

## Separatism in the Northern Caucasus

Moshe Gammer

To cite this article: Moshe Gammer (2014) Separatism in the Northern Caucasus, *Caucasus Survey*, 1:2, 37-47, DOI: [10.1080/23761199.2014.11417292](https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2014.11417292)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2014.11417292>



Published online: 13 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 222



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

---

## Separatism in the Northern Caucasus

MOSHE GAMMER

*Editors' note:* We publish here posthumously one of the last unpublished articles by the great historian of the Caucasus, Moshe Gammer (1950-2013). Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University, Gammer specialized in the history of Muslim resistance to Russian rule in the Northern Caucasus, to which subject his best-known works, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan* and *The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule*, were dedicated. The current article was originally written in 2010 for submission to *Europe-Asia Studies*, but could not be completed for health reasons. The text has been left unabridged, and the author's original preferences in terminology and toponymic spellings have been retained. The editors thank Ruth Frankl-Gammer and Dr Chen Bram for their kind assistance in publishing this article.

**Keywords:** separatism, Northern Caucasus, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Chechnya.

### Introduction

Western media and observers frequently call those Chechens fighting the Russian army “separatists”. From their perspective this term is correct in two meanings of the word: it is accurate and at the same time does not convey sympathy with either side. Indeed, although the original definition of the word “separatism” is “the advocacy or practice of separation of a [certain] group of people from a larger body on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or gender”<sup>1</sup>, it is nowadays limited mainly to ethnic/national groups aiming at independence.<sup>2</sup> As such the term “separatists” is practically synonymous with “secessionists”<sup>3</sup>, but by far simpler to use, write and pronounce. Also, in many cases “separatism” is interconnected with “irredentism”, which is defined as “nationalist agitation in other countries, based on historical, ethnic, and geographical reasons, for the incorporation of territories under foreign rule”.<sup>4</sup>

As it seems, the phenomenon of separatism in its modern interpretation is strongly connected to nationalism and nation building.<sup>5</sup> After all, nationalism as an ideology advocating the right of each national group to its own independent state has since the First World War become the basis for international relations and the nation-state – their norm.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the Northern Caucasus national division, nation-building and nationalism were the products of Soviet policies and practices. Separatism, therefore, is the result of these Soviet policies and practices and their consequences.

### Soviet nation building and national conflicts

Ethnically and linguistically the Caucasus is probably the most diverse region in the world. Several dozens of autochthonous ethnic groups inhabit this mountain range. Their sizes vary from the residents of a single village to several hundred thousand. Long before contact with Russia and the modern world the people in the Caucasus were aware of their ethnic and linguistic divisions, but these had no political overtones. In spite of this ethnic, linguistic and even religious diversity<sup>7</sup> all the “mountaineers” shared the same way of life, traditions, customs and even costume. In other words, while fully aware of their own peculiarities, all these groups had a common culture and identity (Gammer 1995).

Ethnic definition/delimitation was introduced into the Northern Caucasus by Russian (imperial) ethnographers and administrators (Jersild 1996). By 1917 these concepts were internalized, at least by the modern-educated layer of society. Thus, the short-lived “Independent Democratic Republic of the Mountaineers of the Northern Caucasus” (1918 – 1919) was planned to be a federal republic of seven national states.<sup>8</sup> It was, however, the Soviet regime, and more precisely Stalin as Commissar for Nationalities Affairs, which created and built the existing peoples in the Northern Caucasus.

Soviet nationalities policies vis-à-vis the Muslims of the ex-Russian Empire (reassembled by the Bolsheviks) was motivated by a strong fear of Pan-Islam and Pan-Turkism. It aimed, therefore, at a triple “divide and rule” of these societies by (1) dividing them from each other by creating new peoples out of existing ethnic groups and new literary languages to replace long established *linguae francae*; (2) dividing them from the outside Muslim world by these two means as well, as well as by the switch from

the Persian (Arabic) to the Latin (and later on to the Cyrillic) orthography; and (3) dividing them from their past by the above new languages and alphabets. In the Northern Caucasus the application of this policy started with the division of the region between two multi-ethnic Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) within the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), Dagestan and the Mountain Republic. Dagestan remained a single multi-ethnic republic. Its more than 30 native ethnic-linguistic groups were re-arranged into 11 officially recognised titular “peoples”. To these three more peoples, each enjoying a polity of their own within the USSR, were added. Dagestan is, thus, a unique state “owned” jointly by 14 peoples.

The Mountain ASSR was divided into several separate autonomies, all within the RSFSR (Daudov 1997). After some fluctuation their number stabilised in the late 1950s at five: the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, the North Osset ASSR, the Kabardino-Balkar ASSR, the Karachai-Cherkes Autonomous Oblast (AO) and the Adyghe AO.<sup>9</sup> In this way three closely, kin-related Muslim ethnic groups were split into separate peoples and divided among two or even three republics: the Circassians into Kabartay, Cherkes and Adyghe; the Vaynakhs into Chechens and Ingush; and the Karachai and Balkars were separated from each other.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, three of the autonomies were bi-national in their definition. The exception – Adygheia – was mono-ethnic but its titular people formed a tiny minority within a Russian sea.<sup>11</sup>

All these new “peoples” developed in due time their own identity (however partial and imperfect it might have been) and nationalism (and under Soviet conditions even xenophobia and chauvinism) and proceeded along divergent paths. Thus, a large potential was created for “national” strife and conflict. The universal policy of creating territorial national autonomies added further reasons to enhance this potential (Hirsch 2005; Hajda and Beissinger 1990; Motyl 1990; Nahaylo and Swoboda 1990). First, not all peoples enjoyed equally, or even at all, the state apparatuses and tools of rule accompanying the status of titular peoples. In a situation of more than one titular people it was rather natural for the largest one to monopolise power and resources. The smaller titular peoples, therefore, felt discriminated against. Yet the status of a titular group was crucial for the advancement of political action and demands. All those groups who were not defined as titular did not enjoy such opportunities and consequently did not come out with nationalist and separatist demands. Among these one may count the small ethnic groups registered officially as Avars and Darghins in Dagestan, the Abaza in the Karachai-Cherkes ASSR and the Shapsugs in Krasnodar *kray*.

Second, the political-administrative borders diverged markedly – and more often than not on purpose – from ethnic borders (if these could ever be established). Consequently, large portions of ethnic groups and peoples found themselves outside of their territorial autonomies as non-titular minorities with no national rights.<sup>12</sup> Among these one could count the Lezghins, Tsakhurs and Rutuls in Azerbaijan who were officially registered in their internal passports as Azerbaijanis, the Avars in Georgia and the Nogais in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR and Stavropol *kray*.

All these problems and frictions were kept under a tight lid during the Soviet period. But even during Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and after the dissolution of the USSR these did not develop into serious conflicts. The only exception was the problem of the Lezghins and other Dagestani groups, who now found themselves divided by an international border (between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan). The serious conflicts – violent or not – were the result of two Soviet deeds.

One was Stalin’s deportation, and even more so Khrushchev’s “rehabilitation”. Among the several Soviet peoples expelled in their entirety from their homelands to Central Asia and Siberia during the Second World War were four Northern Caucasian peoples – the Chechens, Ingush, Balkars and Karachai. Their autonomies were abolished, their territories renamed and partly annexed to neighbouring administrative areas, and any sign or memory of their existence in their homelands obliterated. In 1956, in what became known as the “secret speech”, Khrushchev denounced the deportations among Stalin’s other crimes, and following that the suppressed peoples were “rehabilitated”.<sup>13</sup> They were allowed to return to their countries and their autonomies were reinstated. But the restoration was not complete, as a Karachai leader told a British reporter in 1991:

It's not like in the United States where the Japanese-Americans who were put in camps during World War II were apologized to and given financial compensation. Or look at the Germans, the way they have apologized to the Jews and banned anything anti-Jewish.

Instead, our repressed peoples came back in the late 1950s either to have their oil exploited in the case of the Chechens, their best lands taken away in the case of the Ingush, their autonomous status removed in the case of the Karachai and, again, a loss of territory in the case of the Balkars (Smith 1998, 91).<sup>14</sup>

While objective reasons existed, which prevented full restoration of the returning peoples, the fact that this was not done was the major cause for almost all of the acute conflicts in the Northern Caucasus, conflicts also involving separatism.

The other Soviet deed contributing to an acute conflict was more specific to Daghestan. Rapid economic development of the lowlands accompanied by (not always planned) massive resettlement and urbanisation overturned the ethnic balance in the lowlands. In combination with the results of the partial “rehabilitation” of the Daghestani Chechens it created the most complex multi-party conflict in the Northern Caucasus, as shall be seen below.

### Post-Soviet national conflicts and separatism

All the post-Soviet conflicts in the Northern Caucasus can be divided into two categories: (1) conflicts between mountain peoples, and (2) conflicts between mountain peoples and external (to the mountains that is) factors. Conflicts belonging to the latter category tend more easily to deteriorate into violent clashes. Although with one exception conflicts between mountain peoples did not deteriorate into armed warfare, the mere fact that such conflicts emerged proves the success of the Soviet (Stalinist) policy of “divide and rule”. Most if not all of both categories of conflicts involved either separatism or irredentism, or a combination of both. However, with one notable exception no separatist movement aimed at full independence.

#### *Conflicts between mountain peoples*

All of the conflicts between mountain peoples have their roots in the actions of the Soviet government during and after the Second World War, that is, in the deportation and “rehabilitation” and in the fast economic development in the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> As mentioned above, the main problems and frictions resulted from an incomplete return to the *status quo ante*. Gorbachev’s liberalisation brought all these problems and conflicts to the fore when people used political freedom to establish nationalist movements and parties. All of these conflicts – with one exception – reached their peak towards the mid-1990s, but were contained and did not become violent.

The **Karachais’** main complaint, apart from the lack of personal compensation, was the fact that the Karachai AO was not restored, but rather merged with the Cherkes AO. However, any separatist tendency was mitigated by the fact that the Karachai were the larger, and therefore the dominant people in the newly formed AO.

Unlike the Karachais, the **Balkars** were not given a separate autonomy by the Soviets. Balkaria was a separate *okrug* in the Mountain ASSR. Once Kabarda was made an AO, in 1922, however, Balkaria, contrary to its will and some recommendations in Moscow was joined to it to make the Kabardino-Balkar AO, which was later raised in status to ASSR. After deportation the Balkar lands were partly annexed to Georgia and partly resettled by people from “*kolkozy* [collective farms] short of land” in other parts of the republic. When the Balkars returned, the previously Balkar *rayony* were not fully re-established in their previous borders. Another Balkar grievance was the failure of the Kabardino-Balkar authorities to allocate proper financial and other resources to the Balkars. Rather, they later claimed, the authorities treated them “as a 10 per cent minority” (Meskhidze 2008).

As soon as Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost* reached the periphery, in 1990, *Töre* (the ‘Balkar Forum’) was established as a popular movement. Its declared aim was the “full political, legal and economic rehabilitation of the Balkar people.” More precisely, this meant solving the “survival and dire economic situation” of the Balkar people and re-establishing “the administrative-territorial integrity of Balkaria.” On 17 November 1991 the First Congress of the Balkar People convened and declared the “national sovereignty of the Balkar people.”<sup>16</sup> Thus from the very beginning the Balkar national movement had in it an element of separatism (and to a lesser extent irredentism). However, this separatism was secondary to Balkar nationalist demands to redress the consequences of deportation and to complete rehabilitation.

In March 1994, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deportation of the Balkars, President Boris Yeltsin publicly apologized for the “injustice” and signed a decree “on the Means for the Rehabilitation of the Balkar People and Statehood and to Support its Revival and Development” (Zamukalov 1998, 4, 184-186). Still, next to nothing was done to implement this decree for the following couple of years. It was only then that Balkar separatism surfaced and reached a peak on 17 November 1996, when the Congress of the Balkar People proclaimed the establishment of an independent Republic of Balkaria as part of the Russian Federation, suspended the Constitution and Legislation of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic on the territory of the Republic of Balkaria and requested the President of the Russian Federation and the Federal Council in Moscow to enforce direct presidential rule in Balkaria.

As stated above, the most complicated conflict leading to separatist demands developed in **Daghestan**. The economic development and urbanisation of the lowlands accompanied by the massive resettlement from the mountains had changed within the span of a generation the old ethno-demographic balance there and transformed the Kumyks, Nogais and Azeris into minorities in their historical homelands. Of the three, the Kumyks felt particularly overwhelmed by this process. The formerly nomadic Nogais were too few in numbers in Daghestan – their majority lived in other parts of the Northern Caucasus – and were not too attached to their territory. The Azeris were but a tiny fraction of the titular nation across the southern border. The Kumyks, on the other hand, felt that they were losing their ancestral lands and becoming a minority in their own homeland.

Once Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* reached the periphery of the USSR in the late 1980s, several Daghestani peoples were quick to establish their national movements. Among these were the Kumyks. Their national movement – *Tenglik* – demanded the complete cessation of further migration into the lowlands. It also demanded the restructuring of Daghestan into a federal republic with full territorial autonomy for each nationality in its historical homeland, disregarding present demographic realities. Both the republican government and the Avar national front fervently opposed these demands. This conflict reached boiling point when it became intertwined with another – the one involving the Aki Chechens.

The Chechen-inhabited district of Aki (*Akinskiy rayon*) was annexed to the Daghestan ASSR in the 1920s. Its Chechen population was deported on 23 February 1944 together with all their co-nationals across the border. Laks from central Daghestan were settled by force in most of the empty villages and the district was renamed the 'New Lak' (*Novolakskiy rayon*). To prevent the Lak settlers from returning to their previous places, their villages – and more important the elaborate system of terraces enabling agriculture in the mountains – were destroyed. Rehabilitated in the late 1950s, the Aki Chechens were not allowed to return to their villages of origin and were settled in the towns of Khasav Yurt and Kizil Yurt.

Nevertheless, the Aki Chechens had never given up the demand to return to their ancestral villages and the graves of their forefathers.<sup>17</sup> Under Gorbachev's *glasnost* they raised publicly their claims again. This time the Daghestani authorities acknowledged their right to return to their ancestral villages. But in order to do so, a solution had to be found for the Lak settlers. It was decided, therefore, to resettle the Laks in the vicinity of Makhachkala, the republican capital city. But, such a massive move of population threatened to diminish even further the percentage of the Kumyks in their homeland. *Tenglik*, therefore, warned that it would resist by force any such move. The Avar national movement threatened to use force against such steps by *Tenglik*. The conflict reached its peak in the early 1990s, when on several occasions thousands of armed Avars and Kumyks confronted each other (Gammer 2002, 2005b; Matveeva 2004, 122-131).

It was against this background and in this atmosphere that the extreme wing of *Tenglik* demanded separation from Daghestan and the creation of a separate Kumyk autonomous republic within the Russian Federation. Their claim was that the Kumyks had never been part of Daghestan until annexed to the republic by the Soviets in the 1920s. Furthermore, since the times of the Khazars – whom they claimed as forefathers – up to the Russian conquest in the nineteenth century the Kumyks had always formed their own independent states.<sup>18</sup>

The **Ingush-Osset** conflict was an exception in several ways: it did deteriorate into open warfare; it reached its peak in 1992; and one of its outcomes was a successful case of separatism. Although even before the Soviets relations between Ossets and Ingush were strained, to say the least<sup>19</sup>, the current conflict between them goes back to the deportation era. When the Ingush were deported in February 1944, the Prigorodnyi *rayon* (across the Terek from Vladikavkaz) was re-settled by Ossets and annexed to the North Osset ASSR. When the Ingush were allowed to return and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR restored, Prigorodnyi *raion* remained part of the North Osset ASSR and the Ingush were not allowed to return to it. Those who tried to return to their villages faced considerable animosity. Nevertheless, during the Soviet period a considerable number of Ingush managed to purchase unofficially and occupy their houses but they were never recognised as official residents (Matveeva 2002).

Demands to return the Prigorodnyi *rayon* were raised occasionally during the Brezhnev years (Gammer 2005a, 189). It was natural, therefore, that during the last Gorbachev years a campaign unfolded to that end. Encouraged by what looked like Yeltsin's positive stance and faced with a growing Chechen tendency to secede from (what was still officially) the RSFSR, an Ingush Congress declared on 15 September 1991 a separate Autonomous Republic of Ingushetia *within* what should soon be the Russian Federation. Thus, a marginal separatist aim was deployed as a means to secure Moscow's support for an irredentist one.

However, if indeed the Ingush were seeking to mobilise the Kremlin's support, they were soon to be disappointed. In late October 1992 the Ingush-Osset conflict flared up into a war in which tens of thousands of Ingush were forced out of their homes in the Prigorodnyi *rayon* into refugee camps in

Ingushetia (Birch 1995; Human Rights Watch 1993; Tishkov 1997, 155-182). The Ingush accused the Russian peacekeeping troops in fighting on the side of the Ossets.

*Conflicts between mountain peoples and “outsiders”*

These kind of conflicts centred on the national delimitation and the borders of the 1920s. The multi-layer structure of the Soviet Union, in which ASSRs and AOs were created within (and as parts of) constituent union republics of the USSR – Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) – created what nationalists in the post-Soviet space called “mini-empires”, that is union republics that under the pressure of russification developed strong nationalism and attempted – many times forcefully – to assimilate the minorities into their own culture and language. Such minorities included both groups given autonomies within union republics and groups who were separated from their brethren across SSR borders. The result was in most, if not all, cases the opposite. The minorities clung to their own culture as far as possible and then opted for russification. When the USSR was dissolved all these minorities found themselves in new nationalist states bound on forging national cohesion and homogeneity. In many cases this was a prescription for conflict.

The *Lezghin* problem involves groups with no autonomous status in Azerbaijan. That might be one reason explaining why it did not become a violent conflict. The borders designed in the 1920s divided some of the Daghestani titular nationalities, leaving parts of their members adjacent to but outside the republic. Among these one might count Avars in Georgia and in Azerbaijan as well as Lezghins, Tats and Tsakhurs in Azerbaijan. And while the Avars across the border were an insignificant minority of their people, the Lezghins in Azerbaijan accounted for more than a third of the Lezghins and the Tsakhurs and Tats were to be found in larger numbers in Azerbaijan than in Daghestan.

As long as the Soviet Union existed, this fact caused little problems, since the borders between Azerbaijan and Daghestan were meaningless. Once the USSR was dissolved, however, an international border came into being between Daghestan (which remained part of the Russian Federation) and Azerbaijan, and all these groups faced national as well as personal daily problems. Nationally they became overnight cut off from their national, cultural and educational centres. Personally, thousands of people needed a visa to visit their families, lands, places of work, markets, etc., which they used to do all their lives, in many cases on a daily basis.

Of these only the Lezghins were numerous enough to carry weight and they used it to solve this problem. The Lezghin national movement, *Sadval*, demanded a solution to the human and national problems ensuing from the new realities. If no satisfactory solution could be found within the existing borders, its moderate wing demanded border changes to include all the territories inhabited by a Lezghin majority within Daghestan (and thus within the Russian Federation). The more radical wing of *Sadval* added a separatist dimension to the irredentist demands of its moderate wing: it demanded the establishment of an autonomous republic of Lezghinistan, separated from Daghestan which should include all Lezghin inhabited territories in both Daghestan and Azerbaijan, within Russia (Matveeva 2004, 131-136).

The conflict in *South Ossetia* carried also an irredentist as well as a separatist character, but unlike in the case of the Lezghins, the Ossets were a titular nation in that territory. The AO of South Ossetia was established in April 1922 as part of the Georgian SSR. In the late Gorbachev years, in response to growing Georgian nationalism the Osset national movement *Ademon Nykhas* (Popular Front) was formed. It demanded at first greater autonomy for the AO, and later – unification with the North Osset ASSR. On 20 September 1990 the South Osset AO declared itself the South Osset Democratic Soviet Republic independent of the Georgian SSR and requested Moscow’s recognition as a SSR within the Soviet Union. The self-proclaimed republic boycotted the October 1990 elections in Georgia and held its own elections on 10 December 1990. On the following day the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR annulled the elections and abolished the autonomous status of South Ossetia. On that day Georgian police and the National Guard were sent to South Ossetia, starting a war which has been going on intermittently to this day (Potier 2002).

The conflict in *Abkhazia*, on the other hand, was purely separatist. The Abkhaz, though inhabiting the south-western area of the Caucasus range are closely related to the north-western Caucasian ethnic groups (the Circassians, Abaza, Shapsugs). Whether they are the autochthonous inhabitants of the land or “migrants” preceded by “Georgian tribes” emerged as a matter of dispute between historians on both sides of the divide (Lortkipanidze 1990; Bgazhba 1999; Lakoba 1999). In the nineteenth century the principality of Abkhazia was annexed to Russia peacefully, but following its abolition, in 1864, most Muslim Abkhaz (some 60 per cent of the population) emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. Between that year and 1917 many Armenians, Russians and Georgians settled in the area.

In 1921 Stalin created a special status for Abkhazia: it was made a Soviet Socialist Republic (that is, a union republic) associated to the Georgian SSR. However, in 1931 Abkhazia was demoted to the

lower status of being an ASSR within the Georgian SSR.<sup>20</sup> Between 1931 and Stalin's death in 1953 a policy was enacted encouraging a massive migration of Georgians to Abkhazia; many Russians also settled there. Finally, in the 1950s and 1960s the Armenian Church supported a massive migration of Armenians. The result was that the Abkhaz became a small minority in the republic named after them (Müller 1999).

In the *perestroika* years, as Georgian nationalism moved towards independence, tensions between the Abkhaz and the Georgians grew and the Abkhaz nationalists demanded separation from Georgia and the restoration of Abkhazia's pre-1931 status as a union republic. On 21 February 1992 Georgia reinstated its 1921 constitution. Two days later Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia. Tbilisi sent in troops starting a two-year war. Aided covertly by Russia and overtly by other Northern Caucasian peoples, the Abkhaz separatist government ended the war in control of the country.

All the above cases have quite a few common features. In none of them did the separatist party aim at establishing an independent state. To the contrary, they wanted to detach themselves from another entity and either join, or remain part of, Russia. In this sense they were all pro-Russian. Furthermore, they all depended on Moscow's good will. They all were, therefore, contained, though not solved, through this dependence on Russia.

The conflict in *Chechnya* is in a category of its own. First, while it was a conflict between a mountain people and outsiders, its immediate roots were the same as in conflicts between mountain peoples. In other words, the main grievances of the Chechens were in the results of deportation and rehabilitation, not in the national and territorial delimitation of the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> Second, unlike other cases of separatism aimed at external (that is non-mountain) political units, Chechen separatism was aimed *against Russia*. Furthermore, Chechen separatists demanded *full* independence. Finally, Chechnya is the only conflict in the Northern Caucasus to go through two full-scale wars with Russia, the second of which is still not over.

To understand these grievances one has to remember that while not always allowed to settle back in their original places, the Chechens as a whole had a larger territory in the post-1958, reinstated Chechen-Ingush ASSR than in the original, pre-1944 republic. Therefore, at least in public, the Chechens had no territorial grievances. Rather, they were alienated from the Soviet state on two grounds. First, although officially rehabilitated and their deportation declared a crime, the authorities continued to doubt Chechen loyalty and considered them as having been "pardoned rather than politically rehabilitated" (Gakayev 1997, 107). "The deportations were considered non-events. No memorial monuments were erected and there was certainly no mention of what had happened" (Smith 1998, 67). "People kept quiet as if the tragedy were some sort of collective stigma for which they had to pay," and "middle-aged Chechens, particularly those who had attained prominent administrative posts, curiously referred to their exile period as work on the 'virgin lands'" (Tishkov 2004, 25, 26).

Second, and as a result of the first factor, Russian dominance in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was greatly stronger and more manifest than anywhere else in the Soviet Union. This was demonstrated by the fact that contrary to the usual Soviet practice of having a member of the titular nationality as a figurehead first secretary of the republican communist party, while a Russian was the second secretary and held real power, the first secretary of the party *obkom* in Grozny was for 32 years consistently Russian (Tishkov 2004, 35-40). Only towards the end of Gorbachev's rule, in 1989, and after strong Chechen pressure, was a Chechen nominated as first secretary. The result was that no Chechen political elite (as opposed to a few individuals) capable of running the country was created. The detrimental consequences of this fact were revealed in the post-Soviet period.

In Chechnya, unlike in the other republics of the Northern Caucasus and like in neighbouring Georgia and Azerbaijan, the ex-Communist political elite (based on the Soviet *nomenklatura* and known as *partokratiya* in the post-Soviet space) was replaced by nationalists. In both Azerbaijan and Georgia the inexperience of the new leadership resulted in considerable damage to their countries and they were soon replaced by the *partokratiya*. In Chechnya this did not happen because there was no Chechen *partokratiya*. Furthermore, the new Chechen leadership lacked not only experience, but also a common language with the Russian (ex-*nomenklatura*) leadership. This political experience and a common language with Moscow were two important components in the success of the *partokratiya* in the neighbouring autonomous republics in containing their local conflicts. The lack of both experience and a common language were major factors in the escalation of the Chechen nationalist leadership into full separatism and its inability to find a compromise with Moscow that would prevent war (Gammer 2005a, 206-208).

The first war in Chechnya (1994-1996) ended with a Chechen pyrrhic victory. The physical political, economic, social and cultural infrastructure of the country lay in ruins while, even more importantly, the moral structure of its people was destroyed. The chaos during the interwar period and the second war (1999 - present) only added to the general environment of lawlessness, use of force and anarchy. More important, this ambiance and Russian actions against the (moderate) nationalists only

served to enhance the strength of the Islamists, or the “Wahhabis” as they have been called in the post-Soviet space (Gammer 2005a, 208-218).

### From national to Islamic separatism?

The “return of Islam”, if one may plagiarise the title of a famous article (Lewis 1975) started in the Northern Caucasus under Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and was part of the general return to religion in the USSR. That time also saw the first public appearance of foreign-inspired extremist Islamic currents, dubbed all over the former Soviet Union “Wahhabis”. In the ideological and legitimacy void that followed the banning of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and then the dissolution of the USSR itself, one could observe a growing Islamisation of politics as both the authorities and some opposition groups turned to Islam for political mobilisation and legitimisation. This was especially true in Chechnya and Dagestan. Still, Islam markedly played second violin to nationalism (Gammer 2002).

The first war in Chechnya accelerated the Islamisation of Chechen politics and policies (Gammer 2005c). The arrival of foreign (mainly Arab) “Jihadists” played its role in Islamising Chechen resistance, or at least of its language, and directing it in the “Wahhabi” direction (Glyn Williams 2008). But it was the second Chechen war that propelled Islamism into being the dominant current of resistance. More importantly, Chechen leaders who embraced “Islamism”, such as Shamil Basayev, were now successful in exporting “decolonisation from Russia” to other parts of the Northern Caucasus. Thus, Islamic organisations bearing various names have popped up, first in Dagestan and then in other autonomous republics – Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia and even North Ossetia.

Most of these organisations have called for the establishment of an Islamic state in their republic, and many have called for an Islamic state on the territory of the entire Northern Caucasus. In either case, the establishment of an Islamic state means separation from Russia, unless – as some organisations have bothered to explain – Russia embraces Islam. Furthermore, some of these organisations have maintained that they are connected to the Chechen Islamic resistance and have claimed responsibility for attacks on Russian and local government and military targets and personnel. In these attacks they have not shied away from civilian casualties and acts of terrorism.

The reasons for the proliferation of Islamic opposition groups are rather clear. First is the successful containment of nationalism all over the Northern Caucasus. In Chechnya Moscow crushed it; in the other republics the *partokratiya* emasculated it by co-optation and other means. The nationalist alternative has, thus, become obsolete. Second is the new Russian policy of re-centralisation since the accession of Putin, which has strongly curtailed local autonomy and “elbow room”. Third is the targeting of Islam as “the enemy” by the authorities themselves, republican and central alike (Richmond 2008; Bram and Gammer 2013).

The interest of both Moscow and the local authorities in the Northern Caucasus in portraying any opposition as part of a single, unified movement connected to international Islamic terrorism is self-evident. So is the interest of the Chechens and many of these groups themselves to do so.<sup>22</sup> Does this however, reflect reality? Have all these groups overcome their local, ethnic, national and social interests and grievances? Are they really strongly committed to an Islamic ideology, and if so to which one exactly? Have they the same vision of the future? Can one really speak of an Islamic separatism in the Northern Caucasus? Only the future will provide the answers to these questions and many more.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> As defined in *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. Similarly: *The New Oxford American Dictionary*; *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed.).

<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is defined as “the ambition of a minority to form its own sovereign state” (*Dictionary of Geography*), “the idea of creating a separate and sovereign political entity” (*The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*) and “can involve secession from a state and the establishment of independent countries” (*Dictionary of the Social Sciences*).

<sup>3</sup> “Secession” is defined as the “formal withdrawal from an association by a group discontented with the actions or decisions of that association. The term is generally used to refer to withdrawal from a political entity; such withdrawal usually occurs when a territory or state believes itself justified in establishing its independence from the political entity of which it was a part. By doing so it assumes sovereignty (*Dictionary of the Social Sciences*).

<sup>4</sup> *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition (2002-2005); see also Chazan (1991).

<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, a difference between nationalism and separatism; see, for example,

- 
- Sokiryanskaya (2008).
- <sup>6</sup> For nationalism as ideology, see Kedourie (1985).
- <sup>7</sup> The majority of the aboriginal people of the Northern Caucasus are Sunni Muslims, but there are also Christians and Jews (known as Mountain, Caucasus or Tat Jews). At the time of the Russian conquest some groups were still pagan.
- <sup>8</sup> For the history of the Mountain Republic, see Dzadziev (2003). Kakahasanov *et al* (1994) is a collection of documents on the subject.
- <sup>9</sup> In addition the Abkhaz ASSR and the South Osset AO were created and made part of the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Georgia.
- <sup>10</sup> In all three cases, it seems the Soviets merely reconfirmed divisions made by the Tsarist authorities, cf. Hirsch (2005).
- <sup>11</sup> The other mono-ethnic unit – the Northern Osset ASSR could hardly be regarded an exception. A great part of the Ossets are Christian (at least nominally) and were, therefore, measured by a different yardstick, especially since they had been the most loyal element to Russia in the Caucasus. Still even they did not escape division into a Northern Osset ASSR within the RSFSR and a South Osset AO within the Georgian SSR.
- <sup>12</sup> The only exception is the Aki (Daghestani) Chechens, who were recognised as a titular people of that ASSR.
- <sup>13</sup> For the deportations see Conquest (1970), Nekrich (1978) and Bugai (1996). For the deportation and “rehabilitation” of the Chechens and Ingush, see Gammer (2005a), 166–183.
- <sup>14</sup> The references are to the exclusion of the Prigorodnyi *rayon*, which had been part of Ingushetia and annexed to Northern Ossetia, from the reinstated Chechen-Ingush ASSR; the unification of Karachai, which had been a separate AO before the deportation with Cherkessia, and the failure to reinstate the pre-deportation Balkar districts in the re-established Kabardino-Balkar ASSR.
- <sup>15</sup> No national movement in the Northern Caucasus objected – at least not openly – to the political structure and national division as formed in the early Soviet period. Even peoples who were divided into two and three – like the Karachai-Balkars and the Circassians (divided into Kabartay, Cherkes and Adyghe) conducted their political activity *within* the republican borders. The Circassian *Adyghe kh'ases* (Adyghe Councils), although cooperating with each other, were active addressing each the specific problems of its own republic, while the International Circassian Association defined its goal as “to serve the idea of the cultural and historical revival of the Circassian people” (Akbashev 1998, 7). See also Bram (2004), from where this quotation is taken. The Balkars and Karachai, although still identifying as one people, were even slower to cooperate. Only in 2000–2001 did the Balkar *Malkar Auzy* and the Karachai *Alan* organizations decide “to coordinate their activities, especially in the cultural sphere – the development of spiritual heritage, the preservation of national originality and the re-establishment of objective history”. Cited in Julietta Meskhidze, “The Events of November 1996 in Kabardino-Balkaria and their Prehistory”, in Gammer (2008), 80.
- <sup>16</sup> This was but one in a series of such declarations following Yeltsin’s call to the various peoples of the USSR to “take as much sovereignty as you want”.
- <sup>17</sup> According to a British observer, the Chechens “consider ancestors as important as the living, [and] still rise out of their car seats in respect as they drive past cemeteries” (Smith 1998, 1 – 2).
- <sup>18</sup> Hand-written historical sketch by a Kumyk nationalist leader submitted to an International Alert Fact-Finding Mission, Makhachkala, September 1994 (in the author’s possession).
- <sup>19</sup> See the descriptions in Baddeley (1940).
- <sup>20</sup> The reason for the special status of Abkhazia was Stalin’s personal friendship with its first Soviet leader. When Beria became the party “boss” of Georgia he managed to get in the way of that relationship and move Stalin away from it. Since then until Stalin’s death and Beria’s execution Abkhazia was controlled personally by Beria even after he moved to Moscow.
- <sup>21</sup> Indeed, the Chechens in Chechnya have been extremely cautious not to address the problem of the Chechens in Daghestan, so as not to arouse suspicions of irredentism, while the Aki Chechens have always referred to their problem as an internal Daghestani one for the very same reason.
- <sup>22</sup> “The reason for such behaviour could perhaps be found in the fact that in a world where ‘fundamentalist Islam’ is a (if not *the*) major enemy, to be a ‘fundamentalist Muslim’ is,

surprising as it may seem, second best. Admittedly the ticket to join the club is to appear to fight the ‘baddies,’ (i.e. ‘fundamentalist Islam’). This is the position to strive for. However, if one is rejected from, or unable to join the club there are still advantages to be reaped from being a ‘fundamentalist,’ if one does not overplay one’s hand. Such a label carries with it notoriety, nuisance value and a certain amount of bargaining power, since the most obscure group once called by its opponents ‘Wahhabi,’ or ‘fundamentalist’ is immediately promoted to the status of the West’s enemy No. 1. Perhaps this should not be as surprising as it looks. After all, in a world where ‘market economy’ is the ideal, this is merely the translation into politics of the laws of supply and demand” (Gammer, 2005c, 848).

## References

- Akbashev, B. 1998. “Prophet in his Homeland.” *Circassian World* 1 (Spring).
- Baddeley, John Frederick, 1940. *The Rugged Flanks of the Caucasus*. Oxford and London: University Press.
- Bgazhba, O. 1999. “History: first-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries.” In George Hewitt, ed., *The Abkhazians: a Handbook*, 59-66. London: Curzon.
- Birch, Julian, 1995. “Ossetia: A Caucasian Bosnia in Microcosm.” *Central Asian Survey* 14 (1), 43–74.
- Bram, Chen, 2004. “The Congresses of the International Circassian Association: Dilemmas of an Ethno-National Movement.” In Moshe Gammer, ed., *The Caspian Region, Vol. II: The Caucasus*, 63-103. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Bram Chen and Moshe Gammer, 2013. “Radical Islamism, Traditional Islam and Ethno-Nationalism in the Northern Caucasus.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 49 (2), 296-337.
- Bugai, N. F., 1996. *The Deportation of Peoples in the Soviet Union*. New York: Nova Science.
- Chazan Naomi, ed., 1991. *Irredentism and International Politics*. Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner.
- Conquest, Robert, 1970. *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities*. London: MacMillan.
- Daudov, A. Kh., 1997. *Gorskaya ASSR (1921 – 1924 gg). Ocherki sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoy istorii*. St. Petersburg: St Petersburg University Press.
- Dzadziev, V. D., 2003. *Ot soyuza ob’edinennykh gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza i Dagestana do Gorskoy ASSR (1917 – 1921)*. Vladikavkaz.
- Gakayev, Jabrail, 1997. *Ocherki politicheskoy istorii Chechni (XX vek)*. Moscow: Chechen Cultural Centre.
- Gammer, Moshe, 1995. “Unity, Diversity and Conflict in the Northern Caucasus.” In Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*, 163-186. London: Frank Cass.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. “Walking the Tightrope between Nationalism(s) and Islam(s): the Case of Daghestan.” *Central Asian Survey* 21 (2), 133–142.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005a. *The Lone Wolf and the Bear. Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule*. London and Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005b. “The Road not Taken: Daghestan and Chechen Independence.” *Central Asian Survey* 24 (2), 97-108
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005c. “Between Mecca and Moscow: Islam, Politics and Political Islam in Chechnya and Daghestan.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 41 (6), 833 – 848.
- \_\_\_\_\_. ed., 2008. *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Glyn Williams, Brian, 2008. “Allah’s Foot Soldiers. An Assessment of the Role of Foreign Fighters and Al Qaeda in the Chechen Insurgency.” In Moshe Gammer, ed., *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, 156-178. London: Routledge.
- Hajda, Lubomyr and Mark Beissinger, eds., 1990. *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society*. Boulder, Co.: Westview.
- Hirsch, Francine, 2005. *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca: Cornell.
- Human Rights Watch, 1993. *The Ingush-Osset Conflict in the Prigorodnyi Region*. New York and London: Human Rights Watch.
- Jersild, Austin Lee, 1996. “Ethnic Modernity and the Russian Empire: Russian Ethnographers

- and Caucasian Mountaineers.” *Nationalities Papers*, 24 (4), 641-648.
- Kakahasanov, G. I., A-H. S. Hajiev, S. Ch. Asil'darov, L. G.Kaimarazova and I. M. Musaev, eds., 1994. *Soyuz Ob''edinenykh Gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza i Daghestana (1917 – 1918 gg.), Gorskaya Respublika (1918 – 1920 gg.). (Dokumenty i materialy)*. Makhachkala: Academic Centre of Daghestan.
- Kedourie, Elie, 1985. *Nationalism*, 3d. rev. ed.. London: Afterword.
- Lakoba, Stanislav, 1999. “History: 18<sup>th</sup> Century–1917.” In George Hewitt, ed., *The Abkhazians: a Handbook*, 67-88. London: Curzon.
- Lewis, Bernard, 1975. “The Return of Islam.” *Commentary* (January), 39-49.
- Lortkipanidze, M., 1990. *The Abkhazians and Abkhazia*. Tbilisi.
- Matveeva, Anna, 2002. “Northern Ossetia/Ingushetia: a History of the Expulsion and Resettlement of People.” In Paul van Tongeren, Hans van de Veen and Juliette Verhoeven, eds., *Searching for Peace in Europe and Eurasia: an Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peace Building Activities*, 389-402. Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. “Daghestan: Interethnic Tensions and Cross-Border Implications.” In Moshe Gammer, ed., *The Caspian Region*, Vol. II, *The Caucasus*, 122-145. London: Routledge.
- Motyl, Alexander J. 1990. *Sovietology, Rationality, Nationality. Coming to Grips with Nationalism in the USSR*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Müller, Daniel, 1999. “Ethno-demographic History: 1886-1989.” In George Hewitt, ed., *The Abkhazians. A Handbook*, 218-239. London: Curzon.
- Nahaylo Bohdan and Victor Swoboda, 1990. *Soviet Disunion. A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Nekrich, Alexandre M., 1978. *The Punished Peoples. The Deportation and Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War*. New York: Norton.
- Potier, Tim, 2002. *Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia*. The Hague/Boston: Kluwer Law International.
- Richmond, Walter, 2008. “Russian Policies towards Islamic Extremism in the Northern Caucasus and Destabilization in Kabardino-Balkaria.” In Moshe Gammer, ed., *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, 86-101. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Sebastian, 1998. *Allah's Mountains. Politics and War in the Russian Caucasus*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Sokiryanskaya, Ekaterina, 2008. “Ideology and Conflict: Chechen Political Nationalism Prior to, and During Ten Years of War.” In Moshe Gammer, ed., *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, 102-138. London: Routledge.
- Tishkov, V. A., 1997. *The Mind Aflame. Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tolts, Mark, “Demography of Northern Caucasian Jewry: A Note on Population Dynamics and Shifting Identity.” In Moshe Gammer, ed., *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*. London: Routledge.
- Zamukalov, B. M. 1998. *Reabilitatsiya balkarskogo naroda. Istoriya, problemy, resheniya*. Nalchik.