Varlam's dead body—history and the pent-up grievances of the Soviet era—had returned to haunt policy makers and the public. Rather, it was that the peculiar politics of state collapse had begun to push parts of the Caucasus over the brink into civil war and inter-ethnic violence. As with the citizens in Abulazde's Repentance, most people are content to weather political change by continuing to do precisely what they have done in the past, namely, to keep old myths in place and resign the bodies of despots to their graves. It is only when highly committed individuals begin digging up the past—and when those around them have an incentive to hear their cases and respond accordingly—that political change begins to occur. In the Caucasus the real story of the late twentieth century is not about deep-rooted sentiments of ethnicity or ancient grievances but about the ways in which personal ambition, structural incentives, and the simple presence of sufficient quantities of guns led to bloody conflict.

In the south Caucasus the late 1980s were characterized by the rise of opposition movements and the weakening of the Communist Party establishment. Experienced elites like Aliyev and Shevardnadze spearheaded the modernization of their republics in the 1970s and successfully suppressed public expression of discontent, but they were succeeded by less able bureaucrats. The pace of events on the ground, fueled by movements for reform and political change in other parts of the Soviet Union, outstripped the ability of local elites to manage them. In Baku the Popular Front of Azerbaijan was formed by intellectuals and activists in mid-1989 and quickly became the pole around which opposition groups could rally, taking its cue (and its name) from similar organizations in the Baltic republics. In Tbilisi the Round Table / Free Georgia bloc, headed by the prominent literary critic and dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia, emerged as an umbrella organization that included a host of interests, from nationalists bent on independence to human rights activists from Georgia's emerging civil society. In 1990 the bloc garnered nearly two-thirds of the votes in the republic's first multiparty parliamentary elections. Gamsakhurdia was first elevated to the chairmanship of the republican parliament and to the post of president the following year. In Yerevan members of the intelligentsia were similarly motivated by the sense of reform and openness fostered by Moscow. The republic's inadequate response to the massive earthquake of December 1988—which killed some twenty-five thousand people and left half a million homeless—underscored the crisis of governance then facing the Soviet state.

Across the south Caucasus, however, the nature of political change was bound up with questions of borders. Although the dispute over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, located near the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, was not the first instance of open inter-ethnic rivalry within Gorbachev's Soviet Union, it was the first to involve the interests of two union republics. The territory was included in the Azerbaijan Soviet republic after the Bolshevik conquest of 1920. Part of its upland reaches—mountainous Karabakh (Russ. Nagorny Karabakh)—was granted special status as an autonomous district shortly thereafter. Nagorno-Karabakh was mainly populated by ethnic Armenians, comprising 76 percent in 1979, the last prewar census that can be trusted. Clashes between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis were not infrequent during the Soviet period, but they manifested themselves in different ways: heated debates among historians in learned journals; ethnic hooliganism during soccer matches between Baku and Yerevan teams; or underground publications about human rights abuses against ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan. Within an atmosphere of increased openness under Gorbachev, questions about the past and future of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory became a natural focal point of discontent.

In 1988 Armenian leaders in the autonomous district called for its transfer to Armenian republican jurisdiction, repeating a demand that had been made by local Armenians many times before. Although only partially related to events in Nagorno-Karabakh, anti-Armenian pogroms in the Azerbaijani cities of Sumgait in 1988 and Baku in 1990 convinced ethnic Armenians that the territorial question was not only a matter of administrative boundaries but also one of national survival. Profound grievances were voiced by both sides. From the Armenian perspective, repeated attacks against ethnic Armenian communities were reminiscent of the Ottoman-era genocide, especially given the massive outflow of migrants (over 180,000 by mid-1980) from Azerbaijan. From the Azerbaijani perspective, Armenians were attempting to squelch the nascent Azerbaijani national movement by destroying the republic's territorial unity, not to mention carrying out their own ethnic cleansing of ethnic Azerbaijanis from Yerevan and other parts of the Armenian republic.

Events in Nagorno-Karabakh and the rest of Azerbaijan were intimately linked to developments inside Armenia. Just as the growing