigner and chairman of the Russian government's human rights commission, was unequivocal in his criticism. Kovalev denounced the crimes being committed by the Yeltsin administration. He and his colleagues estimated that twenty-five thousand civilians had been killed by bombs and artillery fire in the attack on Grozny, with an additional thirty-five thousand civilians and soldiers killed thereafter. The Chechen conflict galvanized Russian public opinion. In often remarkable displays of the country's emerging civil society, intellectuals, human rights advocates, politicians, and the mothers of soldiers united to protest a war that was quickly taking its toll on Russian youth and Chechen civilians and was adversely affecting Russia's international reputation.

As the war wound on, things only got worse for Russian troops on the ground. Chechen forces managed to regroup after the initial Russian counteroffensive, and by August 1996 Russian units were forced to retreat from Grozny. Dudaev was not around to witness the victory. He had been killed in the spring, and was succeeded first by Yandarbiev, his old colleague, and then by Aslan Maskhadov, a former Soviet artillery officer and leader of the anti-Russian Grozny campaign. It was this single military act—the triumphant entry of Chechen guerrillas into the republican capital—that demonstrated the bankruptcy of the Russian war effort and eventually helped convince Yeltsin to seek a political settlement. Brokering Russian general Alexander Lebed—who had garnered a reputation as an iron-fisted peacemaker in another post-Soviet war in Moldova—the so-called Khasavyurt Agreement marked the end of the first Chechen conflict. It was signed in the Dagestani city of the same name in August 1996. The agreement, a combination cease-fire and formal peace treaty, committed all sides to rejecting the use of force and affirmed the right of self-determination. It also established a framework for arriving at a settlement regarding Chechnya's final status. A joint commission composed of Russian and Chechen representatives was to be set up to help govern the republic and work out the terms of a permanent peace settlement, which was to be concluded by the end of 2001. Russian troops were evacuated from the republic.

What followed the end of Russian-Chechen hostilities was not so much peace as an absence of war. Nearly two years of conflict had radicalized an entire generation of younger Chechens, intensified the rifts within the Chechen leadership, and proven that violence could provide a reasonable source of livelihood in a context in which the state had effectively collapsed. The experiment in Chechen self-governance after Khasavyurt turned out to be a miserable failure. Violence and kidnappings continued, although now they involved clans and criminal gangs rather than Russian soldiers and Chechen guerrillas. The Islamic dimensions of the struggle also became more pronounced. Chechens, Arabs, and others who had fought with the mujahideen in Afghanistan and who now saw Chechnya as the next battleground in the global jihad moved into positions of power. The foreign Islamist presence was never as large in Chechnya as is often claimed, nor did Arabs and other imported fighters form a unified group. Moreover, traditional religious elites were wary of these newcomers, whose teachings were at odds with religious practices in Chechnya. But their arrival did change the social and political calculus of Chechen elites. It made adherence to a particular brand of Islamic orthodoxy a mark of political viability, and it provided a claim to legitimacy that Maskhadov's many opponents used to undermine the president's power. One of the most ambitious figures within the Maskhadov regime, the field commander Shamal Basaev, wrapped himself in the mantle of revivalist Islam and used it to justify his own increasingly outrageous activities, such as setting up private military formations and political institutions and staging spectacular mass hostage takings.

In 1994 Yeltsin seems to have believed that a short, victorious war in Chechnya would seal his position of strength in Moscow and prevent other republican elites from following the Chechen model of secession. Vladimir Putin appears to have believed something similar five years later. However, in Putin's case there were added incentives for doing something about the Chechen problem, namely, the growing radicalization of Chechen politicians, the perceived influence of outside Islamists, and the real threat that freelancers like Basaev posed for other north Caucasus republics. A raid by Basaev's forces into Dagestan in the summer of 1999 plus a series of terrorist attacks in Russian cities—some of which have never been conclusively linked to Chechen fighters—provided the proximate causes for the resumption of war.
Following more than a week of aerial bombardment, in October 1999 Putin launched a new ground offensive in Chechnya aimed at deposing the Maskhadov government and putting an end to disorder.

Grozny was fairly easily retaken. The Russian soldiers sent to do the job included seasoned security personnel, border guards, and interior ministry troops. In the first Chechen war the Russian side numbered around forty-five thousand men at the height of the conflict, about 93 percent of whom were conscripts. By contrast, the ninety-three thousand men deployed by Putin was roughly the size of the Soviet expeditionary force sent to Afghanistan. The nature of the conflict came to resemble a long-term counterinsurgency operation, not the full-scale but poorly planned maneuvers of the first Chechen campaign. However, many of the techniques that had previously been used—including the wholesale roundup of men and boys of fighting age, the “cleansing” (zachistka) of territories thought to contain rebel sympathizers, and the “disappearance” of men and women with alleged terrorist connections—were pursued with renewed zeal. Over time the Russian state increasingly subcontracted its duties to local authorities, who, while professing loyalty to Moscow, were building up their own paramilitary units and profiting from the chaos of conflict. Putin’s long-term plan was not so much to use federal forces to subdue guerrillas and “terrorists” but rather to hand off the job of securing Chechnya to local Chechens, who could be trusted to neutralize the anti-Russian fighters still roaming the hills and valleys.

The human and material costs of the two Chechen wars are impossible to gauge with any precision. In the second war the Russian government restricted press access, a technique that would have been familiar to Ermolov and Vorontsov. The profitable industry of kidnapping—a favored practice on all sides—ensured that even the most intrepid observers generally stayed away. However, the broad outlines of the wars’ devastating effects are clear. Estimates for the total dead range from forty thousand to one hundred thousand (out of a prewar population of about 1.3 million), most of them civilians.

The level of Russian military casualties approached that sustained by the Soviet Union during its ten-year quagmire in Afghanistan. Russian leaders seemed to believe that this level was politically sustainable so long as soldiers were being killed in half dozens rather than in tens and twenties. (Russian military planners reportedly calculated that a casualty figure of 12 to 15 percent in any major operation would not produce a significant public response.) Cities were leveled by Russian bombs, and hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens were made refugees in neighboring republics and countries. In contrast to the first Chechen war, these losses did not generate widespread opposition among the Russian public outside the conflict zone. The Putin administration had found a method of making war that seemed to work: minimizing the use of conscripts in the most difficult engagements, controlling press coverage, and casting the enemy not as nationalist secessionists but as self-serving bandits and cold-blooded terrorists linked to a global Islamist holy war.

Tit-for-tat assassinations became routine. Dudaev had already been killed in 1996 by a Russian missile programmed to track the signal of his satellite telephone. The prominent field commander Salman Raduev died while in Russian custody in 2002. Dudaev’s immediate successor as acting president, Yandarbiev, was assassinated in Qatar in 2004, probably by Russian agents. Akhmad Kadyrov, who headed the pro-Russian government in Grozny, died in a bomb attack by secessionists in 2004. Dudaev’s successor as elected president, Aslan Maskhadov, was killed by Russian special forces in 2005. Maskhadov’s successor, Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev, was likewise killed the following year. This spiral of violence also extended to the heart of Russia itself. In October 2002 Chechen fighters seized a Moscow auditorium full of theatergoers, setting off a crisis that ended in the deaths of more than a hundred hostages during a gas attack by Russian security services. Two years later the attack on the Beslan schoolhouse in North Ossetia became the single largest incident involving civilian deaths outside the war zone. Events such as these—along with the appearance of Chechen suicide bombers who were responsible for, among other things, bringing down Russian commercial aircraft—increased public support for the war and eased discontent over the concentration of power in the hands of the Russian president. Building an effective and powerful state, Putin affirmed, should be the primary goal, especially in the face of organized violence bubbling up from the south.

As the war wound on and its effects spread to other areas, Western governments became even less interested in the region’s fate. What had initially been a mildly critical attitude gave way to a propensity to treat the north Caucasus as a legitimate battleground against the international network of radical Islam. The detention and torture of young men and the wanton theft and destruction of property—all of which were documented in innumerable reports by Russian and Western human rights groups—became some of the defining features of Russia’s war effort in Chechnya. While the government admitted that some atrocities had taken place, federal soldiers were only rarely...
held accountable. By 2003 fifty-one Russian servicemen had been court-martialed for crimes against civilians. Of these, only nineteen served prison sentences. 

If Yeltsin’s war was purportedly about preserving the federation, Putin’s was cast as a war to defend the federation against bandits, terrorists, and religious zealots. Both rhetorical devices played well abroad. President Bill Clinton and other American officials publicly compared the conflict in Chechnya to the American Civil War. Following the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, Putin repeatedly stressed that Chechnya was simply another theater in the new global war on terror.

Putin’s claim was less easy to dismiss than the portrayal of Yeltsin as a latter-day Lincoln, especially after the United States began to engage in some of the very wartime techniques in Iraq and Afghanistan for which American presidents had earlier criticized the Yeltsin leadership. There were, no doubt, some Chechens who continued to fight for national liberation, but their numbers were diminishing as the second Chechen war dragged on. Rebels lacking an overall strategic plan for victory—known in Russian simply as boeviki—came to dominate what had been a multifaceted Chechen political elite. They and their spokesmen became skilled at resurrecting allegedly traditional social norms—particularly the glorification of the highland bandit (abrek), the martial way of life, and holy war—and transforming them into a code of violence for its own sake.

The wars thus had a doubly deleterious consequence for the Russian state: at first keeping it at arm’s length from Western institutions and then making it the West’s partner to the rhetoricians of radical Islam.

Historical analogies are easy to propose—and they are often wrong. But one could not observe Russian and Chechen behavior without being reminded of the nineteenth century. The Russian state worked to “Chechenize” the conflict by devolving authority to locals who could fight guerrillas on their own turf and with equal brutality. It set aside concerns for governance and focused mainly on security. It carried out punitive expeditions for each act of violence and, in the process, provided new recruits for the rebels. The line between Russian and Chechen blurred as fighters on both sides used the same unscrupulous tactics, carried out impromptu raids against alleged collaborators, and worked assiduously to derive some personal profit from the wartime economy. As the second Chechen war continued, the people who were doing the killing and dying on both sides were most often ethnic Chechens, some wearing the uniform of the Russian Federation and others the camouflage fatigues and green headbands of a putative worldwide jihad.

The guerrillas also learned to speak about the war by using the vocabulary of Islamist fighters in other conflicts and the terminology of earlier eras. Web sites such as kavkazcenter.com—a major channel of communication with the rest of the world—consistently appropriated the Islamic lexicon found in Shamil’s letters written 150 years earlier. Rather than “Russians,” the Web masters spoke of “unbelievers” (kafiir). Rather than pro-Russian Chechens, they spoke of “hypocrites” (munaﬁqs). Casualties on the Chechen side were always “martyrs” (shahids). There is a world of difference between the Russian Empire’s wars in the Caucasus and those of the Russian Federation, but in the Chechnya of the early twenty-first century the past still provided a dark template for action. Just as Imam Shamil frequently wrote letters to the Ottoman sultan and Russian commanders explaining the nature of his struggle, Chechen leaders also understood the power of public relations. In early 2006 Shamil Basaev published his own e-memoir, Book of a Mujahideen [sic], which he made available for purchase online with a major credit card. (Within only a few months Basaev was killed in an explosion in Ingushetia, an event that seemed to mark a turning point in the conflict and was heralded by Moscow as the beginning of the end for the guerrillas.)

The tragedy of the long-running war was not that there was no one to speak for the people of Chechnya, its real victims. It was that those who claimed that mantle—in Moscow, Grozny, and the highlands—preferred a pyrrhic victory to a lasting peace. That same logic seemed to be spreading to other parts of the north as well. One of the pressing analytical questions of the 1990s was why Chechnya erupted into large-scale violence while other parts of the north Caucasus remained quiet. By the early 2000s that question appeared naively time-bound. The relative peace that had prevailed in Dagestan, based on a complex distribution of power among the republic’s many clans and ethnic groups, proved uniquely sensitive to external and internal shocks, such as targeted assassinations and raids launched from Chechnya. North Ossetia continued to face the prospect of violence between ethnic Ossetians and Ingush over property ownership and social power, following a pattern previously set in clashes in the early 1990s. Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria were moving into the 2000s burdened by local authoritarianism, the politicization of Islamic practice, and tensions between Circassian and Turkic populations.
In general, the region's persistent ethnic and religious disputes were usually proxies for other, often deeper contours of discord. People displaced by the Soviet regime found themselves at odds with those who now lived in their homes and worked their fields. Individuals whom the Kremlin had devolved control clashed with those left out of Russia's new imperial bargain. People who had learned to profit from the post-Soviet disorder succeeded at the expense of those who struggled merely to survive in it. The Caucasus still had plenty of ghosts, but they were not those of ancient hatreds among peoples and religions. They were much younger ones, born of the Soviet system and now revealing a cold and unexpected paradox—that it is possible to gain one's freedom and lose it at the same time.

Conclusion: Continental Shift

The suppression of the Polish insurrection and the annexation of the Caucasus, I regard as the two most important events to have taken place in Europe since 1815.

Karl Marx, writing to Friedrich Engels (1864)

We have always been on the threshold of Europe, and now we want to be Europeans.

Eugeni Gogebkobi, Georgian foreign minister (1919)

When the British traveler Henry Barkley loped out of the hills and plains of eastern Anatolia in 1878, dusty after riding along the limits of the south Caucasus, he inquired about the amenities to be found in Trebizond, the port on the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea. It was, he hoped, a far cry from the hinterland, a city where steamers arrived weekly from Marseille, Odessa, and other points to the west, and where a hodgepodge of traders and travelers from across Europe met local Muslims, Greeks, and Armenians on the quays. Are there good streets, good houses, good shops, and, above all, a good hotel, Barkley asked. Yes, of course, a local man assured him: “Trabzon Avrupa!”—Trebizond is Europe.1

Good streets, good houses, good shops, and good hotels. More than a century later, that is still the view from the periphery—Europe as the civilized terminus of a long, aspirational journey. For Czechs and Poles
in 1989, rejoining Europe involved rediscovering a cultural heritage that had been buried beneath the gray moraine of communism and foreign occupation. For Romanians and Bulgarians today, Europe represents the promise of economic success and consolidated if still imperfect democracy. For Ukrainians it may eventually become the winch that helps pull their unlikely country out of Eurasia. For Turks it has encouraged an unprecedented program of government reform that may one day stretch the European continent across the Bosphorus. Trabzon Avrupa, indeed.

In the Caucasus the magnetic utility of Europe is less clear. On the one hand, all the independent states of the region repeatedly affirm their European credentials: in Armenia’s case as the first Christian nation; in Azerbaijan’s as the first Muslim republic; in Georgia’s as the inheritor of an ancient culture that produced Byzantine-era emperors as well as George Balanchine. All three countries are members of the Council of Europe, an organization that has become something of a large antechamber for prospective applicants to the European Union. The flags of both bodies are conveniently the same, consisting of a circle of twelve gold stars on a blue field. That simple fact allowed Georgian authorities to begin flying the flag outside government buildings in 2001—a symbol of where the country already was and an affirmation of where it wanted to go.

On the other hand, when one is standing on the pebbly beaches of the Black Sea or the salty dunes of the Caspian, Europe seems very far away. The nature of politics in the Caucasus—guerrilla war, secessionist disputes, consolidated authoritarianism, rickety democracy—is at odds with the growth of responsive and responsible governance closer to Europe’s center, even in the once disorderly Balkans. Indeed, in the early 2000s it was still the United States, not Europe, that was the preeminent player across the wider Black Sea zone. On one side of the sea, in Romania, the United States announced the opening of two new military bases in 2005. On the other side, in Georgia, a military training program provided facilities and know-how to the Georgian army. Both Georgia and Armenia were slated to benefit from the Millennium Challenge Account program sponsored by the United States; an aid effort that promised to deliver over five hundred million dollars to the two countries for designated infrastructure projects. All three south Caucasus states remained among the largest per capita recipients of U.S. development aid in the world. In Armenia’s case the flow of resources was enhanced by investment and assistance from U.S.-based members of the global Armenian diaspora. Azerbaijan had earlier been under an arms ban by the United States—limiting direct military assistance as long as Azerbaijan maintained an embargo against Armenia—but the lifting of those restrictions under President Bill Clinton permitted a deepening of the bilateral relationship. Hydrocarbons also played a significant, even dominant, role. In 2006 a new pipeline running from Baku, via Tbilisi, to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan began carrying oil to Western markets—a route that significantly bypassed older pipelines running through Russia. For years before and after, one could not enter a bar or restaurant in Baku without finding a contingent of Texas oilmen and their nouveau riche Azerbaijani counterparts.

Politically, if not geographically, all of the south Caucasus capitals have remained far closer to Washington than to Brussels. Within the European Union there is little sign that either politicians or the public are eager to change that state of affairs. However, rather than being peripheral to European interests, there is much about the nature of political life and historical memory in the Caucasus that makes it a quintessentially European space. In order to grasp this point, one has to understand something about the transformation of Europe during the last half century and the peculiar relationship between Europeans and their past.

After 1945 the concept of Europe as an idea and an ideal, rather than a place, became a way of addressing a set of perplexing questions about the nature of political and social life on this small appendage of western Eurasia. How might a set of diminutive, irascible states provide for their own security and prosperity? How might they bind themselves, Ulysses-like, against the siren calls of nationalism, chauvinism, and militarism? How might they pool their political and economic resources and reclaim their destiny from two global powers, the United States and the Soviet Union?

Answering these questions—a process that came to be known as the European project—was less a matter of farsighted leadership, although that certainly played a role, than a result of the utter failure of the alternatives. European states had never abided hegemony on their own continent even as they rushed to impose it on others. Any vision of European unity that rested on the dominance of a single state or empire soon prompted a reaction. This traditional system of adversarial balancing could produce unity of a sort, but it was usually short-lived. In the middle of the twentieth century the devastation of mechanized war cleared the ground to such a degree that the old system of would-be hegemonic states and counteralliances became
utter economic and political collapse. The war upended everything, in senses both horrible and ultimately providential. The continent was divided, but that very division helped spur the consolidation of its western half. Institutional and economic devastation permitted original thinking about how to organize the state. The substitution of new international rivalries for old ones meant that there was now room—and powerful incentives—for reconciliation. What followed was a complete continental transformation, but one that oscillated between optimism and pessimism over the continent’s future: the postwar reckoning and recovery, the emergence of cold war politics, the dialectic of affluence and rebellion, the waning of power and expectations, the revolutionary dreams of 1989, and the emergence of a united yet complicated continent. Europeans have both literally and figuratively spent the last half century crawling out from under the rubble, dusting themselves off, and trying to make sense of the ruins around them.

The war, however, did more than destroy an old system. It also set up one of the enduring themes in Europe’s long march away from 1945, namely, the conscious struggle to misremember the past. Trauma can produce three kinds of reactions. One is rugged determination, a courageous commitment to remake and rebuild. Another is nostalgia, a way of recalling the past that is selective and sepia-tinged. The third is creative amnesia, an effort to refashion the past so that it provides a coherent link to the imagined present. This third reaction is a basic marker of modernity, and as such, it is the defining attribute of Blanche DuBois, nationalists, and, to a great degree, modern Europeans.

Amnesia has its uses. It has facilitated the creation of a European quasi state that was barely conceivable a few decades ago, a multifaceted and multilevel form of political and economic union that has knitted together the continent, improved the quality of life for its citizens, and inspired political change on its periphery. The next era in world affairs—if one believes in eras—might well be Europe’s, or at least this Europe’s. The old ghosts—ethnic exclusivism, fractious politics, governments that promise too much and deliver too little—are still there, but the barricades, by and large, have held. What has been built up behind them is, as Marxists used to say, of world-historical importance.

The irony is that this Europe emerged out of a particular kind of victim narrative (“never again can we do this to ourselves”) that has imparted to the European project a uniquely anxious relationship to history. That, as it turns out, is precisely the structure of the narratives that spawned the twentieth century’s problems in the first place. A
Europe that sees its own recent history as tragedy and invents an older, more civilized past to which it is now returning: can this Europe become something other than the insular, fearful, self-absorbed countries it was meant to replace? The answer lies in the future of continental shift: whether Europe can now reimagine itself in such a way that real engagement with lands farther east—Turkey, Ukraine, and even the Caucasus—becomes part of the natural future of the European continent. Much of this will depend on what happens in the Caucasus itself, a region now facing a struggle with its own ghosts that bears more than a passing resemblance to the one the rest of Europe has been waging for the past fifty years.

With the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 1997, the European Union became a Black Sea power, if Turkey ever gains admission, it will almost become a Caucasus one as well. But the Caucasus remains a feared and poorly understood specter at the edge of Europe’s thinking about its own future. Brussels has barely begun to chart what its “Caucasus policy” might look like in the next few decades, although debates among analysts and pundits about the future of the Black Sea and Caspian zones are now more vigorous than ever. As new issues come to the fore—the future of Iraq and the greater Middle East; the prospects for political change in Iran; and the evolution of Russia’s consolidated authoritarianism—the Caucasus will fall squarely within the interests of European states. Still, for the time being, the core concerns of the United States and Russia—oil, security, and the building of political systems that pass for democracies—are likely to remain the prime movers in the political and economic life of the Caucasus.

What, then, of Russia? Under both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, post-Soviet Russia has remained something resembling an empire—an electoral and increasingly wealthy one perhaps, but a political system whose essential attributes look rather different from those of a modern state. Central power is exercised through subalterns, who function as effective tax and ballot farmers. In exchange for being permitted to manage their own fiefdoms, they surrender up a portion of local revenue and deliver the votes for the center’s designated candidates in national elections. Viceroyts sent from the capital keep watch over local potentates but generally leave them to their own devices. State monopolies or privileged private companies secure strategic resources and keep open the conduits that provide money to the metropolis. The military, weak and in crisis, is given the task of policing the restless frontier, from supervising a low-level war in Chechnya to superintending the cease-fire lines of unresolved conflicts in the borderland emirates of Moldova, Georgia, and Tajikistan. Such arrangements do make for federalism of a sort, but in an older sense of the word. The concept, after all, is derived from ancient Rome’s practice of accommodating threatening peoples by settling them inside the empire and paying them to be federati, or self-governing border guards. It is federalism as an imperial survival strategy, not as a way of bringing government closer to the governed. The problem with this system is not its fragility. As a form of political and economic organization covering vast stretches of territory, it has a track record far longer than that of the nation-state. It is, however, incompatible with the basic norms of liberal democracy and the free market.

Russia is in many ways the last of the Soviet successor states to develop a clearly national—or more accurately ethnonational—sense of self. The other successor states exited the Soviet Union in a vast crusade to reclaim their heritage as nation-states—by, of, and for a distinct ethnonational group—in contrast to the sopoificract nationalism preached by official Soviet ideology. Russia, a power comfortable with the legacies of empire, has long resisted the allure of the ethnonational. However, one of Vladimir Putin’s major achievements has been to transform Russia into a confident international actor that is equally sure of its own historical destiny. One need only look at school curricula or visit newly refurbished museums in Moscow to sense the shift in attitude toward a national, culturally Russian perception of the past and of the state itself.

All this has been happening within a context in which Russia is, in fact, becoming less “national” as a society. From 1989 to 2002 the ethnic Russian proportion of the country’s population slid by almost two percentage points—from 81.5 to 79.8 percent. During the same period Russia’s minority groups grew considerably. The ethnic Armenian population more than doubled, the number of Azerbaijanis grew by 85 percent, and the number of Lezgines by 60 percent. Despite the war in Chechnya, there were over 50 percent more Chechens reported in Russia’s first census in 2002 than in the last Soviet census in 1989. If current trends continue, Russia faces a future in which its population will be smaller, more multi-ethnic, and considerably more Muslim than it is today.

Throughout the Caucasus, the post-Soviet era has seen an intensification “de-Russification” of local societies, a process of emigration by ethnoreal Russians that has begun to reverse nearly two centuries of Russian at Soviet demographic engineering. Still, part of what it means to Russian continues to include elements that are fundamentally linked...
the cultures, histories, and traditions of the mountains, from the dress of Cossack dancers to habits of feasting and toasting. Russia is not quite Russia without the Caucasus. Yet the peoples of the region—especially Muslims—are routinely denigrated as thievish and inherently rebellious, blanketed with collective responsibility for everything from organized crime to terrorism, and portrayed as the chief threat to Russia's internal security and stability. In the Russian imagination to be a “person of Caucasian nationality” (itso kavkazskoi national'nosti) is to be dark rather than light—of complexion, yes, but also of spirit and purpose. “Cossack! Do not sleep. In the gloomy dark, the Chechen roams beyond the river,” wrote Pushkin in “Captive of the Caucasus.” Those fearful lines about the southern menace continue to evoke and inspire images of Chechens, Dagestaniis, Circassians, and others in Russian popular culture and to inform the behavior of state officials, from traffic cops to senior politicians. They are right in only one respect. With unfinished territorial disputes still smoldering in the south Caucasus, the expansion of violence in the north could trigger a nightmare scenario in the early twenty-first century: the eruption of multiple armed conflicts involving not only the region’s many political entities and ethnic groups but also its four sovereign states of Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Given all these problems, can one ever really think of the Caucasus as Europe? To conceive of Europe as a place that does not stop at the Oder River or even the Bosphorus became possible once Europe refashioned itself as a set of values rather than a self-evident set of boundaries. Seeing things in that way has required a gargantuan effort to forget, to shove into the dark corners of the past those values that have most often defined Europeanness: nationalism, chauvinism, and a penchant for the authoritarian state. In other words, it requires that today’s Europeans and those who wish to join them continue to do what they have done since 1945—to engage in a collective rethinking of the past that enables a creative, liberating, and humane imagining of the future.

The time of troubles in the Caucasus is by no means over. There may yet be even more devastating things to come for the people who inhabit the hills and plains on either side of the great mountain range. But if a European continent that spent the first half of the twentieth century devising ever more creative ways of destroying itself can misremember its past as an inexorable march toward liberal values, human rights, and democratic governance, there may yet be hope that the Caucasus can do the same.

Notes

Abbreviations Used in Notes

ACA Alpine Club Archives, London
AKAK Akty vseobraznoy Kavkazskoi arkeologicheskoi komissii
RL British Library, London
GRR Georgia (Republic) Records, Houghton Library, Harvard University
GSCACH Georgian State Central Archive of Contemporary History, Tbilisi
HIA Hoover Institution Archives, Palo Alto
KS Kavkazskii sbornik
NAUK National Archives of the United Kingdom (formerly Public Record Office), Kew
OWP Oliver Wardrop Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford
RGB-OKI Russian State Library, Department of Cartographic Publications, Moscow
SMOMPK Sbornik materialov dlia opisania mestsnosti i plemen Kavkaza
SSKG Sbornik vospominani o kavkazskikh gortash
UP David Urquhart Papers, Balliol College, Oxford
WC Wardrop Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford

Introduction: Nature's Bulwark