

Understanding Violent Separatism: Institutions, Identities and International Intervention

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the phenomenon of violent separatism, asking why it is that – in periods of political transition – some groups mount violent separatist movements against the center, while others do not. Although my research interest in this question stems primarily from the experiences of the post-Soviet states, the phenomenon of violent separatism in the context of political transition has far broader applicability, as the experience of the Arab Spring movements demonstrates.

In this dissertation, I argue that where there is a high level of institutionalized identity-division within a state, the process of political transition is likely to be accompanied by high levels of mobilization and escalation along this identity-division. Where mobilization and escalation take place, the geopolitical affiliation of the state is a key determinant of its fate. Those states seen by external actors as belonging to the West are offered assistance by friendly states and international organizations; this assistance is intended to prevent the development of a violent separatist movement. Those states not seen as Western are often targeted for military intervention. This intervention is designed to achieve the goals of the intervening state, and often involves enabling the development of a violent separatist movement and supporting its military campaign. Thus, the potential for the development of a violent separatist movement during periods of political transition is seen as a function of institutions, identities and international intervention.

The four cases examined in this dissertation come from the post-Soviet states of Georgia, Moldova and Estonia. I use theory-oriented process tracing to examine these cases, allowing me to rigorously trace the causal process between my independent variable – the level of institutionalized identity division – and my dependent variable – the level of violent separatism. My research included two years of residence in the country of Georgia as well as field research there and in Moldova and Estonia. The cases and the methodology selected allow me to rule out other causal variables for internal war often advanced in the literature, including political autonomy, poverty, rough terrain and “lootable” natural resources.

This dissertation and its findings should help shed light on an important problem, which is of interest to both scholars and policy-makers. Violent separatism is a form of internal war, and internal wars account for a large and growing portion of those wars that occur in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Research has shown that internal wars last longer and produce more casualties than interstate wars; they also have a tendency to spill over borders into neighboring states, spreading instability and violence. Among internal wars in the post-Cold War period, the post-Soviet wars are understudied, despite the fact that – as the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 war in Ukraine demonstrate – they are far from concluded. My goals in this dissertation were to advance a generalizable theory for violent separatism that will allow us to better understand this destructive phenomenon; to test this theory using post-Soviet cases, in the process gaining a better understanding of those cases; and to bridge a gap between key literatures from comparative politics and international relations. The reader will judge for him- or herself whether or not I have succeeded.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the people and organizations named above, and to the hope that by better understanding the events studied here, we can work to prevent future occurrences of them.

Robert E. Hamilton

*Carlisle, Pennsylvania  
November, 2014*

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A day after I boarded a plane in Tbilisi, Georgia in the early morning hours of July 7, 2008, Russian fighter jets overflew the country, spreading alarm within the Georgian government and population during the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, which itself was meant to ease the rising tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi. I was leaving Georgia after a two-year assignment at the U.S. Embassy there, and exactly a month after I arrived home in the United States, Georgia and Russia were embroiled in a five-day war that left the former teetering on the verge of collapse, the latter diplomatically isolated, and U.S. policy toward the Caucasus in tatters. Since then I have been seized with the question of how this all happened, “this” being not only the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, but also the violent separatist movements that erupted in Georgia and elsewhere in the Soviet Union as Soviet power underwent its slow-motion collapse between 1988 and its final ceremonial end on December 25, 1991. For it was these violent separatist movements, mostly “frozen” in place in the early 1990s, that later “thawed” in Georgia with deadly consequences.

If Georgia’s wars re-ignited after being mostly dormant for some 15 years, could not the frozen separatist conflicts in Moldova and Azerbaijan do the same? What was it about Georgia that drove Russia to intervene there in 1992-93 and again in 2008? Why did only two of Georgia’s territorially concentrated minorities rebel violently, while the others remained quiescent?<sup>1</sup> And why were there only five violent separatist movements in the former Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> Georgia has five territorially concentrated minorities: the Abkhazians in the former Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR); the Ossetians with the former Autonomous *Oblast’* (Region) of South Ossetia; the Ajarians, an ethnically Georgian but majority Muslim population in the former Ajarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic; Armenians concentrated in the southern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Azeris concentrated in the southeastern region of Marneuli. Only the first two mounted violent separatist movements.



Union<sup>2</sup>, given the complex ethnic geography, sudden political transition and wrenching economic and social dislocation there after the collapse of Soviet power? These are the types of questions that animated my research interest in the conflicts that erupted in the wake of the Soviet collapse and in violent separatist movements more generally; and these are the types of questions this dissertation will attempt to answer.

In doing so, it will argue that the identities of the groups involved were the single most important factor in determining logics of conflict or cooperation between them. However, this dissertation departs from many of the mainstream identity-based approaches in two ways. First, it argues that group identities are not simply the result of long-term, macro-historical processes such as modernization and development; instead they are often deliberately constructed by the state to serve its own policy ends. Second, in contrast to much of the identity-based literature, which puts great emphasis on the ethnic dimension of identity, this dissertation shows that other state-constructed identities can also carry great salience in certain circumstances.

But state-constructed identities alone are not sufficient to explain the separatist wars that broke out in the former Soviet Union, or violent separatism in general. I argue that a collapse of state institutions, such as occurred in the Soviet Union, is often a necessary condition for violent separatism, since it leads to a critical juncture in which the relationship of constructed identities and those institutions comes into question. Where there is an

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<sup>2</sup> These are Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia; Transnistria in Moldova; Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan; and Chechnya in the Russian Federation. I do not classify the civil war in Tajikistan as violent separatism since the sides were fighting over control of the central government, instead of one side fighting to break away from the state. I say "only" five violent separatist movements because in addition to the fifteen national groups that inhabited the union republics of the USSR, another 20 groups had political autonomy within these republics (16 of which were in the Russian republic, with two more in Georgia and one each in Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan) and dozens more groups were territorially concentrated at lower levels. Thus, the level of potential separatist conflicts in the Soviet Union is often said to number as many as 70.

institutionalized identity division or cleavage within a state, the collapse of the institutions that perpetuated these identities and regulated interaction between them can lead to a high level of mobilization and escalation along this identity cleavage. This in turn can draw external actors into the percolating separatist crisis, allowing it to escalate further to outright war. I argue that the key factor that determines how external actors make decisions on intervention is the identity or geopolitical affiliation they ascribe to the target state. This dissertation thus sees the potential for violent separatism as primarily a function of three inter-related factors: *institutions, identities and international intervention.*

I will argue that these three factors are individually necessary, yet jointly sufficient for the eruption of violent separatist conflict. Alone, none of these factors can be said to cause violent separatism. After all, there are many societies that institutionalize identity divisions among their populations, dividing and classifying people along racial, religious, economic and other lines. Yet absent a political crisis or transition, these societies can maintain stability for long periods of time, as the Soviet experience shows. But even states with institutionalized identity divisions within their populations are not pre-destined to violent separatism in times of political transition. Successful violent separatist movements almost always receive external support. This dissertation argues that the type of external support received largely determines whether a separatist crisis escalates or not, and the geopolitical affiliation of the target state in turn predicts whether or how external actors intervene there.

Violent separatism is a phenomenon of interest to both scholars and policy-makers, yet we know surprisingly little about its causes. From the perspective of the policy-maker, violent separatism matters because there is a worrying tendency for these conflicts to “spill over” the borders of the state in which they originate, spreading violence and instability. The Uppsala Conflict Database, for example, lists a single active interstate war as of 2011, but 9

“internationalized” wars – or wars which began internally and spilled over their borders. Next, violent separatism and other internal wars tend to be correlated with stalled transitions to democracy. While the direction of the causal process is in dispute<sup>3</sup>, the correlation is not: the vast majority of the literature finds that democracies are more peaceful in their relations with one another than are autocracies, and that “anocracies” – states that have stalled in their transition from autocracy to democracy – are among the most violent states of all.<sup>4</sup> So for the policy-maker interested in securing peace and stability, understanding the origins of violent separatism is a critical undertaking.

Violent separatism and other forms of internal war are also of crucial importance within the academic discipline of political science. One reason for this is that the decline in interstate war over the last two decades means that internal wars are now a large and growing proportion of those wars that do occur. For instance, a 2002 study that combined the findings of the two largest datasets on war listed 163 internal conflicts since 1946 against only 42 interstate conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, internal wars tend to last longer than interstate wars, and to account for the bulk of the battle deaths in the modern era: Fearon and Laitin find that internal wars tend to last an average of six years while interstate wars last an average of three months; and they put the total number of battle deaths in the 127 internal wars they studied at over 16.2 million, against 3.33 million in the 25 interstate wars they examined.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, while Ward and Gleditsch (2006) find that internal war increases the likelihood that democracy will break down, Narang and Nelson (2009) argue that incomplete democratizers with weak institutions are prone to internal conflict.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Gleditsch and Ward (2000) find that regions with a large number of democracies are more peaceful than those dominated by autocratic states, and that anocracies are almost as likely to be involved in wars as the most autocratic polities.

<sup>5</sup> Nils Peter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margarita Sollenberg, and Havard Strand, “Armed Conflict, 1946-2001: A New Dataset”, *Journal of Peace Research*, 39:5 (September, 2002): 615-637.

<sup>6</sup> James Fearon and David Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War”, *American Political Science Review*, 97:1, (February 2003): 75-90.

Among violent separatist movements of the post-Cold War era, those in the former Soviet Union are understudied, especially in comparison to those associated with the collapse of Yugoslavia. Zuercher (2007), Toft (2003), Cornell (2002) and Kaufman (2001) are among the few scholars who have done comparative studies of the wars that broke out in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, whereas there are at least eight such works on the Yugoslav Wars.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, aside from the four works noted above, most scholarly treatments of the Soviet collapse characterize its nature as relatively peaceful.<sup>8</sup> But this characterization misses the point that although the process whereby the fifteen Soviet republics ended their political union was itself peaceful, that process set in motion other processes that resulted in horrific violence inside some of the newly independent states. Indeed, despite the divergent historical narratives that have grown up around the collapses of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the total numbers of deaths in the wars surrounding them are roughly equal.<sup>9</sup> A final reason the post-Soviet wars deserve greater attention is – as the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, the 2010 ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan and the 2014 separatist conflict in Ukraine make clear – that they have yet to be conclusively ended. Studying their causes, then, may shed light on how they can best be concluded. It may also shed light on some of the most important debates within political science on the causes of violent separatism, including the debate between rationalist and

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<sup>7</sup> These include Blitz (2006), Oliver (2005), Morton (2004), Andjelic (2003), Thomas (2003), Veremes (2002), Kourvetakis (2002) and Perica (2002). There are also a large number of cross-regional comparative studies that use one or more of the Yugoslav wars as a case for comparison; the number of such studies using a post-Soviet case is significantly smaller.

<sup>8</sup> Valerie Bunce, for example, begins her book *Subversive Institutions* with the question, “Why did Yugoslavia end in war, and the Soviet and Czechoslovak states through a peaceful process?” (xi).

<sup>9</sup> Although estimates of the casualty figures for individual wars vary, the Correlates of War (COW) and Uppsala data sets show that the total battle deaths were in a similar range for the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav wars. The COW data set lists approximately 49,000 deaths in the post-Soviet wars against approximately 57,500 in the post-Yugoslav wars, while Uppsala lists 34,288 deaths in the post-Soviet wars and 24,179 in the post-Yugoslav wars.

constructivist explanations and the debate over the role of internal factors versus that of external actors in causing separatist violence.

### **I. Violent Separatism in the Literature: The Debate**

The literature within political science on violent separatism and internal war in general can best be characterized as proceeding from disparate approaches, arriving at divergent conclusions and suffering from a high level of disorder. In addition, no single approach in the current literature adequately explains the outcomes observed in the post-Soviet cases, much less the larger universe of cases of violent separatism. This dissertation offers an alternative analytical framework, drawing from work in the fields of both comparative politics and international relations, which brings order to the literature and better explains observed outcomes. The boundary between approaches grounded in comparative politics and those grounded in international relations – while necessary for theoretical coherence and analytical rigor – limits the extent to which each approach can provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon such as violent separatism. While I argue that this boundary should not be obliterated, it should be made more permeable if our intent is to gain a true understanding of such a complex phenomenon.

Indeed, Hanlon makes a compelling argument that since ethnic violence is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, explanations for it should not focus exclusively on social groups, but should also incorporate factors from the second and third images (or from the levels of the state and the international system) and should examine the inter-relationships among them.<sup>10</sup> Despite Hanlon's call for analysis at all three levels, the bulk of the literature on violent

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<sup>10</sup> Querine Hanlon, *The Three Images of Ethnic War*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), electronic resource at [http://psi.praeger.com/doc.aspx??x=x&d=%2fbooks%2fgpg%2fc35682%2fc35682-0046.xml&original\\_url=doc.aspx%3fx%3dx%26d%3d%252fbooks%252fgpg%252fc35682%252fc35682-0046.xml&ws=WS\\_PSI&as=doc.aspx&token=1F537CE2FB0FA93B51860AAAFAD56EBB&count](http://psi.praeger.com/doc.aspx??x=x&d=%2fbooks%2fgpg%2fc35682%2fc35682-0046.xml&original_url=doc.aspx%3fx%3dx%26d%3d%252fbooks%252fgpg%252fc35682%252fc35682-0046.xml&ws=WS_PSI&as=doc.aspx&token=1F537CE2FB0FA93B51860AAAFAD56EBB&count), accessed 28 January 2013.

separatism and other forms of internal war is located squarely at the level of Waltz's first image, or the level of the individual and the social group. This literature focuses on ethnicity and its role in fomenting conflict between groups, and the primary division within it is between those approaches that see ethnic identity as largely epiphenomenal to violence and those that assign it a causal role.

The literature focused on the state level is scant and tends to focus on state weakness and the resulting security dilemma it causes for ethnic groups as a cause of separatism and conflict between them. The portion of the literature that takes into account factors at the level of the international system is even more sparse and less analytical, focusing mostly on the factors that cause states to intervene in separatist conflicts in neighboring states. Finally, there is a growing quantitative literature that has uncovered statistical correlations between internal war and factors such as natural resources, large populations and mountainous terrain; this literature has yet to rigorously examine the causal pathways between these factors and the onset of conflict, however. This section of the dissertation reviews and critiques each of these approaches.

### *Instrumentalist Approaches*

The instrumentalist approach argues that ethnic identity has no inherent meaning or value to groups, but is instead used instrumentally by "ethnic entrepreneurs" to advance the position of their group within a multi-ethnic society, or to gain an advantage over other elites within their own group.<sup>11</sup> Hale refers to these approaches as "ethnicity as epiphenomenal" theories, since they view ethnicity as simply a means by which people struggle for power, security, material resources or status.<sup>12</sup> These approaches are strongly rationalist and

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<sup>11</sup> For examples of instrumentalist arguments, see Rothschild (1981), Gagnon (1995) and Kalyvas (2003).

<sup>12</sup> Henry E. Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14.

materialist in nature, which limits their overall predictive and analytical power. Gagnon provides a clear example of the “ethnic outbidding” strand of instrumentalist theorizing on internal war, arguing that violent conflict along ethnic cleavages is provoked by elites in order to create a domestic political context where ethnicity is the only politically relevant identity. Elites do this, says Gagnon, in order to construct individual interest in terms of threat to the group, enabling them to fend off their domestic challengers.<sup>13</sup>

Rothschild provides another example, arguing that modernizing societies possess both structured interethnic inequalities and political entrepreneurs who mobilize ethnicity into political leverage for the purpose of altering or reinforcing these systems of structured interethnic inequality. In this view, politicized ethnicity has no inherent content or value, but since it can be mobilized along existing fault lines, it becomes the most convenient, feasible, and productive ideology for political entrepreneurs.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Kalyvas argues that it is a mistake to assume that individual and local motivations are related to the apparent cause of an internal war. Instead, he argues that actions “on the ground” in internal wars are often related more closely to individual or private issues than to the war’s “master cleavage”, with individuals using the chaos brought by the war to pursue their own interests.<sup>15</sup>

Whether focusing on outbidding by elites competing for power, on political entrepreneurs using ethnicity to defend or attack existing inequalities, or on individuals using internal wars to pursue their own private interests, these approaches share two common attributes. First, they all imply a strict ends-means calculation in their views of how individuals

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<sup>13</sup> V.P. Gagnon, Jr., “Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia”, *International Security* 19:3 (Winter 1994-1995): 130-166.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1981) 2, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, “The Ontology of ‘Political Violence’: Action and Identity in Civil Wars”, *Perspectives on Politics* 1:3 (September 2003), 475-494.

make decisions: means are selected solely for their effectiveness in achieving ends, and if the use of a certain means appears too costly to justify its use, it will not be selected. Second, non-material factors such as ideologies and identities are seen as having no inherent content; they are valuable only to the extent that they are effective at producing the desired outcome. These approaches, therefore, are overwhelmingly rationalist and materialist in their arguments.

This focus on rationalism and materialism forms the basis for many critiques of the instrumentalist approach to violent separatism and internal war. Hale critiques these approaches for providing no satisfactory answer for why people follow leaders making ethnic appeals, especially since the people often pay a high price in terms of the security of their lives and property during ethnic violence.<sup>16</sup> Kaufman critiques these approaches on several grounds. First, he argues that while they are parsimonious, they are not logically coherent, since they fail to explain why conflict breaks out in some cases but not in others. Ross echoes this, arguing that since instrumentalist approaches neglect how interests are developed and defined in different societies, they cannot explain why the same competing interests in two different settings result in intense conflict and violence in one but not in the other.<sup>17</sup> Explaining this phenomenon, Ross argues, requires an examination of the concept of group identity.

Next, the assertion that participants in internal war weigh the material cost of violently pursuing their goals against their expected material benefit also comes in for criticism from Kaufman, who argues that fighting a civil war over the fruits of a fragile national economy is very

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<sup>16</sup> Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics*, 25. Hale acknowledges that some instrumentalist approaches have attempted to answer this question. For example, Kalyvas (2003) argues that the masses often pursue private agendas during ethnic conflicts that are unrelated to the conflict's "master cleavage". Chandra (2005) argues that the masses may respond to ethnic appeals because they desire a cut of the spoils. I argue that spoils argument suffers from a collective action problem: if too few members of a group participate in the violence, the group will likely be defeated with dire consequences for its members, whereas if too many participate the spoils will be too widely distributed to make the participation of any individual member of the group worthwhile.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Howard Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.



likely to destroy that economy.<sup>18</sup> While the remnants of this destroyed economy might suffice to provide modest benefits to a leader and a small group of followers, the “foot soldiers” of civil war are likely to end the war more impoverished than they started it. So the critiques of instrumentalist approaches focus on three weaknesses: their inability to explain why people follow ethnic appeals; their inability to explain why internal wars break out in some cases but not in other, similar ones; and their inconsistency in arguing that internal war is about the accumulation of material wealth and power while failing to acknowledge that internal war often destroys the basis for that wealth and power.

When applied to the post-Soviet conflicts, instrumentalist approaches fare especially poorly. Kaufman’s observation that these approaches fail to explain why conflict breaks out in some cases but not in others is strikingly illustrated by the post-Soviet cases. Why, for example, did the Slavic minority in Moldova violently rebel, while the large Slavic minorities in Latvia, Estonia and Kazakhstan did not? Or why was the Moldovan state able to reach an accommodation with its Gagauz minority, concentrated in the south of the country, but not the Slavic minority in Transnistria? And why did the Abkhazian and Ossetian minorities in Georgia rebel, while the Ajarians, Armenians and Azeris remained quiescent? In all, there were 32 waves of ethno-national violence in the Soviet Union between 1987 and 1992; these were part of 16 ethno-national conflicts that emerged on Soviet territory during that period; mass violence was sustained in only four of these.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, understanding the patterns of violent separatism in the Soviet Union requires more than an approach that takes identities as epiphenomenal and

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001): 18.

<sup>19</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, “Nationalist Violence and the State: Political Authority and Contentious Repertoires in the Former, USSR”, *Comparative Politics* 30:4 (July, 1998), 401-422.

sees actors as analytically substitutable and their preferences as uniformly geared toward the pursuit of material gains.

The instrumentalist claim that political leaders mobilize people along ethnic lines in order to serve their own ends is also challenged by the empirical record of the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav wars. This argument implies a strictly instrumentally rational calculus on the part of ethnic entrepreneurs and their followers – both must calculate that the gains they stand to realize are worth the risk that war entails. But a simple look at the record of recent history reveals the problematic nature of such a claim. For leaders, the examples of Georgian nationalist leader Gamsakhurdia, Serbian nationalist leader Milosevic, and Chechen nationalist leaders Dudayev, Maskhadov and Basaev, – all of whom died violently or in jail - would seem to indicate that the risk to one's life, to say nothing of power and property, is very high for those who choose to mobilize followers along ethnic lines. And for the followers themselves, the economic and personal risk of participating in an ethnic civil war would seem to be too high to justify doing so on the basis of a cost-benefit calculus. Moreover, the risk to followers is not confined to the economic realm, since civil wars tend to be both bloody and brutal for the populations involved. The war between Armenians and Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, is thought to have killed more than 20,000 people and displaced over a million<sup>20</sup>, while the conflict between Abkhazia and the Georgian central government killed between 15,000-25,000 people and displaced some 250,000, or nearly the entire ethnic Georgian population of Abkhazia.<sup>21</sup> Clearly then, the lessons of recent history would seem to give pause to leaders seeking power by stoking ethnic or religious tensions. Thus, the decision to initiate or

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<sup>20</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Alexandros Peterson, "The 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia War: A Forgotten Conflict", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, 2:4 (Autumn 2008) 1.

participate in an internal war cannot be seen as a purely instrumentally-rational decision for either leaders or followers.

Despite the limitations of the instrumentalist approach, it does provide a major insight into internal war and intra-group conflict: this insight is that power matters and it is often both the currency and the object of these conflicts. This was especially true in the context of the former Soviet Union, where competition for power over existing political institutions and arguments over the division of power between the center and peripheral regions were often major drivers of conflict. But it is not enough to say that power matters and thus label these conflicts pure power struggles, in which identities played little to no role. Instead, as Alexander Wendt has shown, the power of an actor – be it individual or group – acquires meaning to other actors based upon the interests that power is seen to serve, and those interests are themselves constituted by the ideas or the identities that motivate the actor pursuing them.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the meaning of power is a function of the interests it serves, and those interests are in turn a function of the identity of the wielder of power. As a group then, despite the fact that they provide a useful focus on the role of power as both currency and object in separatist conflicts, instrumentalist approaches are insufficient in explaining violent separatism as a general phenomenon, and are especially limited in their ability to explain the post-Soviet conflicts.

#### *Identity-based approaches*

Identity-based approaches provide this focus on identity and show how it relates to interests and how it can therefore generate different logics of cooperation and conflict in different settings. I divide these approaches into two camps, which I label cognitive and constructivist, respectively. Cognitive approaches argue that intergroup comparison and

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 135.

competition are enduring elements of human behavior, that a need for a positive self-identity leads members of groups to compare themselves favorably with members of other groups, and that this mutual comparison can lead to competition and conflict between groups.<sup>23</sup> This approach takes its basic insight from the contention of Tajfel that human beings are cognitively driven to divide themselves into social groups and to favor those of the “in-group” while discriminating against those of the “out-group”.<sup>24</sup>

Often referred to as Social Identity Theory (SIT), this approach developed after experiments on human subjects in laboratory settings showed that the mere perception of being in a group triggered in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. In the experiment, this favoritism manifested itself in the allocation of points or money. In-group favoritism occurred despite the fact that in the experiment group identification was minimal, with membership in each group selected at random, with no history between the groups, and with no basis for them to compete over scarce resources. The source of this favoritism is said to lie in the universal need for self-esteem, which leads individuals to maintain or enhance their self-esteem “by maximizing the difference between our group and other groups on those dimensions that we think reflect positively on our group”.<sup>25</sup>

If the mere perception of being in a group can cause people to discriminate against non-members of that group absent ascriptive markers of group membership or real competition between groups, this would seem to make the prospects for violent separatism exceedingly high in the context of states undergoing rapid political transition, as in the former Soviet Union. Indeed, Volkan uses insights from SIT to explain those conflicts, arguing that they were caused in part by the process of “pseudospeciation”, or the historically-ingrained tendency of groups to

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<sup>23</sup> For examples of cognitive approaches to identity, see Tajfel (1982), Mercer (1995) and Volkan (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Henri Tajfel, “Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations”, *Annual Review of Psychology* 33 (1982): 1-39.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathon Mercer, “Anarchy and Identity”, *International Organization* 49:2 (March 1995): 242.

see themselves as the sole possessors of human identity and thus to regard other groups as inferior.<sup>26</sup> When this identity is threatened, Volkan argues, groups will humiliate, cripple, burn and kill “others” for the enhancement of their protection and survival of their group identity even in cases when their own physical survival is not threatened.<sup>27</sup>

Cognitive approaches can be critiqued on several grounds, and I argue that they are ultimately unsatisfying in explaining violent separatism in the context of states undergoing political transition, although they do provide valuable insights. First, these approaches would seem to over-predict conflict: if any two social groups put into contact with one another are cognitively driven to compete and possibly to fight, how do we explain the observed fact that the vast majority of groups in contact do not fight and that even those that do fight from time to time are at peace with each other far more often than not?<sup>28</sup> Clearly, the number and position of various groups in a society and historical memories of their past interactions are key predictors of the outcomes of their present interactions, but cognitive approaches have little to say in this regard.<sup>29</sup> Another critique comes from Hale, who notes that more recent psychological research has called into question the findings of the original laboratory experiments that provide the foundation for SIT. This research has shown that Tajfel’s observations may have been triggered by two factors unrelated to a cognitive urge to enhance self-esteem. The first of these is a sense of the “appropriateness of competition conveyed in the experimental setting, resembling a kind of game”, and the second is the expectation of in-group

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<sup>26</sup> Vamik Volkan, *Killing in the Name of Identity*, (Charlottesville, VA: Pitchstone Publishing, 2006): 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> For an examination of processes that help maintain interethnic peace, see Fearon and Laitin (1996).

<sup>29</sup> Volkan is an exception here. His approach takes past injustice into account, arguing that two processes can keep the memory of past grievances alive. These are the Chosen Trauma, with the building of monuments as linking objects to that trauma in order to keep the memory of it alive, and Transgenerational Transmission, whereby members of the traumatized group deposit their injured selves and internalized images of others hurt during the traumatic event into the developing selves of children in the next generation. The children are then given certain tasks such as reversing helplessness, shame and humiliation, and turning passivity into activity and assertion.

reciprocity.<sup>30</sup> This newer research points to these factors as the real reason people tend to favor members of their own group over outsiders.

The second type of identity-based explanation for violent separatism and internal war found in the literature is that grounded in constructivism. Rather than arguing that people are cognitively “hard-wired” to identify with certain groups and discriminate against other groups, these approaches see group identity as a more malleable concept. Identities are seen as socially constructed, often through long-term, macro-historical processes. In this view, ethnicity is seen as primarily a phenomenon of the modern era, which brought groups into contact with one another and forced them to more clearly define themselves, often by using other groups as reference points. This process in turn is seen as generating modern states that foster unity by articulating a high culture and enforcing allegiance to a national identity.<sup>31</sup> Constructivist approaches reserve a special place for intellectuals and other elites, who play a key role in propagating group identity through language, literature and other media.

Anderson’s description of nations as “imagined communities” may be the best-known of these arguments. Anderson argues that national identities are a form of discourse that imagines the group as “finite, sovereign and horizontally cross-class”.<sup>32</sup> Language, and especially print language, plays a significant role in the construction of group identities for Anderson. Ross highlights the role of elites and the culture they construct as key elements in the preservation and transmission of group identity, arguing that cultural identities such as ethnicity connect individuals through perceived common past experiences and expectations of shared future ones. For Ross, this focus on intangibles such as shared experience explains why groups in identity-conflicts make such significant emotional investment in what to outsiders seem like

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<sup>30</sup> Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 48.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001): 79.

trivial matters. Resolving identity-conflicts, then, is “not simply a matter of finding a clever interest-based constitutional formula for sharing a limited pie”.<sup>33</sup> Other constructivist approaches argue that while identities may be malleable in peaceful times and over the long-term, they can harden under other conditions. Kaufmann, for instance, maintains that whatever their causes, ethnic civil wars can only be conclusively ended by partition, since the hypernationalist mobilization rhetoric and atrocities that accompany ethnic civil war harden identities, making it impossible for groups to live together after fighting.<sup>34</sup>

Constructivist approaches share several attributes. First, most see identity as having intrinsic importance, instead of being valued only for its capacity as a mobilizational tool. Second, all see identity as malleable over the long term and as subject to construction by elites or by macro-historical forces such as modernization. Finally, all see competing identities as having the potential to lead to conflict between groups, even absent any dispute between them over material objects. In the post-Soviet context, constructivist logic has been used to argue that the reason the civil war in Tajikistan ended peacefully while those in Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan did not was that in Tajikistan there was no fundamental conflict over the idea of the Tajik nation in terms of its territory, boundaries and citizens. Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan, where identities were not only divided but incompatible, were not so lucky, according to this line of reasoning.<sup>35</sup>

While constructivist approaches provide what I argue is the most comprehensive account of identity formation and come closest to my own approach to how identities are acquired and what effects they have in inter-group interaction, they still suffer from several

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<sup>33</sup> Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Chaim Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars”, *International Security* 20:4 (Spring 1996): 136-175.

<sup>35</sup> Dov Lynch, “Separatist States and Post-Soviet Conflict”, *International Affairs*, 78:4 (October 2002): 834.

shortcomings that make them unsatisfying as a complete explanation for violent separatism. First, Hale rightly points out that approaches pointing to modernization as a key factor in the development of ethnic and national identities struggle to explain the fact that ethnic politics can be strongest in places comparatively untouched by industrialization and mass literacy.<sup>36</sup> Next, as Gibson argues, strongly-held identities are poor predictors of inter-group intolerance and conflict;<sup>37</sup> in other words just because a given identity is meaningful to those who hold it does not suggest intolerance of those who do not ascribe to that identity.

This points to another, more general weakness of constructivist approaches to identity. As Varshney argues, while these approaches are generally good at identifying the processes whereby identities are acquired, they do a less than satisfactory job of explaining how differing group identities lead to conflict.<sup>38</sup> Hale expands upon this critique, arguing that identity-based approaches, which he labels “ethnicity as conflictual” theories, often lack mechanisms explaining both why people accept the ethnic or national identity of the group and how these identities lead groups to come into conflict with one another.<sup>39</sup> These critiques imply that any complete model of the process leading to violent separatism must describe the conditions under which strongly-held identities breed intolerance (“motive”), and must then describe the conditions that allow groups to violently express this intolerance (“opportunity”).

Identity-based approaches also tend to overemphasize ethnic identities as drivers of violent conflict, paying scant attention to the roles of other identities. In the post-Soviet context this is especially problematic. For instance, the conflict between Estonia’s Russian minority and

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<sup>36</sup> Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> James L. Gibson, “Do Strong Group Identities Fuel Intolerance? Evidence From the South African Case”, *Political Psychology* 27:5 (October 2006), 665-705.

<sup>38</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, “Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict”, *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 274-296.

<sup>39</sup> Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics*, 22.



the center was more purely ethnic in nature than was the struggle between the Moldovan center and the Slavic minority in Transnistria.<sup>40</sup> So any approach focusing purely on the role of ethnic identities would predict that Estonia, with a single large minority group concentrated in a single geographic region, would be a greater risk than would Moldova, where a smaller minority group was more widely geographically dispersed. Yet the conflict in Estonia ended peacefully while that in Moldova escalated to a separatist war. Explaining why Estonia remained at peace and Moldova descended into war requires an examination of facets of identity other than ethnicity.

A weakness common to all identity-based approaches – both cognitive and constructivist – is a failure to take seriously the role of the state in the process of forming social identities. Recent works by Darden as well as by Lieberman and Singh<sup>41</sup> have advanced the research agenda on the role of the state in the construction of identity. The next section will outline their arguments, as well as some of the notable works that preceded theirs in this area. It will also review the other approaches that posit a role for the state in the phenomenon of violent separatism and other forms of internal war. So while they fare better than instrumentalist approaches in explaining the phenomenon of violent separatism, and the post-Soviet conflicts in particular, mainstream identity-based approaches still fail to provide a complete explanation for either.

### State-Level Approaches

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<sup>40</sup> Russians form a large majority in northeast Estonia – over 82% of the inhabitants of Narva, its largest city, are ethnic Russians<sup>40</sup>, and the majority of Estonia's Russians live in the northeast of the country; this has been the case since shortly after the Second World War. In Transnistria, by contrast, the largest ethnic group in the late Soviet period was Moldovans, at almost 40%, followed by Ukrainians at 28.3% and Russians at 25.5%<sup>40</sup>, and more Russians and Ukrainians lived elsewhere in Moldova than in Transnistria.

<sup>41</sup> Evan S. Lieberman and Purna Singh, "Institutionalized Ethnicity and Civil War", Unpublished Manuscript, (Princeton University, 2009); Keith Darden, *Resisting Occupation: Mass Schooling and the Creation of Durable National Loyalties*, Book Manuscript, 2011.

In an unpublished 2009 paper, Lieberman and Singh argue that when the state uses ethnic categories, even for seemingly benign purposes such as counting, these categories can establish the foundations for inter-group conflict. They do this by providing “a powerful basis for political mobilization and insurgency against the claims to authority and a monopoly on violence by the national state, in turn increasing the potential for civil war”.<sup>42</sup> While this argument is the best-developed to date in the literature in its attempt to link state construction of identities with the potential for internal war, it nevertheless suffers from a flaw that makes it incapable of adequately explaining the post-Soviet cases. Whereas Lieberman and Singh envision the institutionalization of identities to ultimately result in a challenge to the authority of the state, in the Soviet Union no such challenge emerged until the state itself – albeit unintentionally – allowed it.

The Soviet Union had been categorizing its people according to ethnic and national criteria for almost 70 years before Gorbachev’s policies of *glasnost’* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) signaled to the republics of the Soviet Union and their peoples that state policies were open for criticism and potential revision. It was this move that enabled a wave of ethnic and nationalist sentiment to overwhelm the Soviet institutions that had perpetuated these identities and regulated interaction among them, ultimately leading in some cases to a high level of mobilization and escalation. In other words, it was the state itself, through a radical shift in its policies, which opened the opportunity space for political mobilization and insurgency against its claims to authority. And the Soviet state’s decades-long practice of highlighting ethno-national identities and suppressing class and religious identities facilitated mobilization along ethno-national rather than class or religious lines.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>43</sup> This process is examined in detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Darden argues that national loyalties instilled in a population during the introduction of mass schooling – when a community shifts from an oral to a written mass culture – prove remarkably powerful and durable. Rejecting both the primordialist argument that national identities rest on fixed and heritable physical and cultural traits, as well as the instrumentalist argument that people routinely don and doff identities in pursuit of material gain, Darden instead argues that the state’s education policies and their content are the primary source of national identity. Indeed, Darden says, “If one knows the national content of the initial schooling in a community, one knows the most basic political loyalties of the community. This gives one remarkable power to predict how that community will align even more than a century hence”.<sup>44</sup> As we shall see, education played a major role in the construction of identities in the Soviet Union.

Whereas Darden focuses exclusively on primary education, I will expand the focus to include state university systems and their role in the construction and perpetuation of ethno-national identities. Mass schooling is undoubtedly important in constructing identities, but in the Soviet context it was the interaction of the university system and the primary school system that constructed and institutionalized identities. Soviet university systems often served as breeding grounds for ethnic nationalist scholars who constructed or reinterpreted national histories that were then handed down to future generations through the primary school system. Both Darden and Lieberman and Singh provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which states construct identities, and I will use these insights in the construction of my theoretical framework in the next chapter.

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<sup>44</sup> Keith Darden, *Resisting Occupation*, book manuscript accessed at <http://keithdarden.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/darden-research-statement-2011.pdf>, 1.

Mamdani's explanation of the 1994 Rwandan genocide provides another example of work that theorizes a role for the state in the construction of political identities, ultimately leading to conflict between them. For Mamdani, the roots of the genocide lay in the construction by German and later Belgian colonial regimes of Hutu as the nativist ethno-political identity and Tutsi as a settler identity. This, combined with a political crisis in neighboring Uganda that forced refugee Tutsis back into Rwanda in the form of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front, is seen as leading to the genocidal reaction by the Hutu majority.<sup>45</sup> While Mamdani allows a role for the state in the construction of identities and acknowledges the role of external factors in catalyzing internal conflict – two attributes of my own approach – my approach differs from his in one key aspect. Whereas Mamdani's account deals with an internal conflict that erupted decades after the end of the colonial period, my approach examines conflicts that erupted during or immediately after the collapse of the colonial state. This difference in outcomes implies a difference in key structural factors between Rwanda and the post-Soviet cases. So, while Mamdani provides important insights into the processes that can lead to genocidal internal conflict, his approach does not answer the question of why those wars that erupted in the former Soviet Union did so just before or immediately after the collapse of Soviet power.

Finally, Paul Brass argues that communal riots in India are caused by political entrepreneurs, who foment unrest through the use of an "institutionalized riot system" and the presence of discursive frameworks that allow them to characterize isolated incidents between Hindus and Muslims as communal incidents.<sup>46</sup> Like Mamdani's work, that of Brass provides

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<sup>45</sup> Paul J. Magnarella, Review of *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, nativism and the genocide in Rwanda*, in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 40:3 (September 2002), 515-517.

<sup>46</sup> Kanchan Chandra, Review of *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65:1 (February 2006) 207-209.

some insights into the processes that led to violence in the former Soviet Union, but differs significantly from my own approach. First, Brass focuses on riots in the context of an existing state, whereas I focus on the emergence of violent separatism in the context of the collapse or withdrawal of a colonial state. Next, and more importantly, Brass seems to simply assume the existence of an important element in his casual model: the discursive frameworks that allow isolated incidents to be recast as communal incidents, thus stimulating the escalation of violence. My approach seeks to explain the role of the state in constructing these discursive frameworks and the identities that underpin them.

Most of the remaining literature at the state level sees the state as an object that is acted upon by other forces, rather than an actor in its own right. Bates, for example, argues that the pressures of modernization can create competition for its benefits, leading to new patterns of stratification along ethnic lines, engendering ethnic competition and ultimately weakening the state and making ethnic conflict more likely.<sup>47</sup> Narang and Nelson apply a version of this argument to the debate over the effects of democratization, arguing that incomplete democratizers with weak institutions are especially prone to internal war.<sup>48</sup> Lake and Rothchild provide a theoretical foundation for this observation, arguing that ethnic conflict is caused by the security dilemma that emerges when the state loses its coercive power.<sup>49</sup> In this argument the loss of the state's ability to arbitrate between groups or provide credible protection for them leads groups to fear for their physical security. This fear leads them to arm

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Bates, "Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa", *Comparative Political Studies* 6 (1974): 457.

<sup>48</sup> Vipin Narang and Rebecca M. Nelson, "Who Are These Belligerent Democratizers? Reassessing the Impact of Democratization on War", *International Organization* 63 (Spring 2009): 357-379.

<sup>49</sup> David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, "Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict", *International Security* 21:2 (Autumn, 1996): 41-75.

themselves for protection, leading to a spiral of violence and retribution, further weakening the state and eventually resulting in violent ethnic conflict.

These approaches fare poorly when applied to the post-Soviet cases. Bates' claim that modernization leads to ethnic stratification and eventually to state weakness is undermined by the fact that the Soviet Union engaged in hyper-modernization and industrialization across much of its territory in its early years, often accomplishing in decades what had taken over a century in other states. It also engaged in a comprehensive effort to categorize, classify and rank its many ethnic groups. Yet it was not until the state itself signaled that its policies were open for criticism and potential revision that the wave of ethnic competition that Bates predicted actually emerged. And indeed, even when this competition did emerge, Beissinger notes correctly that an important reason for the lack of violence between Moscow and its fifteen union republics was the fact that the Soviet central state retained a monopoly on violence until the end of its existence.<sup>50</sup> Clearly then, the process of modernization alone in the Soviet Union cannot be said to have caused the Soviet state to weaken and collapse.

The argument of Lake and Rothchild that state weakness results in a security dilemma, which can lead to a spiral of ethnic violence and retribution, also suffers when applied to the former Soviet Union. First there is the empirical pattern in which the vast majority of ethnic groups did not arm themselves, despite the fact that the Soviet state collapsed and its fifteen successor states all exhibited significant weakness. Indeed, most of them had only the symbolic trappings of statehood, without its coercive power, at the end of the Soviet Union. As Yuri Slezkine has remarked, "when the non-national Soviet state had lost its meaning, the national non-states were its only possible heirs".<sup>51</sup> This dearth of state coercive power should, by the

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<sup>50</sup> Beissinger, "Nationalist Violence and the State", 410.

<sup>51</sup> Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism", *Slavic Review* 53:2 (Summer 1994): 451.

logic of the security dilemma argument, have led to a spiral of armed groups engaging in violence and retribution. While this is exactly what happened in a small number of cases – Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria being the best examples, in the vast majority of the other seventy or so potential internal conflicts in the former Soviet Union, this spiral did not occur. Indeed, even in states like Georgia, where the Abkhazians and Ossetians violently rebelled, the Armenian, Azeri and Ajarian minorities did not. This variation in outcomes cannot logically be explained by the constant of eroding state capacity.

To summarize, most of the approaches to violent separatism and internal conflict located at the state level of analysis fail to explain the outcomes observed in the former Soviet Union. Even Lieberman and Singh, although they significantly advance the literature by theorizing how the state and its policies can sow the seeds of future internal conflict, appear to miss the crucial fact that institutionalized identities do not inevitably lead to a challenge to the authority of the state. In the case of authoritarian states like the Soviet Union, it appears that the onset of state-sponsored reform is also a necessary condition for this challenge to emerge. So state-level approaches to violent separatism fail to provide a complete explanation for the phenomenon.

However, there are those that, although limited in their ability to provide a full explanation for my cases, do provide key building blocks to my approach. Lieberman and Singh provide the key insight that the state's use of categorization and classification labels often plays a key role in the formation of group identities. Darden's focus on the role of the educational system proves to be important in explaining the causes of violent separatism in the former Soviet Union. Mamdani also allows a role for the state in the construction of identities, and acknowledges a role for external actors, while Brass focuses on the use of discursive frameworks. All of these play a role in my explanation for violent separatism in the context of

states undergoing political transition. But my approach attempts to provide a more complete analysis by integrating these individual factors into a single causal framework.

### System-Level Approaches

Moving from the level of the state to the level of the international system involves crossing the invisible but very real boundary between comparative politics and international relations. While remaining grounded within a single sub-discipline of political science can pay dividends in terms of parsimony and analytical rigor, this dissertation argues that it comes at the cost of ontological richness and overall explanatory value.<sup>52</sup> When examining a complex phenomenon such as violent separatism, regarding it as something that happens *within* a state, while ignoring the forces external to the state that can influence outcomes, yields a limited and ultimately incomplete explanation. Recent work has made progress in theorizing the role of external factors in contributing to outcomes within states. For example, theorists of political movements and legislative changes in comparative politics often include international factors in their models.<sup>53</sup> This dissertation intends to build on this tradition, while drawing more deeply from the literature in international relations and rigorously integrating internal and external factors into a single model.

A frequently-encountered limitation of those approaches that examine the impact of external actors on internal wars is that they are often either single-case accounts, or broad studies listing a large number of means used and objectives pursued by external actors in their interventions. An example of the former is provided by Hopf, who argues that Russia intervened

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<sup>52</sup> Ruggie (1998) makes this distinction between rationalism and constructivism, arguing that the axiomatic structure of the former permits high levels of analytical rigor and specificity, but that its ontology often leads to incomplete or distorted views of reality. I argue that this dichotomy can also be applied to methodology: while remaining within a single sub-discipline permits a high level of analytical rigor, it does so at the cost of ontological richness.

<sup>53</sup> A recent example of a PhD dissertation that successfully does this is Rachel Vanderhill's *International Pressure and Regime Change in Postcommunist Europe*, University of Virginia, 2009.



in Georgia in the early 1990s because of the victory of what he calls the “centrist” Russian foreign policy identity over its “liberal” and “conservative” competitors. Had the liberals won out, Hopf argues that no intervention at all would have taken place; had the conservatives prevailed, Hopf argues that Russia might have intervened in multiple places, including the Baltics.<sup>54</sup> Within Russia, there was agreement that Russia was a Great Power – the disagreement was over what constituted legitimate actions by a Great Power in response to separatist movements in neighboring states. Hopf’s account provides a compelling empirical example of the constructivist maxims that identities form the basis of interests, and that a norm is an action deemed appropriate for an actor of a given identity. What is missing from Hopf’s model is the role played by the geopolitical affiliation of the target state. In other words, what was it about Georgia and Moldova that made Russian intervention there legitimate according to the centrist Russian foreign policy identity, while intervention in the Baltics was regarded by this same identity as off-limits? Hopf’s argument is also limited in that it only examines Russian intervention in Abkhazia. This dissertation expands Hopf’s analysis by arguing that it was the geopolitical affiliation of Georgia and Moldova that legitimized Russian intervention there, while Estonia’s geopolitical affiliation proscribed it.

Heraclides expands the scope the study of external involvement in separatist conflicts by examining seven cases of intervention in an attempt to confirm or refute a number of commonly-held assumptions about it.<sup>55</sup> Her findings indicate support for only one of these assumptions: that neighboring states find it difficult to avoid becoming involved in nearby separatist conflicts. She finds partial support for another assumption: that international norms

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<sup>54</sup> Ted Hopf, “Identity, Legitimacy and the Use of Military Force: Russia’s Great Power Identities and Military Intervention in Abkhazia”, *Review of International Studies* 31 (2005): 226.

<sup>55</sup> Alexis Heraclides, “Secessionist Minorities and External Involvement”, *International Organization* 44:3 (Summer 1990): 341-378.

constrain states and international institutions from becoming involved. Heraclides' findings indicate that neighboring states and relevant international institutions will find themselves in a quandary when confronted with a brewing separatist movement: on the one hand, they find themselves inexorably drawn in, but on the other there are normative and legal constraints on their involvement. But the fact is that states and international institutions do in practice have to decide either to involve themselves or not; this dissertation contributes to the literature by offering an explanation for how they make that decision.

Brown provides the final example of an attempt to examine factors outside the state when explaining the phenomenon of violent separatism. Examining both internal and external factors, Brown determines that there are four proximate causes and over a dozen long-term causes. All of the long-term causes he lists are internal to the state; only among his proximate causes do we find a role for external actors. These proximate causes are: internal, mass-level factors (bad domestic problems); external, mass-level factors (bad neighborhoods); external, elite-level factors (bad neighbors); and internal, elite-level factors (bad leaders).<sup>56</sup> While this is certainly a comprehensive treatment of the subject, it is somewhat unwieldy when attempting to apply it to any individual case. Its elite-level proximate causes also are skewed heavily in the direction of agency. It is not enough to say that a state is cursed with a "bad" neighbor or a "bad" leader. For an examination of a case to have any generalizability, we have to ask what made those actors "bad". Finally, Brown assumes that external intervention in an internal war generally occurs with the goal of escalating it or ensuring the victory of one side or the other, leaving unexamined those cases where states or international institutions intervene with the goal of preventing conflict or with the goal of creating a violent conflict where ones does not yet exist.

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<sup>56</sup> Michael E. Brown, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

So the literature that takes seriously the role of external actors in violent separatism suffers from several limitations for our purposes. Much of it is comprised of either single-case examinations or examinations of multiple cases that result in a long list of factors that “might” matter; there is a dearth of comparative studies of intervention that lead to a manageable list of conclusions about its causes. Next, the literature assumes that external actors will only intervene when a large-scale conflict is already underway and that they will intervene with the objective of ensuring the victory of one side. This leaves unexamined the possibility that external actors might intervene with the goal of preventing the escalation of a conflict to outright war or enabling that escalation, yet both of these clearly occur. In all six of the post-Soviet wars, the escalation to large-scale violence was aided by intervention from external actors and the final outcome was largely determined by those actors. In the “wars that weren’t”, such as in Estonia, external actors also intervened, but this intervention was designed to prevent escalation rather than facilitate it or determine the outcome of a war already underway. Along with explaining the role of the state in the construction of identities and the role of political transition in escalating conflict between identity groups, explaining when and why external actors intervene in states experiencing internal conflict will be another focus of this dissertation.

### *Statistical Approaches*

Although statistical studies are a categorization by research method and not by causal factors, I have included them here because they have been useful in challenging some widely-held assumptions about the causes of violent separatism, so they deserve to be discussed. Improvements in statistical methods since the end of the Cold War have resulted in the publication of several large-n statistical studies, which have discredited a number of widely-held assumptions about violent separatism and internal war. Perhaps most important among these

was the claim that states that have a high level of ethno-linguistic fractionalization were at high risk of internal war. Two important studies, the first by Collier and Hoeffler and the second by Fearon and Laitin, found no correlation between high levels of ethno-linguistic fractionalization and internal war. Instead, these studies argued that structural and environmental factors were the root cause of conflict. Collier and Hoeffler argue that greed is the primary factor motivating conflict and that since natural resources are an especially “lootable” commodity, states rich in natural resources tend to have more violent ethnic conflict than resource-poor states.<sup>57</sup> Fearon and Laitin find that the factors most correlated with civil war are weak states, large populations, rough terrain and poverty; they reject the alternative hypotheses attributing recent civil wars to ethnic or religious diversity, ethnic or political grievances, or the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War.<sup>58</sup> While these and other statistical studies have advanced our knowledge of the causes of internal war by discrediting the claim that ethnic diversity is sufficient to cause conflict, they fall short of their goal of providing a general explanation for violent separatism and internal war. The post-Soviet cases bring their limitations into sharp relief.

There were six internal or civil wars that broke out between 1989 and 1994 in Soviet or former Soviet republics: two in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), one in Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), one in Tajikistan, one in Moldova (Transnistria) and one in Russia (Chechnya). An examination of these cases reveals no correlation between war and the factors proposed by Fearon and Laitin or Collier and Hoeffler. Georgia, while mountainous, was not impoverished<sup>59</sup>, had a population of only approximately 5.4 million at the end of the Soviet

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<sup>57</sup> Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “On Economic Causes of Civil War”, *Oxford Economic Papers* 50:4 (1998): 563-573; and “Greed and Grievance in Civil War”, *Oxford Economic Papers* 56:4 (2004): 563-595.

<sup>58</sup> James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War”, *American Political Science Review* 97:1 (February 2003): 75-90.

<sup>59</sup> Georgia ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of 15 Soviet republics in terms of per capita national income and 7<sup>th</sup> in terms of population, according to Dmitrieva’s *Regional Economic Statistics of the Soviet Union*, as cited in Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 19.

period, and had no lootable commodities. Azerbaijan was also mountainous, but was a low-middle income country in the Soviet context, had a population of just over 7 million and its natural resources of oil and gas played no part in the outbreak of the conflict.<sup>60</sup> Moldova had none of the predictors of conflict: it was a middle income Soviet republic, had a relatively small population of 4.3 million and is composed of moderate, gently rolling terrain.<sup>61</sup> Russia and Tajikistan also frustrate the predictions of these quantitative studies: while Russia did indeed have a large population and mountainous terrain in the conflict region, it was a relatively affluent country and its natural resources were of little relevance to the conflict in Chechnya.<sup>62</sup> Tajikistan was the poorest of the Soviet republics and is mountainous, but had a mid-sized population and no lootable resources.<sup>63</sup> So, we clearly need to look elsewhere in the literature to find a satisfactory explanation for post-Soviet internal war. Further frustrating the predictions of Collier and Hoeffler is the fact that the most resource-rich of the post-Soviet states either had no internal wars (Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, for example) or had wars unrelated to resources (Chechnya within Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan).<sup>64</sup>

So despite the insights they yield, statistical approaches are ultimately limited in their ability to explain my cases in particular and violent separatism in general. They are not only disconfirmed by the attributes and outcomes in the post-Soviet cases, but their methodological adherence to purely quantitative indicators means that the explanations they put forth are overwhelmingly materialist. Although they comprise a methodological distinction and not a

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<sup>60</sup> Azerbaijan ranked 10<sup>th</sup> of the 15 in terms of per capita income and 6<sup>th</sup> in terms of population. Its resources of oil and gas are concentrated in the eastern portion of the country, while the conflict broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh, on the western edge of the country.

<sup>61</sup> Moldova ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in the Soviet Union in terms of both population and per capita income.

<sup>62</sup> Russia ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in terms of per capita income and 1<sup>st</sup> in terms of population.

<sup>63</sup> Tajikistan's population was just over 5.1 million in 1989, putting it in 8<sup>th</sup> place among the republics of the Soviet Union.

<sup>64</sup> In other words, although these states are rich in natural resources, the internal conflicts that erupted in them did so in their resource-poor regions while the resource-rich regions remained at peace.

causal one, their causal claims suffer from many of the same shortcomings as those of the instrumentalist approach, in that they are unable to account for ideational factors.

### *Concluding Thoughts on the State of the Literature*

So the literature on violent separatism and internal war fails to offer empirically-supportable explanations for the post-Soviet cases, to say nothing of internal war in general. In many ways, the collapse of the Soviet Union provided an excellent natural experiment to test the claims of the literature on violent separatism and other forms of internal war. The collapse of the authoritarian, centralized Soviet state was preceded by a period of decline in its legitimacy that lasted several years, or long enough for groups to mobilize to contest power when the center finally fell apart. The fifteen successors to the Soviet Union were all challenged in terms of their own capacity in their early years, and all but Armenia had territorially concentrated minorities within their borders, some of whom had enjoyed political autonomy under the Soviet system.

None of the strands of the literature in political science are able to offer a comprehensive explanation for the outcomes observed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The majority of this literature is located at the level of Waltz's first image, focused on individuals and social groups. This literature is divided into instrumentalist and identity-based approaches. The former fails to explain the variation in outcomes observed in the former Soviet Union and struggles to explain how leaders and the groups they lead could use instrumentally rational logic to make decisions that lead to conflict which destroys much of what they were allegedly fighting over.<sup>65</sup> The latter over-predicts conflict, in the case of the cognitive approaches, or struggles to

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<sup>65</sup> The literature in international relations on the Bargaining Theory of War (BTW), especially Fearon (1995) does offer some insight here. This literature argues that war between states results from three factors: private information each side possesses about its own capabilities and intentions, incentives to misrepresent that information to the adversary in order to gain a better deal in a war-avoiding bargain, and commitment problems, or the failure of both sides to believe the other will respect any deal made.

explain how different group identities can lead to conflict, in the case of the constructivist approaches. All of the identity-based literature at this level of analysis suffers from an overemphasis on ethnicity as a driver of conflict and a lack of attention to the role of the state in constructing identities.

The literature located at the level of the state, or Waltz's second image, is sparse and - with the exception of the few works discussed earlier<sup>66</sup> - sees the state as acted upon rather than as an actor in its own right. This literature tends to focus on a decline in state capacity as the cause of internal war, but in the post-Soviet cases all fifteen new states were weak, yet the majority of them did not experience internal war. Even in those states, like Georgia, where state weakness was profound and long-term, the majority of territorially concentrated minorities did not rebel.

Literature focusing on the level of the international system, or Waltz's third image, is sparse as well. What literature there is often examines only a single case, potentially compromising its generalizability, or examines a large number of cases and finds a "laundry list" of factors that may contribute to internal war. When discussing intervention, this literature tends to focus on military intervention designed to assist one side in winning a conflict rather than intervention by states and international institutions designed to prevent or resolve a conflict. Finally, while statistical studies of internal war have been helpful in discrediting some

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While this literature offers key insights about how groups can use a rational decision-making process and yet still arrive at a non-value-maximizing outcome (war), it has two limitations when applied to internal war. First, in interstate war, there is a reasonable chance that the winning state will emerge with its economy relatively intact, especially if it can ensure the bulk of the fighting takes place on the enemy's territory. In internal war, even the winner is likely to inherit a wrecked economy and a degraded infrastructure. Next, in internal war, absent the rare cases of wholesale ethnic cleansing, it is likely that the warring parties will still have to live together within the same borders, which is not usually the case in interstate war. These two differences would lead us to believe that bargaining failures are more likely to explain interstate war than internal war. Indeed, the vast majority of the BTW literature ignores cases of internal war.

<sup>66</sup> These are Darden, Lieberman and Singh, Mamdani and Brass.

widely-held assumptions about its causes, they are incapable of rigorously tracing causal pathways, and the risk factors for internal war that they propose are disconfirmed in the post-Soviet cases.

As mentioned previously, there have been a small number of comparative case studies of the post-Soviet conflicts, and these have proven valuable to our knowledge of the subject. Kaufman's *Modern Hatreds* examines the wars in Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia, Moldova and Yugoslavia, arguing that ethnic conflict can be either elite-led or mass-led, and that in either case symbols and symbolic politics are often critical factors in the escalation to war. Toft's *The Geography of Ethnic Violence* focuses on the different meanings of territory to majority and minority groups, with the former viewing it as an indivisible subject and the latter as a divisible object. Toft uses cases from Georgia and Russia to test her arguments. Cornell's *Autonomy and Conflict* focuses on Georgia alone, arguing that the bestowing by the Soviet Union of political autonomy on certain minority groups there made them more likely to rebel once the Soviet center collapsed. Finally, Zuercher's *The Post-Soviet Wars* focuses on the wars in the Caucasus, arguing that state capacity was the key factor that determined whether there was war or peace in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. Alone among these studies, Zuercher undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the wars that did not happen, focusing on Ajaria in Georgia and Dagestan in Russia. In his conclusion Zuercher argues that the factors that determined whether or not a state recovered its capacity and thus prevented war "were shaped by highly idiosyncratic social and cultural constellations, which can be described, as in this book, but which resist any further generalization".<sup>67</sup>

This dissertation differs from these comparative studies of post-Soviet conflict in several ways. First, unlike all except Zuercher, I focus on two wars that did not happen, thus ensuring

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<sup>67</sup> Zuercher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 230.



variation on the dependent variable. Second, unlike Kaufman, I limit my study to the former Soviet Union, since I argue that this is the best way to ensure a high level of comparability among my cases. Third, I examine the influence of external actors on the level of violent separatism observed in my cases, something none of the other studies includes as one of its explanatory variables. Finally, I depart from the focus on ethnicity as a descriptor of most or all forms of internal war. Instead, I argue that ethnicity is one form of identity that can become salient and lead to conflict, but it is not the only one. I argue that the level of ethnic content present in a conflict should be seen as a continuous variable instead of a dichotomous variable, as most of the literature treats it. Indeed, in contrast to Kaufman, I do not label the conflict in Moldova an ethnic conflict, arguing that other identities overlapped with a rather weak ethno-linguistic division to make conflict possible. The conflict in Abkhazia, on the other hand, had a high level of ethnic content and therefore more closely approaches what most of the literature labels “ethnic conflict”.

## **II. Institutions, Identities and International Intervention: Argument Overview**

Building from the constructivist approach while responding to Hanlon’s call for internal war to be examined from all three levels of analysis, I argue that the potential for violent separatism in the former Soviet Union was primarily a function of three factors: the level of division among the identities institutionalized by the Soviet state; the Soviet collapse itself, which acted as a critical juncture by throwing open for renegotiation the relationship of these identities to the institutions which had perpetuated them and regulated interaction among them; and the geopolitical affiliation of the state in question, which determined how it was treated by external actors.

The role played by these three factors can be summarized in the four theoretical claims made in this dissertation. These claims, although tested in this dissertation by applying them to

the post-Soviet cases, are also meant to apply to violent separatism as a general phenomenon. First, *group identities are often constructed deliberately by the institutions of the state and the policies these institutions promote and propagate*. There is support in the literature for this claim. Pierson was among the first to turn the standard assumed cause-effect relationship between public desires and government policies on its head, arguing that state policies are often underappreciated as a cause of political behavior, since these policies can provide incentives and resources for societal actors and can serve as sources of information and meaning.<sup>68</sup> Hattam and Lowndes provide empirical support for this claim by showing how an obscure 1977 directive from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, which “mandated the categories to be used by all federal departments and agencies when collecting and disseminating data on race and ethnicity”, articulated racial and ethnic categories that “now serve, in slightly revised form, as the official ethnic and racial categories for American society at large”.<sup>69</sup>

As discussed previously, Lieberman and Singh have perhaps gone farthest in applying this insight to ethnic conflict, arguing that “the state’s institutionalization of ethnic group boundaries provides a powerful basis for political mobilization and insurgency”.<sup>70</sup> I will use portions of their analytical argument to support my own, but I expand upon their framework by arguing that not only ethnic but other identities can and have been institutionalized by the state, and have provided the basis for mobilization and separatism.<sup>71</sup> As my empirical chapters

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Pierson, “When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change”, *World Politics* 45:4 (July 1993): 595-628.

<sup>69</sup> Victoria Hattam and Joseph Lowndes in Skowronek and Glassman (Eds.), *Formative Acts: American Politics in the Making*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, 210.

<sup>70</sup> Lieberman and Singh, “Institutionalized Ethnicity and Civil War”, 3. Lieberman and Singh do not dispute this claim, writing that “In a more abstract sense, our theory should not be limited only to ethnic groups”.

<sup>71</sup> The claim that states play a role in the construction of identities is well-established in the literature on race, gender and other identities. For example, Anthony Marx (1999) claims that race is not a natural, biological division, but is socially constructed by elites and states. Lisa Brush (2003) argues that states establish and police the boundaries between the genders. My approach brings these claims into the discussion on violent separatism, and in the process, confirms their validity.

will demonstrate, the Soviet state constructed three categories of identities within the populations under its control: these were ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional identities. Whether these identities were overlapping or cross-cutting played a critical role in the potential for conflict when the Soviet state collapsed.

My second theoretical claim is that *conflict between identity groups is caused by an existing institutionalized identity division within a state combined with the critical juncture of a political crisis or political transition*. In other words, promotion and institutionalization by the state of competing identities within a single state is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict between those identities. Also required is a significant and usually rapid change in the political status of the state, which in the words of Horowitz raises “the cardinal question of who would rule”.<sup>72</sup> Where Horowitz focuses on what he calls unranked ethnic groups, which struggle for control of the state, I argue that where ethnic groups are “ranked”, as they were in the Soviet Union, the approach of independence combined with a division in identity is more likely to result in separatism. Also, where Horowitz focuses exclusively on ethnic identities, I argue that other institutionalized identities also come into play. As discussed above, in the Soviet context historical-symbolic and regional identities also acquired salience. When these other identities are overlapping with an institutionalized ethnic identity, the potential for violent separatism to emerge is very high; where institutionalized identities are cross-cutting, volatility is less.

My third theoretical claim is that *violent conflict erupts when external actors intervene to promote separatism*. This apparently obvious statement contains two less self-evident sub-claims: groups will generally not pursue violent separatism without a reasonable prospect of success, and a reasonable prospect of success requires support from outside the borders of the state. As we shall see in my empirical chapters, all four of the successful violent separatist

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<sup>72</sup> Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985): 188.

movements in the former Soviet Union – those in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh – received outside support, either in the form of direct military intervention by the Soviet and later Russian military or by proxies allowed to infiltrate into the separatist region by Russia.<sup>73</sup> The one unsuccessful violent separatist movement in the former Soviet Union - that of the Chechens - received little to no outside support.<sup>74</sup> However, external intervention takes more than just military form, and its goals are more diverse than simply support of a violent separatist movement. In Estonia, as opposed to the cases discussed above, rising tensions between the center and the Russian-dominated northeast were met by a full-court press by a number of Western states and international institutions, with a single goal: to prevent the escalation of the conflict. The reason for this difference can be explained by a difference in how these states were perceived by external actors.

This brings us to my fourth and final theoretical claim, which is that *the geopolitical affiliation assigned to the target state by external actors strongly influences their decisions on intervention*. This affiliation forms the basis of how these external actors perceive their interests there and determines what actions are considered appropriate there. In the case of the former Soviet Union, there were two available affiliations that external actors could assign to states.<sup>75</sup> The first of these was “Western” or “European”; states assigned this affiliation were seen as legitimate international actors and therefore not legitimate targets for military intervention or other involvement designed to escalate their internal conflicts. Instead, they received institutional intervention designed to de-escalate them and to prevent the formation of violent separatist movements. The other available affiliation was “not Western” or “post-Soviet”;

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<sup>73</sup> In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia also provided support to the separatist movement.

<sup>74</sup> The remaining post-Soviet conflict – that in Tajikistan – was not separatist in nature.

<sup>75</sup> I do not include Russia as a potential target state for intervention here; therefore there are 14 potential target states.

states assigned this identity were seen as only partially legitimate and therefore were not offered significant institutional assistance. Instead, many became the targets of military intervention. The assigning of post-Soviet states to the “Western” group of states or the “post-Soviet” group of states implied different logics of conduct for external actors –these can be seen in terms of Wendt’s “cultures of anarchy”. Wendt lists three different cultures of anarchy in the international system: Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian.<sup>76</sup> Those assigned to the “Western” group can be seen as being embedded in a Kantian culture of anarchy, in which states see themselves existing in a “security community” and where assistance to others in need is the norm. Those assigned to the “post-Soviet” group can be seen as embedded in a Lockean culture of anarchy, in which states see themselves as rivals and where violence toward another state is sometimes undertaken. As we will see, there was a high degree of congruity between the geopolitical affiliations assigned to post-Soviet states by the West and those assigned by Russia.

While grounded in constructivist logic, this theory improves on many of the standard constructivist approaches to violent conflict in several ways. First, it incorporates factors from all three levels of analysis: the social group, the state and the international system. While this increases the complexity of my theory, it provides greater explanatory value and a more accurate model for “how the world actually works”. I believe that it does so at an acceptable cost to parsimony. Incorporating factors from all three levels of analysis also has the advantage of showing that both comparative politics and international relations can offer meaningful insights in the study of this phenomenon, and that further cooperation between scholars grounded in these disciplines is likely to be highly efficacious in studying it.

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<sup>76</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Next, the theory advanced in this dissertation improves upon standard constructivist arguments about how identities are acquired by taking seriously the role of the state in this process, rather than ascribing it to impersonal, macro-historical forces such as modernization and industrialization. I do not deny that these forces sometimes provide a “foundation” for group identities, but the edifice that is constructed on this foundation has room for considerable variation, and this is where the state and its policies play a key role. State policies that categorize and label people legitimize those attributes of identity selected for categorization while delegitimizing those not selected.<sup>77</sup> When state policies tie political power, economic advantage or other social benefits to these categories, they further increase their salience.

Finally, my theory moves past the assumption, prevalent in so much of the literature, that ethnicity is the only identity of interest when studying internal conflict (thus the misguided habit of naming almost all such wars “ethnic conflicts”). Instead, I show that although the ethnic content of a conflict can affect its intensity once it begins, an ethnic division alone is not sufficient to cause violent conflict. Conversely, the lack of a strong division in ethnic identity in the relationship between groups is no guarantee of peace between them if other institutionalized identity divisions are overlaid on this weak ethnic division. In short, ethnicity is one of several identities constructed by state policies, and it is the interaction of these identities that determines the likelihood of conflict between groups in a state. Where state policies have served to construct and institutionalize multiple, overlapping divisions in identities, the chances of conflict during political transition are significantly higher than in cases where identity-

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<sup>77</sup> As an example, some states categorize people according to religious criteria, others according to ethnic or racial criteria, others according to socio-economic status. The point is that those categories highlighted by the state acquire increased salience, especially when tied to benefits distributed by that state.

divisions are cross-cutting.<sup>78</sup> The four cases examined in this dissertation serve to test my theoretical claims.

### III. Four Cases in Three Countries

This dissertation examines the Soviet and early post-Soviet experiences of three countries: Georgia, Moldova and Estonia. From these three countries it selects four cases for examination. In two of these cases – Georgia-Abkhazia and Moldova-Transnistria – the outcome was a violent separatist movement that challenged the state and eventually won *de facto* self-rule. In the other two cases – Georgia-Ajaria and Estonia's Russian minority – although there were tensions between the majority and minority groups, these were eventually resolved peacefully. The advantages of selecting these cases for study are several.

First, the characteristics of these cases allow me to control for some factors and rule out others in the literature. For instance, all three states shared the same political status within the Soviet Union – all were among the fifteen union republics that made up the USSR, and each possessed its own national Communist Party and other state institutions. Although nominally sovereign, each was in reality subject to rule from Moscow. Next, the manner in which each state attained its independence was the same: a gradual decline in the power of the center culminating in a relatively quick formal end to the Soviet state<sup>79</sup>. Third, each state experienced a loss of state capacity along with economic and social turmoil in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Georgia's fall in these categories was especially precipitous, with a violent intra-Georgian power struggle going on in the background of the increasing violence between Georgians and

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<sup>78</sup> As an example, the chances of conflict in a state where two groups are divided by ethnicity, religion, economic status and regional settlement patterns are higher than in a state where two ethnic groups share a common religion, where neither is economically advantaged over the other, and where their settlement patterns are intermingled.

<sup>79</sup> The process culminating in the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991 is usually said to have begun with the collapse of the coup attempt against Gorbachev in August 1991. So while Soviet power had been waning for several years, its formal end came about relatively quickly.

Abkhazians. Yet as this violence escalated and the capacity of the Georgian state declined, there was no violent separatist movement in Ajaria. These cases also disconfirm the claim that autonomous status in the Soviet period led to a higher probability of violent separatism after independence: both Abkhazia and Ajaria had autonomy in the Soviet period, yet one rebelled and the other did not; neither Transnistria nor Estonia's Russian minority had autonomy, yet one rebelled and the other did not.

These four cases also allow us to rule out several of the factors in the statistical literature, which sees weak states, poverty, large populations, rough terrain and "lootable" natural resources as increasing the risk of conflict. As noted, weak states were a constant among these four cases. None were impoverished and none had large populations – all were upper or middle income Soviet states and all had fewer than 5 million inhabitants at the end of the Soviet period. Within Georgia, both Abkhazia and Ajaria are similarly mountainous; Moldova and Estonia are flat or rolling, with no significant mountains. Finally, of the four cases, only Estonia's Russian minority was sitting on top of any significant natural resource endowment, with large reserves of shale oil concentrated in the northeast of the country where the Russian minority dwelled.

Ethno-linguistic fractionalization, usually defined as probability that two randomly-selected individuals in a society will belong to different ethno-linguistic groups, is also fairly comparable among these three states. Georgia has the lowest level of fractionalization, at .493, followed by Estonia at .526 and Moldova at .547.<sup>80</sup> So the size and distribution of ethno-linguistic groups alone cannot be said to correlate with conflict potential for these three states.

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<sup>80</sup> Philip G. Roeder. 2001. "Ethnolinguistic Fractionalization (ELF) Indices, 1961 and 1985." <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~proeder/elf.htm>, internet resource accessed 15 September 2013.



The following table graphically illustrates the extent to which factors commonly found in the literature were present in each of my four cases.

**Table 1: Comparison of Cases According to Variables Found in Existing Literature**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Georgia-Abkhazia</b>	<b>Georgia-Ajaria</b>	<b>Moldova-Transnistria</b>	<b>Estonia-Russian Minority</b>
Weak State	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Poverty	No	No	No	No
Rough Terrain	Yes	Yes	No	No
Large Population	No	No	No	No
Lootable Resources	No	No	No	Yes <sup>81</sup>
Autonomy	Yes	Yes	No <sup>82</sup>	No
Ethnic Affinity/Diaspora	Yes <sup>83</sup>	Yes <sup>84</sup>	Yes	Yes
Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalization	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Violent Separatism</b>	<b>Peaceful</b>	<b>Violent Separatism</b>	<b>Peaceful</b>

There are two interesting and counter-intuitive conclusions to be drawn from an examination of the table. First, according to the factors in the literature, Abkhazia and Ajaria had equal conflict potential; second, according to these same factors Estonia actually had higher potential for conflict than did Moldova. Clearly then, the factors identified in much of the literature do not explain these cases.

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<sup>81</sup> Estonia had significant deposits of shale oil that were located in the northeast of the country, where the Russian minority is concentrated. While it debatable how “lootable” this resource is, the fact remains that this is the only significant natural resource present in these four cases.

<sup>82</sup> Transnistria had autonomy from 1924-1940, when the current territory of Transnistria plus several other regions were incorporated into the Ukrainian SSR as the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. After the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia from Romania in 1940 Transnistria was united with that province to form the Moldovan SSR, which was a unitary republic.

<sup>83</sup> Although the Abkhazian diaspora, located primarily in Turkey and the Middle East, played little role in the conflict, Abkhazia did receive significant assistance from the larger community of Circassians (or North Caucasus Mountain Peoples).

<sup>84</sup> While Ajarians are ethno-linguistically closely related to other Georgians, they were a majority Muslim population that had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire for several hundred years and still enjoyed a special relationship with Turkey.

Another reason these cases are advantageous for my research design is that they demonstrate variation on the dependent variable – the level of violent separatism. They also contain variation on my independent and intervening variables, and this variation illustrates the causal pathway leading to the observed outcomes. Since my research design incorporates variables from all three levels of analysis, it is somewhat complex. However, the causal pathway I articulate can be described in relatively simple terms. The independent variable is the level of institutionalized identity division in each state, or the extent to which state policies have created overlapping divisions in identities along ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional lines. The intervening variable that co-varies with the independent variable is the level of mobilization and escalation along this identity division. The next variable in my causal pathway is the geopolitical affiliation of the state. I label this a “quasi-independent variable” because while it has an effect on the ultimate outcome – the level of violent separatism - it only comes into play if the level of mobilization and escalation within the state is high.<sup>85</sup> The final intervening variable, which is determined by the state’s geopolitical affiliation, is the type of intervention the state experiences, which can be either escalatory or de-escalatory. Finally, the dependent variable is the level of violent separatism. The table below illustrates how these variables interacted to produce outcomes in each of my cases.

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<sup>85</sup> I call this variable “quasi-independent” because it only is activated *if* there is mobilization and escalation along an identity division, since it is only then that external actors begin to consider intervention. If this mobilization and escalation occur, it is the affiliation of the target state which then determines whether intervention takes a military form and seeks to escalate the conflict to the advantage of the external actor; or takes an institutional form and seeks to de-escalate the conflict and preserve the stability and sovereignty of the target state.

**Table 2: The Causal Pathway by Case**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Georgia-Abkhazia</b>	<b>Georgia-Ajaria</b>	<b>Moldova-Transnistria</b>	<b>Estonia-Russian Minority</b>
Level of division of institutionalized identities (Domestic IV)	High	Low/Medium	Medium/High	Medium/High
Level of mobilization and escalation (Domestic Intervening Variable)	High	Low	Medium/High	Low/Medium
Geopolitical Affiliation of Target State (International IV/"Quasi-IV")	Post-Soviet	Post-Soviet	Post-Soviet	Western
Type of Intervention (International Intervening Variable)	Escalatory	None	Escalatory	De-escalatory
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Violent Separatism</b>	<b>Peaceful</b>	<b>Violent Separatism</b>	<b>Peaceful</b>

Eckstein argues that the strongest test of a theory is what he labels a crucial case, in which "it must be extremely difficult, or clearly petulant, to dismiss any finding contrary to the theory as simply 'deviant'".<sup>86</sup> Since crucial cases rarely exist in the social world, Eckstein proposes that theories can also be tested using cases that comprise a "tough test", which he further divides into most likely or least likely cases. Most likely cases are those in which the independent variable strongly predicts the outcomes observed, while least likely cases are those in which the independent variable only weakly predicts the outcome observed.

The four cases examined here each provide a tough test of the theory, with two being most likely cases and two being least likely cases for my theoretical framework. The two Georgian cases are most likely cases, in which the independent variable at the domestic level strongly predicted the observed outcome; the independent variable at the international level served mainly to accelerate movement toward the outcome predicted by the domestic IV in

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<sup>86</sup> George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 120.

these cases. The Moldovan and Estonian cases comprise least likely cases, where the outcome is not strongly predicted by examining only the independent variable at the domestic level. In these cases, the difference in outcomes was strongly affected by the independent variable at the international level (or the “quasi-independent variable”). Collectively, these four cases produce a strong test of the theory.

*Abkhazia: Divided Identities in a “Post-Soviet” State Leads to Violent Separatism*

In Abkhazia, the Soviet state institutionalized and strengthened a previously-existing identity division between Georgians and Abkhazians. As Soviet power waned, this resulted in a high level of mobilization and escalation along this identity division, which erupted into large-scale violence between the groups after the Soviet collapse. Subsequent intervention by ethnic kin of the Abkhazians and eventually Russian troops allowed this conflict to escalate into a separatist war in which Abkhazia won *de facto* self-rule. The cause of the intervention in Abkhazia by Russia was the escalation of the identity conflict combined with Georgia’s geopolitical affiliation as a post-Soviet, non-Western state.

*Ajaria: “Merged” Identities in a “Post-Soviet” State Leads to a Peaceful Resolution*

In Ajaria, Soviet policies took a previously-existing and rather stark identity-division based upon a religious difference and essentially erased it. Soviet policies emphasized ethno-linguistic identities and de-legitimized religious ones, with the effect that by the end of the Soviet period Ajarians, who speak a Georgian dialect, self-identified as Georgians. Thus, although there was a power struggle between the Ajarian government in Batumi and the central government in Tbilisi, this struggle was devoid of any significant identity division and therefore remained confined to the relevant political institutions, even though the Georgian state remained profoundly weak. This lack of mobilization and escalation provided no grounds for

external actors to consider intervention, and the center-periphery power struggle was eventually resolved peacefully.

*Transnistria: Divided Identities in a “Post-Soviet” State Leads to Violent Separatism*

In Moldova, Soviet policies took a rather weak ethnic identity division and overlaid upon it divisions in regional and historical-symbolic identities. As Soviet power waned, the combination of these divisions in identity between Transnistrians and other Moldovans caused a high level of mobilization and escalation. As in Abkhazia, violence increased after the Soviet collapse, and intervention by the Russian 14<sup>th</sup> Army, along with volunteers from Russia and Ukraine, allowed Transnistria to win *de facto* self-rule. As in Georgia, the factor that determined the type of intervention by external actors in Moldova was its geopolitical affiliation as a post-Soviet, non-Western state.

*Estonia: Divided Identities in a “Western” State Leads to a Peaceful Resolution*

In Estonia, Soviet policies maintained an existing identity division between Estonians and Russian residents of Estonia. In a critical difference from the other cases, however, the Soviet government permitted Estonian Communists to exercise a degree of nationalist sentiment and even policy within Party structures. This allowed Estonian Communists to gain a degree of nationalist legitimacy with the Estonian people, meaning that many of them were retained in the first post-Soviet Estonian government. This shut out more extreme nationalists in Estonia; by contrast, such extreme nationalists did gain power in Georgia and Moldova. The fact that more moderate nationalists were in power in Estonia served to dampen the level of mobilization and escalation along the identity division, although it was still moderately high. What prevented external actors from exploiting the mobilization and escalation in Estonia was its geopolitical affiliation as a Western and therefore legitimate state. Indeed, instead of attempting to exploit the mobilization and escalation in Estonia, external actors sought to de-

escalate the situation, leading to a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Estonia and its Russian minority.

To present these cases, I intend to use what Peter Hall describes as “theory-oriented process tracing, which is highly effective in identifying the intervening causal process between an independent variable or variables and the outcome of the dependent variable.”<sup>87</sup> The advantages of this type of research for my topic are several. First, it focuses on the identification of a specific causal mechanism instead of the elaboration of an entirely new theory, which responds to Elster’s call for a focus on mid-range mechanisms instead of on universal theories of human behavior. Second, it is historically informed. As Rueschmeyer, Stephens and Stephens argue, this allows for the exploration of sequence and structural persistence, both of which are neglected by purely “presentist” scholarship.<sup>88</sup> This focus on sequencing is also useful for dealing with the question of endogeneity, since it rigorously analyzes the timing of events in the posited causal chain. Finally, using process tracing to examine a discrete number of historical cases from a specific geographical region allows for detailed and rigorous analysis of the independent and intervening variables in each, which avoids what Rueschmeyer, Stephens and Stephens claim is a major flaw in quantitative research: the use of crude and ambiguous indicators, the context of which is excluded from the analysis.<sup>89</sup> Another problem with using quantitative methods to study rare events such as internal war is that it compromises data quality.<sup>90</sup> The use of process tracing with rigorously specified

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<sup>87</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005): 206.

<sup>88</sup> Dietrich Rueschmeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 32-33.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>90</sup> Lieberman and Singh, “Institutionalized Ethnicity and Civil War”, (quoting King and Zheng, 2001), 7.

hypotheses and rigorously defined and operationalized variables allows for a high level of confidence in the causal inference process.

In order to trace the historical processes leading to the outcomes observed in my cases, I relied on a variety of sources. To trace processes occurring before the latter years of Soviet rule, I relied on mainly secondary sources. However, I was able to consult a significant number of official Soviet government documents, many of which I located on-line, through the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center for scholars. From the latter years of Soviet rule forward, I had the advantage of being able to augment my sources by interviewing participants in the events examined in my dissertation. In all, I conducted 44 interviews with participants in these events; each interview was recorded, and those interviewed represented all sides in the conflicts examined here.

To conclude, the cases selected allow me to eliminate many of the alternative explanations for the outcomes observed, and produce a strong test of my theory. The theoretical framework to be tested here argues that where state policies institutionalized an identity division, the collapse of the state led to mobilization and escalation along this cleavage in identity; given this mobilization and escalation, whether it led to full scale separatist war was determined by the type of external intervention, which itself was determined by the geopolitical affiliation external actors ascribed to the target state.

#### **IV. Scope, Goals and Plan of the Dissertation**

Before presenting my theory of violent separatism, it is important to discuss what this dissertation is and is not about, and what it does and does not purport to explain. First, it is less concerned with articulating a theory explaining the entire universe of cases of internal war and more concerned with accomplishing two other tasks: explaining a discrete set of cases, sharing a set of common attributes, within that universe; and demonstrating that certain cases of internal

war require the use of theories and insights from *both* comparative politics and international relations to be fully explained. This is not to argue that the theory proposed in this dissertation is not meant to be generalized, only that the cases to which it should be applied are a subset of all possible cases of internal war.

These cases should share two attributes. First, this dissertation is concerned with separatism by one group from the state in which it is located, and not with internal wars in which two or more sides fight to control the state. Next, the effects of rapid political transition figure prominently in my explanatory framework, meaning that it has more explanatory power in cases of newly-independent states than of existing states. Thus, the theory presented in this dissertation is meant to apply to cases of violent separatism in the context of states undergoing rapid political transition. Included in this subset are other post-Soviet wars, especially the one in Nagorno-Karabakh; the post-Yugoslav wars; and many of the post-imperial wars in Africa. Together these wars make up a significant majority of modern separatist wars.

There are several types of violence this dissertation is not concerned with, and which my theoretical framework does not purport to explain. The first of these is pure interstate war, in which two or more politically coherent states wage war against one another. I am also not concerned about interstate wars in which a third state, weaker than the main protagonists but otherwise cohesive, becomes a theater of conflict in an interstate war. As noted above, I also do not examine cases where two groups internal to a state each seeks to seize control of the state at the expense of the other – instead I am concerned with cases in which one group seeks to break away from the state. Finally, riots, pogroms, massacres and other forms of internal violence that erupt and then die out periodically are not a major subject of inquiry here. Instead, this dissertation seeks to explain sustained, escalating violence that culminates in a movement by one group to break away from the state. Riots and other forms of internal



violence are thus only of interest if they are part of the escalatory process that leads to a violent separatist movement.

The rest of the dissertation proceeds as follows. In the next chapter I define the terms and variables included in the theory, elaborate the theory in detail, and discuss operationalization and measurement of my key variables. I also present a directed acyclic graph (DAG) depicting the causal process at work. The third chapter examines the process by which the Soviet state constructed and institutionalized identities in my four cases, concluding with an assessment of the level of institutionalized identity division in each case at the end of the Soviet period. The fourth chapter examines the critical juncture of the Soviet collapse, explaining how the level of institutionalized identity division that was a legacy of Soviet state policies produced the level of mobilization and escalation seen in each case in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Chapter five discusses how Georgia, Moldova and Estonia were perceived by external actors and illustrates how this geopolitical affiliation – and not the military or economic significance of the target state, or some other material factor – determined the actions of external actors in each state, which in turn determined whether or not the conflict there escalated to violent separatism. Finally, the sixth chapter summarizes my findings, offers conclusions and suggests avenues for further research.

The puzzle examined here is a complex but important one. Why do some processes of political transition proceed peacefully while others result in violent separatism? What are the factors that cause external actors to intervene in internal conflicts? As noted earlier, internal wars tend to last longer and result in more deaths than interstate wars, and they also make up a large and increasing proportion of all wars that erupt. Given these facts, attaining an understanding of the causes of one particular form of internal war – violent separatism – is a project of considerable importance. By the end of this project, my hope is that the reader will

agree that the potential for violent separatism in states undergoing political transition can be explained by examining the role of *institutions, identities and international intervention*.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORY

### **I. Introduction**

What is the role of the state in the construction of social identities? When does conflict between social groups take the form of violent separatism? Why and how do external actors intervene in internal conflicts? Most importantly, why does violent separatism erupt in some states undergoing political transitions, but not in others? The existing literature about the causes of violent separatism provides few answers to these important questions, and the answers it does provide are in many cases challenged or outright disconfirmed by the experiences of the post-Soviet states. This dissertation seeks to answer these questions and to provide a more comprehensive theory of violent separatism using variables from all three levels of analysis: the social group, the state and the international system.

The theory of violent separatism presented in this dissertation proceeds in three parts. The first part seeks to explain how states construct and institutionalize identities in their populations. This section of the argument contains the independent variable: the level of institutionalized identity division with a state. Where the level of this variable is high, the potential for conflict is also high. The second part of the theory examines how the independent variable facilitates the level of mobilization around an identity division and escalation of identity conflict, given the constant of political transition. The logic here is that political transition puts important questions like citizenship, form of government, center-periphery relations and the structure of political institutions in play. In consolidated, stable political systems these questions are generally considered settled; this is especially true in authoritarian systems like the Soviet Union. However, when these systems enter a stage of political transition, either

commenced by the state itself or influenced by external events,<sup>91</sup> space opens up for the renegotiation of these questions. Where there is a high level of institutionalized identity division within a state, this process of political transition and renegotiation of once-settled questions is likely to be accompanied by a high level of mobilization around this identity division and escalation of identity conflict.

The third part of the theory examines the role of external actors to explain why this mobilization and escalation sometimes results in a violent separatist movement and other times weakens and wanes on its own. Put simply, when external actors engage in efforts to alleviate an escalating identity conflict, it can be resolved peacefully; when external actors intervene militarily, the conflict is much more likely to spiral into a violent separatist movement. Even in relatively weak and incoherent states, minority groups rarely have the military strength to mount a violent challenge to the authority of the central government without assistance from outside the borders of the state. This is a fairly obvious statement; what is less obvious is the cause of such critical decisions by external actors. The theory presented in this dissertation argues that the geopolitical affiliation of the target state is the single most important factor driving intervention decisions. Where the potential target of intervention is perceived as a Western state, intervention will be led by Western states and international institutions and will take the form of conflict prevention or mediation efforts. Where the potential target of intervention is not perceived as a member of the West, the way is opened for external states to pursue their own agendas, and intervention is more likely to take a military form, thereby escalating the conflict into a separatist war. The theory presented here sees geopolitical

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<sup>91</sup> In the Soviet case, the state itself began the process of political transition by implementing Gorbachev's reform policies. In other cases, such as the post-Communist "Color Revolutions" and the Arab Spring movements, a process of diffusion appears to be at work, where political transition in one state catalyzes similar processes in other states.

affiliation in bipolar or binary terms – a state is either perceived as a member of the West or it is not. There are, of course, “middle cases”, in which there is no clear affiliation assigned to a state by external actors, or where a state’s affiliation is a matter of contention among external actors. In these cases outcomes are more indeterminate, and factors such as the strategic military value of a state are more likely to play prominent roles in intervention decisions.<sup>92</sup>

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. First, I discuss and define key terms and concepts. Next, I provide an overview of my argument, both graphically and through discussion of its key mechanisms. I then specify my research hypotheses, and finally I explain how each of my variables is operationalized and measured. The objective of this chapter is to present an analytical framework that provides answers to the key questions that opened this chapter: the role of the state in the construction of social identities; the causes of violent separatism; and the logic underlying external intervention in separatist conflicts. The answers provided here will then be tested in following chapters.

## **II. Discussion and Definition of Key Terms and Concepts**

This section discusses and defines the following terms and concepts, each of which is important to understanding the theory presented in this chapter: identity, institutions, institutionalized identity division, critical juncture, mobilization and escalation, geopolitical affiliation, international intervention, and violent separatism. Some of these terms and concepts are relatively common in the literature, although there is often debate over their exact

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<sup>92</sup> The civil war in Syria, ongoing as of this writing, is an example here. In this case, the geopolitical affiliation of Syria is a matter of disagreement among external actors – it does not obviously belong to any geopolitical bloc. While not a member of the West, it is also an outlier in its region, since it is a comparatively secular, Shia-dominated regime in a region where most states are Sunni –dominated. It has a sectarian and strategic affiliation with Iran and a military strategic relationship with Russia. The result has been an incoherent mix of external interventions. The West has used primarily institutional means to attempt to stop the escalating violence, Russia and Iran have supported the regime with significant military assistance, and many of Syria’s Sunni neighbors have quietly aided the opposition to the regime.

meanings. In these cases I will declare which of the meanings presented in the literature will form the foundation for the definition used in this dissertation. In other cases, terms presented will be unique to this dissertation – in these cases I will advance my own definition.

### Violent Separatism

Violent separatism is the dependent variable, and the key term in this dissertation. It is a specific form of internal or civil war, and it is defined here as *the use of organized military means by a group within a state to separate itself from that state and exercise self-rule*. Not all separatist conflict is violent separatist conflict. In some cases, groups make claims to autonomy or independent statehood but fail to engage in large scale violence to pursue these claims.

### Identity

A rich literature on identity has developed within both comparative politics and international relations over the last twenty years. In contrast to materialist approaches, which argue that identities are nothing more than the markers of the distribution of material power,<sup>93</sup> constructivist approaches in international relations argue that identities have a level of ideational content that prevents them from being used in a purely instrumental way. For Alexander Wendt, “To have an identity is simply to have certain ideas about who one is in a given situation”.<sup>94</sup> Constructivism in international relations has done considerable theorizing on how identities relate to interests and why ideational factors can affect how material factors are perceived. Wendt argues, for example, that constructivism can explain why power in the hands of one actor is seen differently than an equivalent amount of power in the hands of another actor. In this formulation, the meaning of power is determined by the interests it is seen to serve, and these interests are in turn a function of ideas or ideologies. Power is thus constituted

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<sup>93</sup> Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 170.

by interests and interests are constituted by ideas. This view of power can explain, as Wendt says, why American power has a different meaning for Canada than it does for Cuba.<sup>95</sup>

Whereas Wendt sees a state's identity as acquired at the level of the international system through interaction with other states, Hopf argues that a state's foreign policy identity is the result of the interaction of domestic and international factors. In this two-step process, groups of domestic actors motivated by ideas or ideologies about the role of their state in the world compete to dominate in the process of formulation of foreign policy by the state. This policy is then received and evaluated by other states and international actors, who use it to assign that state an identity. For Hopf then, identities are useful in that they categorize people according to common features, "making the other's actions intelligible and an individual's own actions vis-à-vis them intelligible to himself".<sup>96</sup> This leads Hopf to characterize identities as always relational but only sometimes oppositional.<sup>97</sup> In other words, identities tell us who we are, who others are in relation to ourselves, and how we should interact with these others.

Within comparative politics, Chandra has done perhaps the most comprehensive study of how identities are formed at the domestic level and the implications of both this process and the identities it produces. Chandra argues that an identity is "a category that can be used to classify or describe an individual – that is, a category for which she possesses the attributes that determine eligibility of membership".<sup>98</sup> Chandra also engages in a lengthy and valuable discussion about what constructivism is *not* with respect to identities.<sup>99</sup> First, it is not the argument that biology does not matter – biology clearly does matter in that it determines

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 96-113.

<sup>96</sup> Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 5.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>98</sup> Kanchan Chandra, Ed. *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 100.

<sup>99</sup> Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, 149-152.

objective characteristics that are then subject to interpretation by others. In the context of race or ethnicity, for example, while biology determines the color of our skin, socially constructed interpretations determine how we “see” that skin color. The same skin color can be described as light in India, brown in Brazil and black in the US. Next, it is not the argument that identities are created out of thin air; although they are indeed constructed there are objective limits to this construction process.<sup>100</sup> We are not all free to become anyone and anything we want; all strands of constructivism agree that there are constraints on how identities can be imagined and constructed. Third, constructivism is not the argument that ethnic identities are always fluid – because they can change does not mean that they always do. And finally, it is not (only) the argument that identity change is the product of instrumental calculation – although this argument is a strain within constructivism, other strains see self-identifications as expressive rather than instrumental. The primary difference between constructivism in international relations and constructivism in comparative politics lies in this final point, with comparative politics acknowledging a greater possibility for instrumental use of identity than does international relations.

Drawing upon these definitions of identity, the definition used in this dissertation describes identity as *a set of ideas about who we are, about who others are in relation to us, and about the implications this has for our interaction with them*. The term identity as used in this dissertation has a set of characteristics that serve to further refine the above definition. First, identity is usually *based upon an objectively existing material foundation* – how we see ourselves and others is not completely unconstrained by physical and material factors. This is not to argue that identities are *primarily* based upon objective, material or physical attributes,

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<sup>100</sup> Wendt echoes this argument in his discussion of “rump materialism”, arguing that life “cannot be ideas all the way down because scientific realism shows that ideas are based on and regulated by an independently existing physical reality”. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 110.



only that these attributes, especially in the construction of ethnic identities, cannot be ignored. To give but one example, if I insisted that I came from a line of Zulu warriors that had not mixed with any other ethnic groups, my light skin, blue eyes and light colored hair would cast serious doubt upon this claim. Next, although bounded by these material factors, identities are *primarily ideational and inherently relational* – as Chandra shows, the same set of material attributes can be “seen” differently by different actors in different settings. The next characteristic of identities contained in my definition is that they are *malleable but not fluid* – while they can and do change over time, they do not change instantaneously and do not change without considerable effort on the part of an actor or institution.<sup>101</sup> Finally, identities are *multiple and situational*. Every actor has multiple identities, and which identity becomes salient in a given situation depends in large part on the nature of that situation. This is not to argue that actors don identities instrumentally in order to get what they want out of a given situation. Indeed, as we shall see, the identity that often becomes most salient is the one most threatened in a given situation, not the one that stands to gain an actor the greatest advantage.

### Institutions

The recent unpublished works by Darden and Lieberman and Singh have advanced the understanding of the role of state institutions in the construction of identities; this work builds upon previous work by Mamdani, Brass and others. For the purposes of this dissertation two types of institutions matter: those of the state and those at the level of the international system. The former are seen as playing a key role in the formation of social identities within the

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<sup>101</sup> This definition rejects the pure rationalist arguments that see identity as something that is epiphenomenal and used instrumentally. These arguments see identities as fluid, in that actors adopt them to get what they want in a given situation. In these arguments identities are retained only as long as they are useful, and then discarded in favor of more useful identities when the situation changes. My definition sees identities as malleable, like a soft metal that can be hammered into shape by states and their policies. While they can be shaped, they do not change quickly in response to the exigencies of a given situation.

boundaries of a given state, while the latter are seen as using the geopolitical affiliation of that state at the level of the international system as a guide for making decisions about how to respond to events within that state's borders<sup>102</sup>. One of the earliest and most widely disseminated definitions of institutions is that of Douglass North, who calls them "the rules of the game in a society, or more generally... the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction"<sup>103</sup>.

Another commonly-used definition sees them as "systems of rules that apply to the future behavior of actors"<sup>104</sup>. In this definition, institutions are different from regularities, which are propositions based upon the observation of patterns in past events that do not in themselves have normative qualities and cannot sanction deviance from them. They are also different from conventions, in that the rules institutions are comprised of are more often contested. Violations of institutional rules are therefore seen as resulting from an actor's interest and are not simply mistakes. North argues that while conventions become self-reinforcing the moment they are adopted (the QWERTY keyboard is the example given) institutions can be challenged and their alteration advocated<sup>105</sup>.

Missing from this discussion of institutions is the effect they have on the identities of their members. While institutions certainly constrain the behavior of those subject to their rules, they also shape how these actors define themselves. Literature in both comparative politics and international relations acknowledges this effect of institutions. Within comparative

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<sup>102</sup> Although there is a literature within international relations which discusses how international institutions socialize their members, thus modifying their behaviors and identities, this dissertation does not reference this literature. The reason for this is that this dissertation is more concerned with how international institutions deal with states who are either new members or non-members. The identities of these states are thus taken as a given and not yet subject to change through institutional socialization.

<sup>103</sup> Ian Shapiro, Stephen Skowronek and Daniel Galvin, *Rethinking Political Institutions: The Art of the State* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 115.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

politics Pierson, as discussed, has argued that public policies can be sources of information and meaning for political actors, and can help the broader public develop political identities<sup>106</sup>. In the international relations literature on institutions, Hopf and Hurd have argued that institutions have an effect on the identities of actors, and not simply on their behaviors. Hopf maintains that constructivist logic can explain the persistence of institutions past the point at which they have served their original purpose by pointing to the fact that the members of these institutions have developed an understanding of each other as partners in a common enterprise<sup>107</sup>; and Hurd argues that rule-following by members of institutions is due more to socialization into norms of institution than to institutional constraints on behavior<sup>108</sup>. Drawing together the different strands of these definitions of institutions, this dissertation defines them as *sets of rules that govern the behavior and shape the identities of their members, and that are subject to change and renegotiation by those members*.

#### *Institutionalized Identity Division*

The concept of an institutionalized identity division is both unique and essential to the argument presented in this dissertation. Institutionalized identities are defined as *those identities that the state seeks to influence through its policies and institutions*. In most cases this involved the promotion of a specific identity, but, as we will see, in some cases it also involved the de-legitimization by the state of a competing identity. For the purposes of this dissertation, the types of institutionalized identities examined are ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic, and regional. Identity-division is defined as *the extent to which state-constructed, institutionalized identity groups form mutually exclusive "sets"*. In a single state, where the state-constructed

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<sup>106</sup> Pierson, "When Effect Becomes Cause", 619.

<sup>107</sup> Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory", *International Security* 23:1 (Summer, 1998), 171-200.

<sup>108</sup> Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics, *International Organization* 53:2 (Spring, 1999), 379-408.

ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional identities of one group all correspond, and this group is opposed by another group which also has corresponding state-constructed ethno-linguistic, regional and historical-symbolic identities, there will be a high level of institutionalized identity-division.

### Critical Juncture

In states where there is a high level of institutionalized identity division, minority groups will have a motive to separate from the state in order to protect their identities and exercise independent political power. In normal political life governed by even a minimally coherent state, the opportunity to do so is severely impeded. However, when the state enters a period of rapid political transition, social groups often seize the opportunity to attempt to raise their status, since previously-settled relationships are now open for negotiation. In some cases these attempts give rise to violent separatist movements. This is because rapid political transition involves renegotiation of both the form and the authority of the key political institutions of the state. Where institutionalized identity-divisions exist, the process of transition thus makes them more salient.

This period of rapid political transition can be seen as a critical juncture. Following Capoccia and Keleman, this dissertation defines critical junctures as *“short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents’ choices will affect the outcome of interest”*<sup>109</sup>. Whether a period of time is seen as a critical juncture is dependent upon two factors: probability jump, defined as a comparison of the outcome of the critical juncture with the probability of that outcome occurring absent the critical juncture; and

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<sup>109</sup> Capoccia, Giovanni and Keleman, Daniel. “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism”, in *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 3, April 2007, p. 348.

temporal leverage, defined as the duration of the impact of the critical juncture compared to the duration of the critical juncture itself<sup>110</sup>.

### Mobilization and Escalation

During a critical juncture within a state containing high levels of institutionalized identity division, mobilization along that identity division and escalation of conflict between groups is to be expected. This dissertation defines mobilization as *the extent to which rhetoric, policy and mass action occur around the relevant identity division*. It defines escalation as *the level of inter-group hostility displayed in such rhetoric, policy and mass action*.

### Geopolitical Affiliation

Geopolitical affiliation is intended to stand for the identity of an actor – in this case a state – at the level of the international system. Thus, much of the previous discussion of how identity is acquired and the meaning it contains applies to geopolitical affiliation as well. However, there is one important difference between the social identities of groups and the geopolitical affiliation of a state: whereas the social identities of groups are largely acquired and shaped by the policies of the state in which they live, the lack of an institution with a monopoly on the use of force at the level of the international system (the lack of a “world state”) means that the geopolitical affiliations of states are formed through a less institutionalized process. Instead of an authoritative institution assigning identities, institutionalizing them and regulating interaction among them, as happens in coherent states, the geopolitical affiliation of a state at the level of the international system is largely a product of more informal historical interactions.

Thus, whereas the identities of social groups can change relatively quickly – often in the matter of a generation – due to the impact of state policies, the geopolitical affiliations of states change more slowly, since they are the product of multiple, often long-term interactions with

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 363.

other states and international institutions. In many ways, how a state defines itself is less important than how other states and international institutions define it, since this is the determinant of how they treat the state in question. An important nuance contained within my previous description of identities as multiple and situational applies to the geopolitical affiliation of a state as well: the multiple identities assigned to any actor include those self-assigned and those assigned by others. When these do not match there is a high potential for misunderstanding and miscalculation. In the context of this dissertation, this can be illustrated by the fact that although Georgia and Moldova saw themselves as “Western” states having emerged from Soviet occupation in 1991, the West and Russia, their most prominent international interlocutors, saw both of them as “non-Western”. This had profound implications for how these newly-independent states were treated by international actors.

Since we are concerned here with the potential for international intervention in an escalating separatist conflict, the focus here is less on the self-designation of geopolitical affiliation by states and more on the designation assigned by external actors. Thus, this dissertation defines geopolitical affiliation as *a series of ideas held by external actors about the historical, regional and ideological connection of a state to a group of similar states, and the implications this connection has for their interactions with the state in question.*

#### International Intervention

International intervention – used interchangeably with external intervention in this dissertation – can take the form of either military intervention or institutional intervention. Military intervention is defined as *military actions taken by external actors designed to influence the outcome of a separatist conflict.* Institutional intervention is defined as *actions taken by external actors designed to prevent or mitigate a separatist conflict.* Military intervention is most often undertaken by other states, either by providing arms and equipment, by allowing the

infiltration of fighters, or by the direct intervention of that state's military forces. Institutional intervention can be undertaken by both states and international institutions.

### Other Terms of Interest

The terms internal war, civil war and intra-state war are all used in the literature to describe large-scale violence occurring within the recognized international borders of a state. Often, these wars are described as “ethnic conflicts”; this dissertation argues that this labeling convention unnecessarily conflates ethnic identity and other forms of identity. In other words, the level of ethnic content in an identity conflict is a variable, and labeling all such conflicts “ethnic conflicts” ignores the influence of other forms of identity such as regional, ideological and even religious.

Chandra describes ethnicity as “a subset of categories in which descent-based attributes are necessary for membership”.<sup>111</sup> For Chandra, the list of these attributes includes “race, region, religion, sect, language family, language, dialect, caste, clan, tribe or nationality of one's parents or ancestors, or one's own physical features”.<sup>112</sup> The cases examined in this dissertation argue for a more restrictive definition of ethnicity, one that does not include religion and region. First, these are traits that can be changed at will, while language and ancestry require longer periods of time to change – they are more “stable” attributes over time. While an adult member of a group can decide which region to inhabit or which religion – if any – to follow, she cannot as quickly and easily change her native language<sup>113</sup> (although this did happen over time in the Soviet Union) or her ancestry. Second, in the Soviet context religion was specifically de-emphasized as an attribute of identity, while ethno-linguistic traits were specifically emphasized.

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<sup>111</sup> Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, 9.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>113</sup> Although people did change their native language in the Soviet Union, this generally took several generations, despite pressure from the state to do so.

This dissertation thus inclines toward a more restrictive definition of ethnicity focused on more narrowly-defined descent-based categories. For instance, Rothschild describes an ethnic group as one “whose membership is largely determined by real or putative ancestral inherited ties”,<sup>114</sup> while Lieberman and Singh define ethnicity as “those cultural categories rooted in a sense of common ancestry”.<sup>115</sup> Using this more restrictive definition of ethnicity will allow me to disaggregate ethnicity from other forms of identity and more accurately determine the actual source of an identity conflict rather than labeling most or all such conflicts “ethnic conflicts”.

### **III. The Argument**

The dependent variable (DV) in my argument is the level of violent separatism experienced in each of my four cases. The causal pathway leading to violent separatism in states undergoing political transition can be described as follows. Where the level of institutionalized identity division (IV) is high at the onset of transition, the level of mobilization around this identity division and escalation of conflict will also be high. The institutionalized identity division provides the motive here, and the onset of political transition provides the opportunity for groups to mobilize and contest the power of the state. Where the level of mobilization and conflict escalation is high, the “quasi-independent variable” of the geopolitical affiliation of the state comes into play. In states not regarded as members of the West, high levels of mobilization and escalation will result in military intervention by neighbors, further escalating conflict and leading to a high level of violent separatism.

Conversely, where the level of institutionalized identity division in a state is low at the onset of transition, the level of mobilization and conflict escalation will also be low, since social

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<sup>114</sup> Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics*, 9.

<sup>115</sup> Lieberman and Singh, “Institutionalized Ethnicity and Civil War”, 5.



groups will lack a motive for mobilization around an identity division. Low levels of mobilization and conflict escalation, in turn, provide no rationale for external intervention. In these cases, the geopolitical affiliation of the state plays no role, since there is no rationale justifying intervention to begin with.

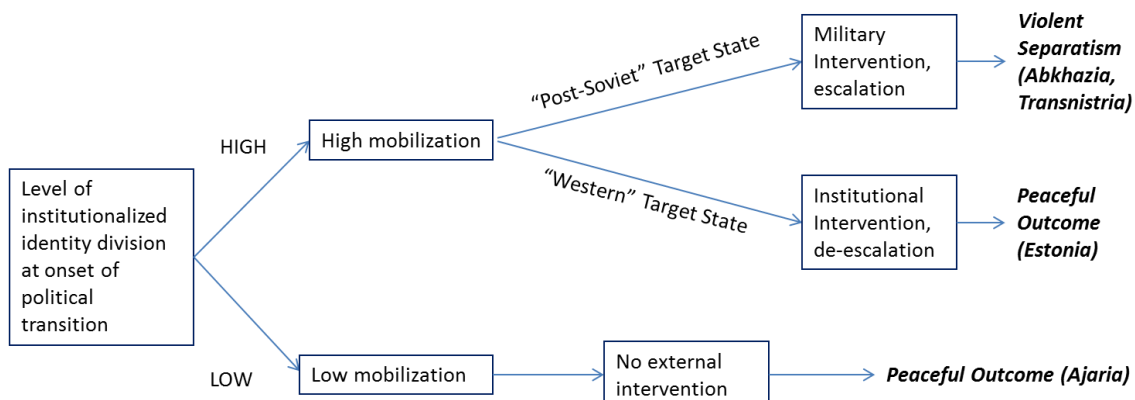
Finally, in states regarded as members of the West, even high levels of conflict escalation will not result in external military intervention; instead, intervention will be led by Western states and international institutions, and will be focused on de-escalating the conflict.<sup>116</sup> This is because states with a Western geopolitical affiliation are afforded a higher level of respect for their sovereignty by both Western and non-Western external actors. Since they are considered legitimate, these states are seen as deserving of help by other Western states, and not seen as legitimate targets of military intervention by non-Western actors.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> More formally, the argument explaining the causes of violent separatism put forth in this dissertation can be explained as follows. The independent variable (IV) is the level of institutionalized identity division present in a state. The onset of political transition is a constant or parameter common to each case. The level of mobilization and escalation is an intervening variable whose value varies with that of the IV. The geopolitical affiliation of the target state is a “quasi-independent variable” (QIV). While it affects the level of the dependent variable, it does not come into play *unless* there is a high level of mobilization and escalation in the target state. The type of international intervention is an intervening variable whose value varies with the value of the QIV: in “Western” states, intervention will be de-escalatory; in “non-Western” states it will be escalatory. The level of violent separatism is the dependent variable (DV).

<sup>117</sup> Of course, Western military power plays some role in this, since in the period examined here Russia was especially weak militarily vis-a-vis the West. But the imbalance in military power alone cannot explain the outcomes observed. As noted previously, Russia had more security interests at stake in Estonia than it did in Moldova and even arguably in Georgia. Had Russia intervened in defense of its interests in Estonia, it is unlikely that the West, even with its military superiority, would have responded. The Western reaction to the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia supports this claim. Instead, it was the perception, by both Russia and the West, that as a Western state Estonia was to be treated differently than Moldova and Georgia, which was primarily responsible for the lack of Russian intervention there.

In the form of a directed acyclic graph (DAG), the argument can be presented as follows:



In order to further explore this argument, the next section of this chapter examines the “how and why” of each variable, first explaining how it works and then explaining why it matters to the argument.

#### *How and Why State Policies Construct and Institutionalize Identities*

The argument that states construct and institutionalize identities rests upon the assertion that identities are capable of being constructed. As discussed previously, this dissertation asserts that identities are neither fixed and primordial nor fluid and contingent – instead, they are seen as enduring yet malleable over the long-term. The extent to which a state is able to construct and institutionalize identities is seen as a function of the capacity and coherence of the state, the effort it devotes to the construction of identities, the length of its rule and the pre-existing identities within its population.

The idea that institutions can have independent causal power was long neglected in political science, before making a comeback in the 1980s. In 1984, March and Olsen argued that rather than seeing institutions as simply reflecting the aggregate of societal preferences and representing arenas in which political behavior occurs, we should embrace a perspective that acknowledges a level of interdependence between relatively autonomous social and political

institutions.<sup>118</sup> In 1985 Scokpol echoed this with her call for more attention to the role of the state as an entity standing between the domestic sociopolitical order and the international state system.<sup>119</sup>

If we conclude that the state as an actor is to be taken seriously, and that its institutions can have a causal effect on the identities of those populations subject to their rules, this still does not answer the question of how this process unfolds. In other words, what does the state actually do in order to construct and institutionalize identities within its population? Or does the state simply reinforce an existing set of identities? As Chandra puts it, do institutions create ethnic groups from scratch, do they transform existing group identities or do they simply alter the salience of a particular pre-existing identity.<sup>120</sup> This dissertation argues that although the state cannot create identities “from scratch”, absent some sort of objective material basis, it can and does transform existing identities and alter their salience. Wendt’s discussion of the role of ideas versus that of what he calls “rump materialism” is illustrative of this point. An identity is a set of ideas about who we are, about who others are in relation to us, and about the implications this has for our interaction with them. However, as Wendt says, identity as an idea must have some material basis: life “cannot be ideas all the way down because scientific realism shows that ideas are based on and regulated by an independently existing physical reality”.<sup>121</sup>

So an identity must have some objective material basis in order to gain traction and salience among a population. This basis can be a set of physical traits, a connection to a geographic region, or a socio-economic class, to give but three examples. However, given even

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<sup>118</sup> James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life”, *The American Political Science Review* 78:3 (1984): 734-749.

<sup>119</sup> Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer and Theda Scokpol (Eds.), *Bringing the State Back In*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 8.

<sup>120</sup> Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, 143.

<sup>121</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 110.

a modicum of material basis, the state has wide latitude in constructing powerful and enduring identities. Physical traits, geographic region and socio-economic class are not dichotomous variables: they are continuous and often defy simple classification; that is, *until* the institutions of the state provide these classifications and propagate them within a society. The example previously discussed, in which an obscure 1977 directive from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget articulated racial and ethnic categories that now serve as the official racial and ethnic categories for American society at large,<sup>122</sup> provides empirical support to this statement. Other scholars provide further support by showing how institutions can create, sometimes unwittingly, discourses which acquire the status of objective reality even though they can be contested in principle. For instance, Crawford Young observes that the “fact” that Tanzania is comprised of a large number of small identity groups while Uganda has a large plurality group reflects an accident of classification under colonial rule; under a different and equally plausible classification scheme the structure of ethnic diversity on the two countries would have been very similar.<sup>123</sup> In other words, two different sets of colonial institutions operating on very similar “ethnic terrain” constructed two separate classification systems for the ethnic groups they found, and these labels have persisted to the present day.

In the Soviet Union, there were three ways in which the state constructed and institutionalized identities within its population, and each of these ways was associated with the development of a specific identity category. First, the state classified and labeled people according the ethnic and linguistic criteria: this constructed ethno-linguistic identities within society. Next, the state’s education policies, especially through mass literacy and education in national history, influenced the development of historical-symbolic identities. Finally, by

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<sup>122</sup> Victoria Hattam and Joseph Lowndes in Stephen Skowronek and Matthew Glassman (Eds.), *Formative Acts: American Politics in the Making*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 210.

<sup>123</sup> Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, 143.

influencing settlement patterns and the location of key economic sectors, the state influenced the development of regional identities. I will address each of these processes in general terms, and then I will conclude this section of the chapter with an overview of how these processes operated in the Soviet Union.

The institutions of the state operate in two separate but often inter-related ways to construct identities. First, they influence how people think of themselves and others, altering discursive frameworks within a society, as the cases above by Hattam and Lowndes and Young make clear. Next, they can attach costs and benefits to particular aspects of identity. Chandra calls the former institutions which structure cognition and the latter institutions which structure incentives. Many institutions do both – the census is one example of such an institution, since it affects the commonsensical frameworks that individuals operate within and attaches incentives to the choice of some attributes over others.<sup>124</sup> The census and related state policies and institutions such as identity documents, affirmative action policies, and language laws are especially powerful in the construction of ethno-linguistic identities. This is because they not only “make sense” of what is often a confusing array of sometimes overlapping ethnic and linguistic groups by neatly giving each a label and attaching these labels to individuals, but they quite often use these same labels in apportioning access to political power, educational opportunity and other benefits.

Two empirical examples of how state policies influence ethnic identities serve to make this point. First, Laitin shows that the creation of tribal identity as “commonsensically real” and the expunging of the religious identity from the political arena which persist in Nigeria to this day are the result of 19<sup>th</sup> Century colonial policies, which emphasized tribal identities and de-

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 144.

emphasized religious ones.<sup>125</sup> Next, Nagel discusses the impact of U.S. government Indian policies, which induced those who qualified to mobilize as Native Americans, even though this was an artificial, externally-imposed category. These same policies also served to discourage mobilization along religious, regional, class or ideological boundaries.<sup>126</sup> So state policies that label and classify people serve to construct ethno-linguistic identities by establishing or altering discursive frameworks, thus influencing how people think of themselves and others, and by incentivizing the adoption of some identities and discouraging the adoption of others.

Aside from ethno-linguistic identities, state policies influence the development of historical-symbolic identities and regional identities. The state's education policies are enormously important in the construction of historical-symbolic identities. Darden focuses on the content of the national "constitutive story" taught at the onset of mass schooling, arguing that this story is internalized by individuals and their families, producing an affective tie that makes this constructed identity "virtually impervious to significant change or elimination over time".<sup>127</sup> Darden argues that mass schooling not only provides people with the content required for the construction of a national historical-symbolic identity, but also provides the conceptual tools necessary to do so. This is because schooling not only endows people with a set of categories with which to group and classify things and people, but also teaches the cognitive skills required for abstract classification.

To prove this point, Darden refers to experiments conducted in the early Soviet period among five different groups with different levels of education, from completely illiterate to highly literate. The groups were asked to classify shapes and lengths of yarn; those who were

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>127</sup> Keith Darden, *Resisting Occupation: Mass Schooling and the Creation of Durable National Loyalties*, Book Manuscript, 10.

less literate grouped the shapes according to representations of physical objects with which they were familiar (troughs, window frames, stars) instead of by geometric shape, and grouped lengths of yarn according to their practical association (colors associated with sheep – wool, dung, etc.) rather than by primary color. The results of this experiment showed that abstract classification is not an inherent attribute of human cognition, but is instead socialized.<sup>128</sup> Applying this insight to the classification of other individuals, Darden argues that people do not divide humans into abstract groups until they are taught to do so. For instance, the 1926 Soviet census showed that illiterate people classified themselves as “from here” or named their village, their religion or their occupation; they did not classify themselves or others according to ethnic or national categories. In fact, says Darden, “they had no notion of national identity whatsoever”.<sup>129</sup>

In order to develop this national or historical-symbolic identity, schools have three mechanisms at their disposal. The first is setting: schools take children away from their families and place them in a bounded, controlled environment for much of the day; authority over the dissemination of ideas in this environment is controlled by teachers who are often themselves trained by the state and subject to its rules. Next, schools bring mass literacy, thus enabling the quick dissemination of ideas across time and space. Finally, schools, use the curriculum to convey the national “constitutive story” directly.<sup>130</sup> These factors make the introduction of mass schooling a powerful force for instilling identities in the schooled population. As Darden says, the content of initial schooling serves to instill basic political loyalties, the content of which can help us predict how a given group will align in the future.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 36-39.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 1.

Darden's depiction of the impact of mass schooling on the development of what this dissertation refers to as historical-symbolic identities represents a valuable contribution to the literature, and I adopt much of his framework in my own. However, I argue that there is another policy of the state with respect to education that affects the development of historical-symbolic identities, and this is the structure of the state university system. The university system functions as an institution structuring both cognition and incentives. This is because it is scholars within the state's university system who actually write much of the "constitutive story" imbued in primary school children; and because the university system itself provides employment and influence for these scholars. Finally, the university system of a state also houses the intellectual elite of the state, a group often referred to as the "intelligentsia" in the Soviet Union. In the Soviet system, some institutes of higher learning were focused only on technical and scientific education and research, while others had faculties focused in the humanities. In the Soviet and Russian academic lexicon, the technical and scientific faculties were referred to as a "technical intelligentsia" while humanities faculties were dubbed a "cultural intelligentsia". Humanities faculties, especially those focused on language, literature, history and ethnography, proved to be powerful proponents of the national constitutive story in the republics of the Soviet Union.

Examples of this phenomenon abound. Anthony Smith argues that in the Soviet Union,

"The modern mythmakers were no longer the priests and scribes of the old demotic *ethnie*; their place was taken by the purveyors of language – the poets and philologists, lexicographers and grammarians, historians and novelists, academics and journalists and lawyers, whose *raison d'être* derived from a capacity for critical discourse and for linguistic meanings."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, Ed., *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 59.



Farmer's 1977 research on nationalist dissidents in Soviet Ukraine reported that the typical dissident was "a university student or university graduate in the field of history, literature or philology".<sup>133</sup> Finally, Kaiser cites Soviet surveys showing that "both unskilled blue-collar workers and the intelligentsia responded more negatively to questions regarding the desirability of an international work environment and family than the more highly-skilled blue collar and lower-level white collar workers".<sup>134</sup> Whereas in the West a higher level of education is usually thought to correlate with more progressive and inclusive views about working with and marrying people unlike oneself, in the Soviet Union this was decidedly not the case. Instead, the Soviet "cultural intelligentsia" tended to be more chauvinistic than all other segments of society except unskilled workers.

State educational policies thus influence the development of historical-symbolic identities in two ways. First, the content of the "constitutive story" at the onset of mass schooling proves exceptionally durable, as Darden shows. Next, the state university system serves as an institution structuring both cognition and incentives, in that it produces and propagates much of the national "constitutive story" of a state, while also incentivizing the intellectual elite to adopt its institutional priorities and positions.

The final identity that state policies can serve to construct is the regional identity. They do this by influencing the political, social and economic geography of the country. While all states have some influence over these factors, highly centralized states such as the Soviet Union often have an outsized influence. The onset of industrialization is often seen as a driver for the construction of identities because it brings previously isolated groups into contact with one

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<sup>133</sup> Rocky L. Rockett, *Ethnic Nationalities in the Soviet Union: Sociological Perspectives on a Historical Problem*, (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1981), 144.

<sup>134</sup> Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 245.

another and rapidly increases mobility within a society. Gellner argues that modernization and industrialization result in “mobile, educated, anonymous societies”<sup>135</sup>, which causes a level of entropy (or breakdown of order) to take hold. States combat this entropy by making political and cultural boundaries congruent through the imposition of a literate high culture and a homogenizing, standardizing educational system that turns out workers who can switch from one job to another in a growing economy and mobile society.

When the state plays a significant role in shaping the structure of the economy and the level and type of mobility within a society, this can result in the construction of identities along regional lines. For instance, when the state decides to incentivize the development of a certain industry or a certain agricultural sector in a specific region it often needs to “import” workers and managers to this region from other parts of the country. While the economic specialization of a region alone provides a basis – albeit often a weak one – for the development of a regional identity, when the workers and managers brought in to the region happen to be of a different ethnic group or religion from the majority of the country, this can intensify the development of a division in identity between that region and the rest of the country.

States can also contribute to the development of a regional identity by the awarding of political autonomy to certain regions of a country. Cornell shows that the conventional wisdom, which holds that the provision of autonomy should mitigate minority demands during times of crisis or political transition, is often wrong. Instead, he concludes that autonomy is likely to be destabilizing in the context of a weakening state. He defines territorial autonomy as “a defined territory that has been legally granted a special status and rights and institutions of self-

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<sup>135</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 63-64.

government by a state, by virtue of a titular group's ascribed differences from the majority population of that state, without being detached from the state".<sup>136</sup>

States can thus contribute to the formation of regional identities by influencing demographic settlement patterns, by concentrating certain economic sectors in specific regions, and by the awarding of political autonomy. Where all three of these factors are present – concentration of a certain ethnic or religious group, concentration of a certain economic sector and the provision of political autonomy – the regional identity that emerges is likely to be especially strong.

There are certainly other identities that states can construct and institutionalize – religious and class identities are two obvious examples. However, given that neither religion nor class existed within the Soviet Union in any formal sense, this dissertation does not examine these identities. It is important to note that although states often do not set out to construct and institutionalize distinct ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional identities within their populations, the effect of state policies is sometimes to do exactly that. For when state policies begin to use ethnicity and language as criteria for classifying and labeling people, when they begin to attempt to influence the content of the primary school curriculum and to run the university system, and when they begin to enact policies that influence settlement patterns and the location of key economic sectors, these policies invariably result in the construction of group identities around these categories. These identities can then become powerful bases for mobilization and escalation when a political transition puts control of state institutions in play.

There is little argument among students of the history of the Soviet Union that the Soviet state exerted a high level of control over the classification of people within its borders,

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<sup>136</sup> Svante Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 2002) Doctoral Dissertation, 9.

the content of its educational curricula and the organization of its educational system, and the economic and demographic layout of Soviet society. The Soviet system was characterized by a high level of emphasis on ethno-linguistic markers of identity (and a corresponding de-emphasis on other markers such as religion), a major effort to remake the socio-economic geography of many of its constituent republics, and a highly politicized and ideologically-driven education system, especially in the humanities disciplines.

Soviet ethno-linguistic policy was based upon two main factors: the complex ethnic geography of the state it inherited from the Russian Empire and the ideological imperatives of Marxism. While Marxist ideology saw the nation as a transitory historical phenomenon and allowed for national self-determination on the assumption that eventually all peoples would come back together in the post-national, socialist age, the new Soviet government was faced with the very real problem that the Soviet Union could not survive as an entity without cotton from Central Asia and oil from the Caucasus.<sup>137</sup> The outcome of this dilemma was a decision by the Bolsheviks to seize control of history by incorporating – often forcibly - the majority of the lands of the former Russian Empire into their new state and accelerating the progression of the peoples of those lands through the Marxist timeline of history until all Soviet peoples had arrived at the post-national stage of group consciousness and identity. Francine Hirsch has labeled this process “State Sponsored Evolution”, and has characterized its theoretical underpinnings as a combination of primordialism and constructionist-modernism. While the Bolsheviks believed that “primordial” ethnic groups were the building blocks of nations, they also believed that state intervention could speed the transition from ethnic group to nation and onward to the post-national stage of development.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>Francine Hirsch. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2005.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 8.

Reflecting this view, Soviet policies such as *korenizatsiia* (often translated as “indigenization”) endowed certain ethnic groups with political and cultural autonomy and sought to educate a cadre of national elites that could advance the national project in their homelands. The objective of these policies was to move the more “backward” peoples in the Soviet Union “up the ladder” of self-consciousness and self-identification until they reached the final rung, which Marxist ideology taught would be a supra-national, Soviet identity and consciousness that transcended national identities.<sup>139</sup> Although in retrospect the division of peoples into political units divided along ethnic lines, with smaller ethno-political units “embedded” within larger ones, seems self-evidently dangerous, it was not seen that way at the time. Indeed, the Soviet Union was to be “national in form, socialist in content”, with the universal appeal of Marxist ideology expected to make national identities relics of the past. In the event, what was intended to be merely “form” held far more “content” than expected. As Hirsch writes, the creation of new national-territorial units along with policy of *korenizatsiia* (the promotion of indigenous elites) “activated nationality categories by demonstrating that nationality, resources and local political power were officially linked”.<sup>140</sup>

In other words, it was the categorization of people according to ethno-linguistic criteria and the institutionalization of these categories that endowed them with power and constructed strong group identities in the Soviet Union. Ethnicity can be seen as a continuous variable, not as dichotomous or binary; after all intermarriage, multi-lingualism and religious conversion make naturally-occurring “hard” boundaries between ethnic groups rare. However, state policies that create and institutionalize categories give them a dichotomous quality and erect

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<sup>139</sup> For discussions of early Soviet ethno-federal policies, see *The Affirmative Action Empire* by Terry Martin; *Empire of Nations* by Francine Hirsch; and *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923*, by Jeremy Smith.

<sup>140</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 146.

boundaries between them in terms of both cognition and (often) power and incentives. As Pelkmans has noted, in the Soviet Union, although the “ethnic classifications did not follow locally-recognized distinctions, the act of delimitation made difference ‘official’, and as such it had very real effects”.<sup>141</sup>

The state-sponsored evolution of group consciousness from the level of the tribe or ethnic group through the level of national group and to the ultimate end point of post-national, Soviet group identity required a high level of control over the education system of the state. In the early years of the Soviet Union, increasing the literacy rate, which stood at only 22% at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was a primary goal of the state educational system. The motives for this were both economic and ideological: not only was increased literacy required for the rapid industrialization desired by the Soviet government, but Marxist ideology was more easily spread among a literate population through newspapers and textbooks. Progress in increasing literacy was rapid: by 1926 it had increased to 56.6% and by 1939 it stood at 81.2%.<sup>142</sup> The literacy campaign was accompanied by a marked expansion in both the number of primary schools and the number of students enrolled in them: between 1918 and 1920, 13,000 new schools were opened and 2 million more students were enrolled.<sup>143</sup> So the threshold of mass literacy was crossed and the onset of universal education began in the early years of the Soviet Union. The constitutive story taught in its schools during that period is thus of considerable interest in understanding the content of the historical-symbolic identities were constructed then.

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<sup>141</sup> Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 14.

<sup>142</sup> M.V Kabatchenko and L.D. Yasnikova, “Eradicating Illiteracy in the USSR: Literacy Lessons” (Geneva: International Bureau of Education, 1990), internet resource at [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=ED321045&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=ED321045](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED321045&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED321045), accessed 22 February 2013.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

The Soviet Union also significantly expanded access to higher education for its population: between 1939 and 1986 the percentage of Soviet citizens with a university degree or other higher education had jumped from 0.8% to 8.7%, or more than tenfold. The total number of Soviet citizens who had completed a higher education degree rose from 1.2 million in 1939 to 20.1 million in 1986.<sup>144</sup> The structure of the Soviet educational system was closely linked to the structure of the Soviet ethno-federal system, with ethno-territorial units almost always endowed with their own educational systems and instruction carried out in the “titular” language. This meant that despite the high level of formal state control over the structure of the system and the content it delivered, widely-divergent “constitutive stories” and national histories could be taught within the borders of a single republic of the Soviet Union, leading to the development of divergent group identities.

The final way in which the Soviet state constructed and institutionalized identities is through its economic and demographic policies. Soviet policies aimed for rapid industrialization and a rapid expansion of agricultural output; these goals combined with the exigencies of Marxist ideology to make a large role for the state in the economy inevitable. Although the primary economic role of a region in the Soviet Union was in part determined by its natural endowments, the perceived loyalty of its population and the number of its inhabitants also influenced policy. In many cases, the Soviet state resettled large numbers of non-native workers in certain regions designated for agricultural or industrial expansion, since the local populations were either perceived as disloyal, were too small to provide the required number of workers, or both. This often resulted in a certain region having not only an economic difference from the rest of the republic, but an ethno-linguistic difference as well. The overlaying of these divisions

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<sup>144</sup> Alan P. Pollard, Ed. *USSR Facts and Figures Annual, Volume 12, 1986* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1988), 473, 475.

in identity on a regional division helped set the stage for separatist movements as Soviet power waned.

For instance, the natural endowments of shale oil and uranium oxide ore in northeastern Estonia resulted in a decision by the Soviet government to establish significant power generation and uranium processing industries there. The relatively small native population and Soviet doubts as to the loyalty of Estonians led to the resettlement of large numbers of Russian immigrants to this area, thus overlaying an ethnic division on an economic division and contributing to a strong sense of regional identity in Estonia's northeast. Similarly, the fact that the Moldovan region of Transnistria had not been subject to Romanian rule in the inter-war years like the rest of Moldova had led the Soviet leadership to regard Transnistrians as more reliable than other Moldovans. This in turn influenced the decision to concentrate Moldovan manufacturing in Transnistria, which led to an influx of Slavic workers and managers. The combination of antithetical inter-war histories, an economic division and an ethnic division led to the development of a strong Transnistrian regional identity.

So Soviet state policies constructed and institutionalized ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic identities in all of the union republics of the Soviet Union. While Marxist ideology officially proclaimed the irrelevance of ethnic and national labels, taught a teleological view of history and aimed for a homogenized society, Soviet policies often had the effect of constructing and institutionalizing divided ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional identities within the fifteen Soviet republics. The effect of these divisions would become painfully apparent as political liberalization processes began in the late Soviet period. The result of rapid political transition combined with a division in identities in many post-Soviet republics would threaten not only the success of the political transition process but the coherence of some of them as independent states.



Political Transition as a Critical Juncture

Why do some processes of political transition lead to violent separatist movements while others do not? This dissertation argues that political transition in states with institutionalized identity divisions is destabilizing because it provides an opportunity for groups to pursue a separatist agenda. It does so by weakening state institutions and throwing their relationship with societal groups open for renegotiation. Categories such as language, political autonomy, citizenship rights and educational rights, which had previously been regulated by state institutions, are all now subject to revision. The crisis brought on by the combination of political transition and an institutionalized identity division often results in a critical juncture in the political history of the state.

The concept of critical junctures gained traction in comparative politics in the early 1990s. Collier and Collier were among the first to theorize about critical junctures, describing them as periods of significant change, which typically occur in distinct ways in different countries, and which produce distinct legacies.<sup>145</sup> Recall that Capoccia and Keleman define critical junctures as “short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents’ choices will affect the outcome of interest”.<sup>146</sup> Whether a period of time is seen as a critical juncture is dependent upon two factors: probability jump, defined as a comparison of the outcome of the critical juncture with the probability of that outcome occurring absent the critical juncture; and temporal leverage, defined as the duration of the impact of the critical juncture compared to the duration of the critical juncture itself.<sup>147</sup> So the essential elements of a critical juncture are a short period of rapid change or crisis, a significant

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<sup>145</sup> Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 745.

<sup>146</sup> Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Keleman, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism”, *World Politics*, 59:3, (April 2007), 348.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 348.

amount of room for agency and thus for unpredictability of outcomes, and a long duration of the outcome relative to the critical juncture which produced it.

A commonly-heard critique of the concept of critical junctures is that they portray the choices of agents as “highly efficacious but essentially unpredictable”.<sup>148</sup> In other words, the concept of critical junctures can explain why the choices made by agents within a critical juncture are important, but cannot explain why agents make the choices they do. Chweiroth answers this criticism by highlighting the role of ideas in helping actors define their interests during critical junctures. He argues that during a crisis uncertainty and the often unique nature of the situation prevent actors from fully understanding their distributive preferences, so they use ideas to help them do this.<sup>149</sup> In other words, arguments of this type maintain that when rapid change and crisis result in a situation with few if any precedents that could serve as a guide for possible distributive outcomes, agents use ideas to determine their interests.

Identity is at its core a set of ideas about who one is, who others are and the implications of this for interaction between groups. It is therefore logical that in a critical juncture brought about by rapid political change, group identity would provide a salient and powerful foundation for defining group interests. When identities are institutionalized, this provides a distributional as well as an ideational foundation for mobilization around an identity. To illustrate this point, Chweiroth explains that change is likely during crisis when a prominent and cohesive group of advocates promotes an idea that has sufficient distributive and ideational appeal.<sup>150</sup> In other words, although the basis for the definition of interests during a critical

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<sup>148</sup> James Mahoney in Katznelson, Ira and Weingast, Barry (eds.), *Preferences and Situations*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005), 313.

<sup>149</sup> Jeffrey M. Chweiroth, “How Do Crises Lead to Change? Liberalizing Capital Controls in the Early Years of New Order Indonesia”, *World Politics*, 62:3 (July 2010), 496-527.

<sup>150</sup> Chweiroth, “How Do Crises Lead to Change? Liberalizing Capital Controls in the Early Years of New Order Indonesia”, 499.

junction is ideational, the addition of distributive appeal significantly strengthens the influence of this idea. This dissertation argues that the concept of an institutionalized identity division can explain the choices made by agents within the critical juncture of a rapid political transition by providing both an ideational and a distributional rationale for mobilization.

While group identity itself provides the ideational rationale, the distributional rationale is provided by the opportunity for change that opens up as state institutions enter a period of transition. In states with institutionalized identity divisions, these institutions had not only labeled groups but had regulated interaction and had often defined power relationships among them. Thus, rapid and significant change in the scope and structure of these institutions provides an opportunity for identity groups to seek to improve their status vis-à-vis other groups. In her 2003 examination of women's movements in four democratizing countries, Lisa Baldez argues that organizational resources – networks and funding, for example – were a necessary but not sufficient variable for mobilization to occur. Direct contact with the international feminist movement and the exclusion of women from the political process were also necessary for women to mobilize.<sup>151</sup> This dissertation accepts Baldez's point that resources are a necessary variable for mobilization to occur in a critical juncture, and seeks to show that where states institutionalize identity divisions by tying them to political or economic power, they greatly increase the mobilizational resources available to groups. These resources, combined with the ideational and distributional rationales identified by Chandra, provide fertile ground for the development of violent separatism in the critical juncture of rapid political transition.

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<sup>151</sup> Lisa Baldez, "Women's Movements and Democratic Transition in Chile, Brazil, East Germany and Poland," *Comparative Politics* 35:3 (April, 2003) 253-272.

In the Soviet Union, the state had not only constructed ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional identities in many of its union republics, but had created a powerful and complex set of institutions to perpetuate these identities and regulate interaction among them. The rapid decline of Soviet power in the late 1980s thus opened up space for mobilization around these identities and the renegotiation of the relationships among them. This served as a critical juncture, during which agents had both ideational and distributional motivations to mobilize people around these identities. Where the institutionalized identity division constructed by the Soviet state was deep, there was a high potential for this mobilization to escalate to violent separatism. Conversely, where the motive for separatism had not been built through an institutionalized identity division, the critical juncture of the Soviet collapse sometimes resulted in contentious negotiations between centers and peripheries in newly-independent states, but these did not escalate to violent separatism.

#### *Why and How Mobilization and Escalation Take Place*

How and why does an institutionalized identity division combined with the onset of political transition cause mobilization around that identity division and escalation of the conflict between identity groups? Answering this question requires returning to the definition of institutionalized identity division discussed previously. Recall that institutionalized identities are defined as those identities that the state seeks to influence through its policies and institutions, and that identity division is defined as the extent to which two or more groups of institutionalized identities form mutually exclusive “sets”. Mobilization along an identity division between groups thus requires two things in addition to the critical juncture of political transition: that identities are tied to institutions; and that these identities are more overlapping than cross-cutting. For conflict between these mobilized groups to escalate, leaders who can articulate group grievances, assign blame for them and offer solutions to them are required.

Rather than assuming these leaders are motivated purely by greed or hunger for power, this dissertation argues that they are instead primarily motivated by the ideational and institutional frameworks in which they operate. While these leaders are able to influence this framework, it proves to be a powerful and durable force shaping both the rhetoric and the actions of political entrepreneurs. This section of the chapter discusses the processes whereby an institutionalized identity division leads to group mobilization and incentivizes leaders to escalate the nascent inter-group conflict. Woven throughout the narrative are examples of how these processes operated in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods.

The institutionalization of identities alone is seen as destabilizing by a number of prominent researchers in the discipline of comparative politics. Lieberman and Singh argue, for instance that “institutions play a role in the *construction* of group conflicts, which themselves induce a search for narratives of grievance, both real and imagined”.<sup>152</sup> This argument sees mobilization and conflict as originating with the establishment of boundaries between groups alone. This can lead to group mobilization because “when potential rebels observe the state’s use of categories, these become ready-made bases for expressing grievances about inequality and injustice, and facilitate the process of recruitment”.<sup>153</sup>

Wilkinson echoes this argument with his contention that “mobilization along ethnic lines is attractive to politicians in conditions in which existing ethnic categories are institutionally and often legally privileged compared to other types of groups”.<sup>154</sup> When there are already well-established, dense social networks and other organizations through which these leaders can communicate with followers, this further simplifies the mobilization process. As will see, in the

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<sup>152</sup> Lieberman and Singh, “Institutionalized Ethnicity and Civil War”, 3.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>154</sup> Steven I. Wilkinson, “A Constructivist Model of Ethnic Riots”, in Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, 363.

Soviet system identities were highly institutionalized and in many cases were deeply divided and overlapping, with few identities that cut across boundaries. The Soviet system also bestowed multiple ready-made forums for organizing and communicating with potential followers, in the form of factory collectives, writers' unions, academies of sciences, and other institutions. As a rule, these institutions were divided along the boundaries created by the Soviet state: ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional, and multiple sets of these institutions often existed within the same Soviet republic. One set existed at the republican center with other sets in peripheral regions, and those in the periphery were largely independent of those at the center and had key positions within them reserved for the minority group inhabiting that region. This further increased the potential for mobilization and escalation in the critical juncture of political transition. This point presages the second factor seen as contributing to mobilization: the extent to which institutionalized identities were overlapping instead of cross-cutting.

Chandra sees cross-cutting identities as a stabilizing factor, even where identities are institutionalized, arguing that in states with institutionalized, symmetric, cross-cutting cleavages in identity, an initially marginalized party will bid for the support of an ethnic majority: it will make itself into an ethnic party. Once this happens, the response of the previously dominant party is to outbid on a second dimension of identity to prevent further erosion of its voter base. The initial spiral of outbidding thus ends in a deadlock, which then turns into a centrist equilibrium.<sup>155</sup> However, where ethnic and other identities are overlapping instead of cross-cutting, the emergence of this type of centrist equilibrium is nearly impossible; instead there is increased mobilization of identity groups and further escalation of the conflict between them. This is because the lack of relevant cross-cutting identities denies the party representing a

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<sup>155</sup> Kanchan Chandra, "Ethnic Parties and Democratic Stability", *Perspectives on Politics* 3:2 (June, 2005), 235-252.

minority group the opportunity to mobilize along another axis of identity, since these axes are co-terminal with the initial axis used for mobilization. This leads to an increased level of fear among minority groups and an increased incentive to mobilize for protection of their separate identity, especially when this identity had been tied to power or privilege.

Varshney articulates another way in which cross-cutting ties can mitigate identity divisions with society. His research into communal violence in India has shown that cities with low levels of violence have strong associational ties between Hindu and Muslim communities. Since associations are more durable than informal, everyday ties, they create channels of interactions for elites of the different groups and they bring together or create interest groups that do not readily emerge from everyday interactions.<sup>156</sup> However, in societies where the state controls the organizational structure of civil society and essentially outlaws social groups not affiliated with the state, those groups which do emerge are likely to reflect the identity terrain constructed by state institutions, this increasing, rather than decreasing, the potential for mobilization.

In the Soviet Union, this held true for both those social groups that persisted in the aftermath of the Soviet Union and for those new groups formed as Gorbachev's reforms opened up space for non-state civil society groups. Both the Soviet-legacy writer's unions, factory collectives and academies of sciences, and the new groups such as the pro-Soviet Interfronts and the anti-Soviet Popular Fronts in many Soviet republics organized themselves along the identity boundary set by the Soviet state. Rather than mitigating identity conflict in the critical juncture of the Soviet collapse, these organizations contributed to its escalation. Beissinger argues that there was also a demonstration effect at work in mobilization in the late Soviet

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<sup>156</sup> Charles King, *Extreme Politics: Nationalism, Violence and the End of Eastern Europe*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 66.

period, since mobilization events were chronologically “clustered”: an event in one Soviet republic made the previously unthinkable suddenly thinkable and was often followed by similar events in other republics.<sup>157</sup> While this is certainly true, this demonstration effect was doubtless strengthened and even enabled by the fact that these republics demonstrated similar structural conditions in terms of their levels of institutionalized identity and the critical juncture of impending political transition.

For escalation to take off, leadership is required. Even in the context of highly institutionalized identity divisions and the potential for change opened up by the critical juncture of political transition, social groups do not spontaneously mobilize and engage in conflict with other groups. As discussed, those leaders who emerge to take up the cause of an identity group are largely conditioned by the ideational and institutional frameworks in which they operate. Often ignored in the literature on internal war is the fact that publics are subject to the same ideational and institutional frameworks. In a state where those frameworks result in highly institutionalized and divided identities, the emergence of political entrepreneurs leading – and sometimes even being pushed by – willing publics in the escalation of conflict is very likely. Kaufman address the role of publics by arguing that “mass-led” mobilization can and does occur. In some of the cases he examines, he maintains that escalation occurred despite the fact that incumbent leaders “initially tried, without success, to restrain mobilization and prevent interethnic violence”.<sup>158</sup> Clearly, both leaders who can articulate grievances and publics willing to hear and respond to these appeals are required for conflict between groups to escalate. Both leaders and publics are largely conditioned by the ideational and institutional

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>158</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 86.



framework in which they operate, even within a critical juncture when room for agency is greater than usual.

Kaufman goes on to argue that it is fear that motivates the escalation of conflict,

“Once ethnic fears become prevalent among the members of any ethnic groups, for whatever reason, they justify and motivate a resort to violence in self-defense. Such fears are a necessary condition for ethnic war because people are much more concerned to avoid loss than to pursue gains, so they are usually mobilizable only when confronted with some threat”.<sup>159</sup>

In the former Soviet Union an institutionalized identity division combined with the collapse of the state institutions that had created and perpetuated it was the kernel of that fear, which was then stoked by discriminatory rhetoric by leaders, resulting in the escalation of inter-group conflict. To give examples, the minority Abkhazian population in Georgia and the minority Transnistrian population in Moldova feared loss of the status they enjoyed in the USSR and loss of the distinct identity they had cultivated in the Soviet period. Georgians and Moldovans, on the other hand, feared the loss of the territorial integrity of their state.<sup>160</sup>

Discriminatory rhetoric by leaders and demonstrations by followers are often the first signs of such escalation. Often this rhetoric targets the symbols of the other group: rhetoric either attacking or defending language policy, ethnic quotas, religious policy, and interpretation of important historical events are examples of this. The extent to which an identity division is the cause of such mobilization and escalation can be inferred from the content of the speeches and slogans used. Where the content has high levels of reference to the ethnic, linguistic, regional or historical-symbolic identities institutionalized by the state, this is a sign that the identity division is a likely cause of the escalation. An important point advanced in this

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>160</sup> Here Toft’s argument that territorial integrity is a key concern of states is correct. My argument differs from hers in the weight it assign to this factor; where she sees it as among the chief causes of separatism, I argue that it is a contributing factors but not a key cause.

argument is that these leaders largely believe what they are saying, or they are pushed to adopt extreme positions by popular sentiment – in other words, the identity mobilized has emotional content and is not an empty vessel used instrumentally by leaders. As King maintains, “some organization is usually involved in collective violence, but the picture of receptive masses whipped up by an unscrupulous leader is not quite true to life”.<sup>161</sup>

Escalation often continues with the adoption of discriminatory laws or policies by the state toward a minority group, by the institutions of the minority group (if present) against the national majority within their region, or both. The institution of political autonomy bestowed on some groups during the Soviet period enabled and simplified this but was not a necessary precondition for it to occur. Continued escalation is often marked by the use of violent rhetoric by leaders and groups; this signals the shift from blaming of the out-group for the problems experienced by the in-group to advocating their ejection from the state (or the region) by violent means, or even their physical destruction. When these steps have been taken, groups often begin to arm themselves, further increasing fears and making clashes between groups both more likely and more violent. Charles King summarizes the process of escalation of group conflict, writing that violent events “have a certain life cycle that begins with precipitating events such as persistent prejudices or rumors, progresses through a brief burst of bloodletting, passes through a lull, and then rapidly escalates into a series of massive deadly attacks”.<sup>162</sup>

This dissertation, then, sees mobilization and escalation as processes that are caused by the existence of an institutionalized identity division within a state, combined with the onset of political transition, which serves as a critical juncture. Within this critical juncture, the speed and the intensity of mobilization and escalation are determined by the extent to which identities

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<sup>161</sup> King, *Extreme Politics*, 61.

<sup>162</sup> King, *Extreme Politics*, 61.

were institutionalized by the state and the extent to which divisions in identity were overlapping rather than cross-cutting. When these conditions obtain, the onset of a critical juncture and the attendant increase in the efficacy of agency results in the emergence of political leaders who mobilize followers along the lines of the relevant identity divisions and escalate the conflict between groups. Sometimes these leaders “pull” publics behind them and other times publics “push” leaders to escalate farther and faster than they had originally intended. In either case, however, the logic of mobilization and escalation and the discursive frameworks used to justify it are informed and bounded by the ideational and institutional structure within which agents are embedded.

#### *Why and How International Actors Intervene*

Even significant levels of group mobilization and the escalation of inter-group conflict do not guarantee the emergence of a large-scale violent separatist movement – for this to occur external support to separatist groups is required. As Robert Cooper and Mats Berdal remark, “when ethnic oppression does not turn into ethnic conflict, it is most often because of the weakness of the oppressed”.<sup>163</sup> Absent external support, most minority groups – even in the weakest and least coherent states – simply do not have the means to violently break free from the center and militarily defend their territory. This section of the chapter first outlines the forms that intervention can take, then discusses why states make the intervention decisions they do, and concludes with a discussion of what this process looked like in the former Soviet Union.

Much of the extant literature focuses only on military intervention and often attributes it to factors internal to the intervening state, two shortcomings which the model advanced in

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<sup>163</sup> Michael E. Brown, Ed. *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 181.

this dissertation seeks to remedy. First, the focus on military intervention ignores another important type of intervention: that by external states and international institutions designed to prevent the escalation of a conflict to large scale violence or mitigate a conflict already underway, despite the facts that this type of intervention is relatively widespread and has proved successful in a number of cases. This type of intervention can take the form of assistance from foreign embassies, the designation by a foreign government of a special envoy or other such dedicated assistance, episodic assistance from international institutions, and even the deployment of a permanent conflict prevention mission by an international institution. Where military intervention occurs, it can take the form of the provision of small arms to government or rebel groups, the provision of heavy weapons, the provision of vehicles and/or aircraft, allowing mercenary or volunteer forces to enter the target state, and direct intervention by one's own military forces in the target state.

The second shortcoming of much of the literature on intervention is a focus on decision-making within the intervening state with a corresponding neglect of important characteristics of the target state. Regan, for instance, identifies three conditions under which the political leadership of a state would be expected to undertake intervention: a reasonable expectation for success, a short projected time horizon, and domestic support for intervention. He argues that states make intervention decisions by weighing the costs and benefits, which they break down along domestic and international lines. Domestic costs and benefits are seen as political in nature and are conceived of in terms of their political ramifications (audience costs); international costs and benefits are conceived of in terms of national security but also consist of material and audience costs. Although international factors enter the equation, Regan is clear that domestic factors dominate the decision-making process, writing that "events in the target country affect an intervention decision through the impact on expected outcomes, and the cost-

benefit calculus *but the decision whether or not to intervene results from the internal dynamics in the potential intervener.*<sup>164</sup>

While certainly valuable as a heuristic listing of factors decision-makers take into account when making intervention decisions, this model has two critical limitations. First, a model focused on the internal dynamics of the intervening state struggles to explain why the same state makes different intervention decisions when there are multiple simultaneous opportunities to intervene, as there were for Russia and Western states in the post-Soviet period. Returning to Hopf's argument on Russian intervention in Abkhazia, we recall that Russian identity was a constant in the period from the Soviet collapse to the freezing of the wars that broke out in Georgia and Moldova: it defined itself as a Great Power. Hopf argues that the actions that Russia considered legitimate for a Great Power depended upon the internal struggle among the liberal, centrist and conservative identities in Russia. The victory of the centrist identity implied intervention limited to Moldova and Georgia. A liberal victory might have resulted in no intervention at all, while a conservative victory would have resulted in wider interventions including in the Baltics.<sup>165</sup> Although Hopf does not make this point explicit, his argument implies that there was something different about the Baltic States that made intervention there appear illegitimate to the centrist Russian political identity.

This foreshadows the second limitation of a model focusing on the internal dynamics of the intervening state: it leaves out a factor that is critically important in framing intervention decisions, and that is the identity or geopolitical affiliation of the target state. Simply put, in states seen as Western, a different set of norms apply than in states seen as not Western. Western states are accorded a higher level of respect for their sovereignty and territorial

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<sup>164</sup> Patrick M. Regan, "Choosing to Intervene: Outside Interventions in Internal Conflicts", *The Journal of Politics* 60:3 (August, 1998), 759.

<sup>165</sup> Ted Hopf, "Identity, Legitimacy and the Use of Military Force, 226.

integrity than are those not seen as belonging to the West. To return to Wendt's cultures of anarchy model, those states seen as Western exist within a culture of anarchy approaching Wendt's ideal type of Kantian anarchy: they are seen as friends and are offered assistance from other states, so intervention will usually be contraindicated, and if it does occur it will take the form of assistance in mitigating a conflict. Conversely, those states seen as not belonging to the West can be seen as existing in a culture of anarchy similar to Wendt's ideal type of Lockean anarchy: they are objectified, meaning that intervention decisions and the form that intervention takes will serve to further the objectives of the intervening state. In these states, therefore, military intervention is more likely.

While the power of the target state certainly plays a role – this explains the lack of international intervention in Russia's Chechnya war – explaining intervention decisions purely in terms of power proves to be a dead end. Krasner, for instance, argues that the model of the Westphalian state, based upon the principles of autonomy and territory, is just that: a model which does not correspond to objective reality. In Krasner's view, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states has routinely been violated in history because the condition of international anarchy means that there is nothing to prevent it. States like the US, which approach the ideal of the Westphalian state, do so because their power allows them to maintain their sovereignty and autonomy, not because international norms require others to respect these.<sup>166</sup>

The post-Soviet cases, and particularly those of Georgia, Moldova and Estonia, challenge this argument. In Georgia and Moldova there was early military intervention and this intervention enabled the violent separatist movements there. There was no military intervention in Estonia, not because it was more powerful than the other two and not because it

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<sup>166</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, "Compromising Westphalia", *International Security* 20:3 (Winter 1995-1996), 115-151.

lacked economic or military importance for Russia, but because it was seen as a European state and thus accorded a higher level of respect for its autonomy and sovereignty. For the model of intervention advanced in this dissertation to hold, the primary external actors must agree on the geopolitical affiliation of the target state. In the case of early post-Soviet Georgia, Moldova and Estonia, Russia and the West agreed that the latter was a Western state and the former two were not. Military intervention was thus assumed to be off limits in Estonia but conceivable in Georgia and Moldova. Had this agreement been absent, it would have been a relatively simple matter for Russia to use armed proxies and even its own forces to escalate the conflict in Estonia, much as it did in Georgia and Moldova.

While it is tempting to attempt to simplify the argument by pointing to the pre-existing level of conflict as the factor driving intervention decisions of external actors – with military intervention being the first choice where levels of violence are already high and institutional intervention being the rule where violence has not yet escalated - this simplification fails to hold in the post-Soviet context. First, as King, Kaufman, Hopf and others point out, it was Russian military intervention that actually enabled the escalation of the conflicts in Georgia and Moldova. Absent Russian military assistance to separatist groups culminating with the direct intervention of Russian military forces, it is possible if not likely that these conflicts would have been contained instead of escalating to violent separatism. So an existing military conflict is not a necessary precondition for external intervention.

Neither is the presence of violent conflict a deterrent to conflict mitigation efforts of international institutions, as the experience of Macedonia in 2001 shows. An analysis of that conflict mitigation effort by the UK's Royal United Services Institute concludes, "Looking back, NATO rightly sees its efforts in Macedonia as a rare example of successful pre-emptive

diplomacy. It stopped a low-level insurgency turning into a full-blown war".<sup>167</sup> After fighting broke out in Macedonia in March 2001 between the government and ethnic Albanian rebels, NATO and the EU convened a grand coalition of all major political parties in Macedonia to attempt to resolve the fighting. Among the lessons learned from this effort was that early and high-level engagement were keys to halting ongoing violence. As the author concludes, "early engagement must be matched by high-level engagement, and without the early, personal, sustained engagement of Lord Robertson and others, there would have been a civil war in Macedonia".<sup>168</sup>

Contrast this with the experience of Moldova, which requested an OSCE conflict mitigation mission in March 1992, as soon as violence began to escalate. By the time the mission finally arrived in April 1993 the violence had escalated to a full-scale internal war that was decided in favor of Transnistrian separatist forces by the intervention of the Russian 14<sup>th</sup> Army; in other words, by the time the conflict mitigation effort began, the conflict was over. The difference between these two cases lies neither in their levels of violence nor in their willingness to accept intervention from an international institution: both were experiencing escalating violence and both were willing to accept the conflict mitigation efforts of international institutions. The reason that Macedonia received such assistance and was able to avoid war while Moldova did not lies in their differing geopolitical affiliations. In 2001 Macedonia was seen as important by the West due to its role as a staging base for the NATO operation in Kosovo, and was afforded at least a modicum of Western geopolitical affiliation due to its history as a part of Yugoslavia and its historical ties to Greece. Moldova, on the other

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<sup>167</sup> Mark Laity, *Preventing War in Macedonia: Pre-Emptive Diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2001), 6.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 80.



hand, was regarded in the West as remote and non-Western due to its murky historical descent and its inclusion in the Soviet Union.

So international intervention in escalating conflicts can take the form of efforts to mitigate these conflicts – often led by international institutions; or the form of efforts by external states to pursue their own interests, which often means further escalating the conflict. The primary determinant of the form intervention takes is neither the intensity of the conflict nor the power of the target state, but instead its geopolitical affiliation. Those states seen by external actors as members of the West will be offered conflict mitigation assistance; those not seen as Western will be ignored by the West and objectified by non-Western actors, who will use the escalating conflict to pursue their own interests. External intervention then is the final intervening variable in the causal chain that starts with the independent variable- the level of institutionalized identity division - and ends with the dependent variable – the level of violent separatism. The next section of this chapter specifies hypotheses derived from the model of violent separatism articulated in this dissertation, revisits each variable in the causal chain advanced by this model, and establishes parameters for operationalizing and measuring these variables.

#### **IV. Specification of Hypotheses, Operationalization and Measurement of Variables**

The causal argument advanced by the theory of violent separatism developed in this dissertation yields the following five hypotheses:

- H1: If state policies promote a given facet of identity, this facet of identity enjoys increased salience among the people of that state; if state policies ignore or delegitimize a given facet of identity, it loses salience among the people of that state.
- H2: If state policies result in a high level of institutionalized identity division, a political transition process will be accompanied by a high level of mobilization along this identity division and a high level of escalation of conflict between groups. If state policies result in a low level of institutionalized identity division, a political transition process will be accompanied by a low level of mobilization along this identity division and a low level of escalation of conflict between groups.

- H3: High levels of mobilization and escalation along an institutionalized identity division within a state will result in external intervention. Low levels of mobilization and escalation will not result in external intervention.
- H4: In states perceived as Western, external intervention will take the form of efforts to de-escalate and eventually resolve the conflict; in states not perceived as Western, intervention is more likely to be military in nature and to escalate the conflict.

In order to test these hypotheses, the key variables in the theory must be operationalized. Operationalization of variables requires specifying exactly how each is defined, how it is to be measured, and what sources will be used to do so. Although I have previously defined each variable in the theory, the following section revisits these definitions for the sake of clarification; it then describes in detail how each variable will be measured and what sources will be used to do so.

- The Independent Variable: Institutionalized Identity Division
  - Institutionalized identities are defined as those identities that the state seeks to influence through its policies and institutions. In most cases this involved the promotion of a specific identity, but, as we will see, in some cases it also involved the de-legitimization by the state of a competing identity. For the purposes of this study, the types of institutionalized identities examined are ethno-linguistic, regional, and historical-symbolic.
  - Operationalization, Measurement and Sources
    - Institutionalization of identities:
      - Ethno-linguistic:
        - Status of languages in a specific region:<sup>169</sup>
          - local language is the only official language
          - both local and national (“titular” in the Soviet lexicon) languages have official status
          - titular language is the only official language
        - Ethnicity or language is used as a category in government documents used to count or identify people (censuses, identity documents, etc.): yes or no.<sup>170</sup>
        - Significant imbalance between demographic make-up of society and demographic make-up of political leadership: yes or no.
      - Historical-Symbolic:

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<sup>169</sup> This measure does not include Russian, which was the official language of the Soviet Union. Instead, the languages of interest here are the local and the national/titular only.

<sup>170</sup> This measure is adopted from Lieberman and Singh, “Institutionalized Ethnicity and Civil War”, 29.

- Content of mass schooling (“constitutive story” taught) at onset of mass literacy:<sup>171</sup>
  - differences in constitutive story taught and language used to teach it
  - standard nationwide constitutive story, different languages
  - standard nationwide constitutive story, single language
- Local/regional universities have autonomy from universities in the center:
  - yes, and local university has humanities department
  - yes, but local university is a technical or scientific university
  - no, local university is a branch of another university
  - no local university exists at all
- Regional:
  - Groups are awarded political autonomy:
    - ethno-territorial
    - territorial only
    - none at all
  - Government policy concentrates certain groups in specific regions:
    - region contains ethno-linguistic group different from titular group plus economic sectoral difference from center
    - region contains either ethno-linguistic or economic sectoral difference from center, but not both
    - region contains neither ethno-linguistic nor economic sectoral difference from center
- Identity-division is defined as the extent to which two or more groups of institutionalized identities form mutually exclusive “sets”.
  - High identity-division is when all three categories overlap for each group and are mutually exclusive with those of other groups.
  - Medium identity-division is when not all categories overlap within groups or when one or more categories are “cross-cutting”, uniting rather than dividing groups.
  - Low identity-division is when there is no pattern of overlap among categories.
- Sources:
  - Soviet policies with respect to language, counting/documentation of people, political/territorial autonomy
  - Soviet census data, especially changes between end of WWI and final census in 1989 showing migration patterns, self-identification in terms of ethnicity and nationality/language, economic output by region
  - Soviet history texts and status of universities from almanacs
  - Interviews
- Intervening Variable: Mobilization and Escalation

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<sup>171</sup> This measure is largely adopted from Darden, *Resisting Occupation*, and uses a threshold of 50% literacy to define the onset of mass literacy.

- Mobilization and escalation is defined as the extent to which rhetoric, policy and mass action occur around the relevant identity division and the inter-group hostility displayed in such rhetoric, policy and mass action.
- Operationalization, Measurement and Sources
  - Widespread use of discriminatory rhetoric: yes or no.
  - Adoption of discriminatory laws or policies:
    - law or policy potentially excludes a group from citizenship
    - law or policy gives precedence to a certain group
    - no discriminatory law or policy
  - Widespread use of violent rhetoric: yes or no.
  - Presence of non-state armed groups: yes or no.
  - Violent clashes between groups: yes or no.
  - Sources:
    - Newspaper accounts
    - Other second hand accounts
    - Parliamentary records of laws passed, etc.
    - Interviews.
- “Quasi-Independent Variable”: Geopolitical Affiliation of the Target State
  - Geopolitical affiliation is defined as a series of ideas held by external actors about the historical, regional and ideological connection of a state to a group of similar states, and the implications this connection has for their interactions with the state in question.
  - I label it a “quasi-independent variable” because although it affects the dependent variable it is not activated unless the level of the independent variable is high.
  - Operationalization, Measurement and Sources
    - Date of establishment of diplomatic relations by US (proxy for West) vs. date of declaration of independence (lag time seen as indicator that West does not view state as Western).
    - Date of US embassy opening vs. date of establishment of diplomatic relations (lag time seen as an indicator that U.S. places little priority on establishment of diplomatic relations).
    - Recognition of Soviet annexation by US: yes or no.
    - Sources:
      - US Department of State records
      - Records and publications of other government and international institutions
      - Interviews
- Intervening Variable: International Intervention
  - International intervention is defined in two ways. Military intervention is defined as military actions taken by external actors designed to influence the outcome of a separatist conflict. Institutional intervention is defined as actions taken by external actors designed to prevent or mitigate a separatist conflict.
  - Operationalization, Measurement and Sources
    - Military intervention:
      - Small arms transfer from external state to non-state group: yes or no.
      - Heavy weapons transfer from external state to non-state group: yes or no.

- Military vehicle or aircraft transfer from external state to non-state group: yes or no.
  - Introduction of volunteer or “Cossack” forces from external state: yes or no.
  - Direct military intervention by external state: yes or no.
- Institutional intervention:
  - Assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by foreign embassy: yes or no
  - Direct assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by foreign government (Special Envoy, etc.): yes or no.
  - Assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by international institution: yes or no.
  - International institution deploys conflict prevention mission: yes or no.
- Sources:
  - Museums
  - Newspaper accounts
  - Other second hand accounts
  - Government records
  - Records and documents of international institutions
  - Interviews
- The Dependent Variable: Level of Violent Separatism
  - Violent separatism is defined as the use of organized military means by a group within a state to separate itself from that state and exercise self-rule.
  - Operationalization, Measurement and Sources
    - Minority group mounts organized violent movement seeking separation from the state and the establishment of self-rule: yes or no.
    - Sources:
      - Historical and other secondary sources
      - Interviews
  - How it Works
    - Violent separatism requires *motive, opportunity and means*. Motive is provided by an institutionalized identity division within a state; opportunity is provided by a political transition process underway in that state; and means are provided through access to weapons, fighters and in some cases foreign troops.

For the sake of simplicity, the following table summarizes how each variable is to be operationalized. It is meant to serve as a quick reference for information on the operationalization of each variable; a full understanding of the operationalization and measurement of variables requires reference to the bulletized list above.

	Definition	Operationalization and Measurement
Independent Variable: Institutionalized Identity Division	Extent to which state policies and institutions result in the construction of mutually exclusive “sets” of identities within a single state.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethno-linguistic: Language status in a specific region; use of language or ethnicity as categories to label or classify people; existence of ethnic or language requirements for government leadership positions; imbalance between demographic make-up of society and demographic make-up of political leadership.</li> <li>• Historical-Symbolic: Content of mass schooling curriculum at onset of mass literacy; autonomy for regional universities; officially-sanctioned histories disparaging titular group or historical allies.</li> <li>• Regional: Existence of political autonomy; concentration of certain groups in certain regions.</li> </ul>
Intervening Variable: Mobilization and Escalation	Extent to which rhetoric, policy and mass action occur around the relevant identity division and the inter-group hostility displayed in such rhetoric, policy and mass action.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Widespread use of discriminatory rhetoric.</li> <li>• Adoption of discriminatory laws or policies.</li> <li>• Widespread use of violent rhetoric.</li> <li>• Presence of non-state armed groups.</li> <li>• Violent clashes between groups.</li> </ul>
“Quasi-Independent Variable”: Geopolitical Affiliation of Target State	Ideas held by external actors about the historical, regional and ideological connection of a state to a group of similar states, and the implications this connection has for their interactions with the state in question.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Date of establishment of diplomatic relations by US vs. date of declaration of independence.</li> <li>• Date of US embassy opening vs. date of establishment of diplomatic relations.</li> <li>• Recognition of Soviet annexation.</li> </ul>
Intervening Variable: International Intervention	<p>Military intervention: military actions taken by external actors designed to influence the outcome of a separatist conflict.</p> <p>Institutional intervention: actions taken by external actors designed to prevent or mitigate a separatist conflict.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small arms transfer from external state to non-state group.</li> <li>• Heavy weapons transfer from external state to non-state group.</li> <li>• Military vehicle or aircraft transfer from external state to non-state group.</li> <li>• Introduction of volunteer or “Cossack” forces from external state.</li> <li>• Direct military intervention by external state.</li> <li>• Assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by foreign embassy.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by foreign government (Special Envoy, etc.).</li> <li>• Assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by international institution.</li> <li>• International institution deploys conflict prevention mission.</li> </ul>
Dependent Variable: Violent Separatism	Use of organized military means by a group within a state to separate itself from that state and exercise self-rule.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minority group mounts organized violent movement seeking separation from the state and the establishment of self-rule.</li> </ul>

## V. Argument Summary, Scope and Boundary Conditions, and Conclusion

### The Argument Summarized

The theory advanced in this dissertation sees identities as constructed, but as nevertheless containing meaning for those who hold them. It argues that where state institutions and policies resulted in a high level of identity-division within a society, rapid political transition is likely to be accompanied by a high level of mobilization around this identity-division and the escalation of tension between societal groups. Where this identity-division also contains a regional division, this mobilization is likely to take the form of separatist agitation. Whether this escalates to violent separatism is dependent upon the reaction of external actors, which in turn depends on the geopolitical affiliation they assign to the target state. Where a state is seen as “Western” and therefore legitimate, external intervention will be focused on the prevention or mitigation of a separatist conflict; where the state is seen as “not Western” and therefore less legitimate, external intervention is likely to be military in nature and will focus on fomenting conflict and influencing its outcome.

In the four cases examined in this dissertation, this process worked as follows. In Abkhazia, Soviet state policies, with their emphasis on ethno-linguistic identities, strengthened a pre-existing identity division between Abkhazians and Georgians. The awarding of political

autonomy to Abkhazia within the Georgian SSR and the resettlement of ethnic Georgians to Abkhazia raised tensions between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, further strengthening this identity division. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there was a high level of mobilization around this identity division and a high level of escalation of the identity conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians. When the conflict escalated to violence, Georgia's geopolitical affiliation as a non-Western, "post-Soviet" state caused the West to ignore the problems there and allowed Russia to influence the outcome of the conflict, first by allowing volunteer forces to enter Abkhazia from the Russian North Caucasus, and later through the direct intervention of Russian military forces. This led to a high level of violent separatist conflict and to Abkhazia winning *de facto* independence.

The Georgian case of Ajaria provides an interesting contrast to that of Abkhazia, and underscores how potent state policies can be in constructing group identities. In Ajaria Soviet state policies all but eliminated a pre-existing identity-division between Ajarians and Georgians. This identity-division has been based upon the fact that although they spoke a Georgian dialect, the majority of Ajarians were Muslim, whereas Georgians were Christian. The Soviet emphasis on ethno-linguistic identities and the suppression of religious identities caused Ajarians to abandon their separate identity and re-imagine themselves as Georgians by the end of Soviet rule in Georgia. Thus, even though Ajaria had been granted political autonomy within the Soviet system, leading to a power struggle between Batumi and Tbilisi, this struggle remained peaceful and remained confined to the relevant political institutions. This is because there was no ideational structure, in the form of an identity division, which could have allowed the struggle for power to spill into society and result in mobilization and escalation. The lack of mobilization and escalation meant that external actors were constrained from intervening and the conflict between Batumi and Tbilisi was resolved peacefully in Tbilisi's favor.



In Moldova, Soviet policies essentially created the Moldovan nation in an attempt to differentiate Soviet Moldova from Romania, which was seen as an enemy of the Soviet Union in the inter-war period. The original birthplace of the Soviet Moldovan identity was the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) within Ukraine, which existed from 1924 until the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia from Romania in 1940. The Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) was created from uniting Bessarabia with the majority of the MASSR, now known as Transnistria. The primary effect of Soviet policies in Moldova was to construct a separate Transnistrian identity within Moldova based upon three factors: an economic division created by the decision to locate the majority of Moldova's industry in Transnistria; the resettlement of a large Slavic population there in order to man the newly-built factories there; and a barrage of Soviet official histories vilifying Romania as an enemy, even after its conversion to Communism. This division in identity within Moldova led to a high level of mobilization and escalation in the period surrounding the Soviet collapse. Moldova's geopolitical affiliation as a non-Western, "post-Soviet" state led the West to ignore its appeals for conflict mitigation assistance and allowed Russia to intervene militarily in the conflict, thus ensuring the victory of the Transnistrian separatist movement.

Finally, in Estonia, Soviet policies strengthened a pre-existing ethno-linguistic identity division between Estonians and Russians, and further exacerbated the situation by locating strategic industries in northeastern Estonia and resettling large numbers of Russian workers there to man them. The impending collapse of the Soviet Union caused a high level of mobilization around this identity division. Escalation of the conflict, while not insignificant, was contained somewhat by the moderation of the nationalist rhetoric emanating from the Estonian government. This had been enabled by the Soviet *de facto* policy of allowing the Estonian Communist leadership to use state institutions to preserve and promote a moderate Estonian

nationalism. This gave the Estonian communist leadership a degree of nationalist credentials, allowing it to capture the first free elections in Estonia and relegating more extreme nationalists to civil society organizations. Escalation in Estonia was further contained by the state's geopolitical affiliation with the West. This induced Western states and international institutions to intervene early in Estonia in an attempt to alleviate the rising tensions there, and inhibited Russia from attempting to escalate the situation. The result was that the identity conflict between Estonians and Russians was resolved peacefully and largely on the terms of the former.

#### *Scope and Boundary Conditions*

I bring this chapter to a close with a discussion of the scope and boundary conditions of my theory. This theory attempts to find the middle ground between those purely deductive, often deeply-structural theories that attempt to explain a large number of cases, often doing so at the cost of their ability to explain any single case; and those approaches that become so centered on an inductive approach to a specific case that they leave little room for external validity. The theory advanced in this dissertation should offer insights into the factors that cause violent separatism in a significant number of cases, but is of course not meant to explain every case of this phenomenon.

For the causal chain advanced in my theory to operate, the following factors are required. First, the state constructing identities must be reasonably powerful and its rule must cover a reasonable amount of time, two generations at a minimum. This period of time is required to allow national identities to be “preserved and reproduced over time within families and reinforced by local communities in a way that makes these constructed identities virtually impervious to significant change or elimination”.<sup>172</sup> Next, the identities constructed by the state must have some foundation in material reality – they must in some way be tied to ethnicity,

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<sup>172</sup> Darden, *Resisting Occupation*, 10.

language, religion, region, socio-economic class or some other objective marker. Although identities are at their core ideas, as Wendt says, ideas are themselves based upon and regulated by an independently existing physical reality.<sup>173</sup> This may explain why the effort to create a Soviet identity based almost exclusively on adherence to Marxist ideology was such a failure.

Next, in explaining the decisions of external actors with respect to intervention, the power of the target state cannot be ignored, even though its geopolitical affiliation is the primary determinant of these decisions. For instance, a great power and nuclear state such as Russia is clearly not a target for military intervention, irrespective of the level of escalation of its internal conflicts. It is also important that external actors agree on the geopolitical affiliation of the target state. If there is conflict between major external actors over the target state's affiliation, with both the West and Russia "claiming" it, for example, there is likely to be both institutional and military intervention in an escalating conflict. This is what happened in Georgia in 2008, and appears to be happening in Ukraine in 2014. Whereas in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Russia and the West assigned these states a post-Soviet geopolitical affiliation, disagreement over where they belonged later developed. While Russia still saw them as integral parts of its "near abroad" and "zone of privileged interests", a number of Western states began to argue that Georgia and Ukraine should be treated as members of the West.

Finally, the theory advanced here seems to work most effectively when applied to post-imperial or post-colonial states.<sup>174</sup> The reason for this is that in states that are fully independent and fully sovereign, there is no actor with the power to shape identities except for the national government. This national government will naturally attempt to enact policies that unify its

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<sup>173</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 110.

<sup>174</sup> It may also shed light on the policies of federal states divided along ethnic, linguistic or religious grounds, such as Canada.

population rather than divide it. Supra-national states or colonial rulers, however, through either design or accident, may enact policies that serve to divide people in a certain territorial unit rather than unite them.

### Conclusion

This chapter has presented the theory of violent separatism advanced by this dissertation. The following chapters test this theory through the examination of four empirical cases in three post-Soviet states. Chapter 3 begins with a short historical overview of the creation of the Soviet Union and then examines the process of construction and institutionalization of identities undertaken by the Soviet state in Georgia, Moldova and Estonia. Chapter 4 examines the critical juncture of the Soviet collapse, explaining how the level of institutionalized identity division in each state translated into a corresponding level of mobilization and escalation seen in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Chapter 5 discusses how the geopolitical affiliation of Georgia, Moldova and Estonia – and not their military or economic significance or some other material factor – determined the actions of external actors in each state, which in turn determined whether or not the conflict there escalated to violent separatism. Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes my findings, offers conclusions and suggests avenues for further research.

### CHAPTER 3 – THE SOVIET UNION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES

#### **I. Introduction**

This chapter traces the process whereby the policies of the Soviet state constructed and institutionalized identities in the populations under its control, a process that led to different levels of institutionalized identity division in the four cases under examination. To restate the main components of the argument put forth in this dissertation, the independent variable is the level of institutionalized identity division in Georgia, Moldova and Estonia at the end of the Soviet period.<sup>175</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the value of the independent variable is argued to determine the value of the intervening variable – the level of mobilization around this identity division and escalation of the conflict between identity groups within the newly independent states. The value of this variable is argued to determine whether or not the “quasi-independent variable” of geopolitical affiliation enters the equation. Where the level of mobilization and escalation is high enough, the geopolitical affiliation of the target state predicts the form of international intervention – those states seen as Western will be targeted for conflict prevention or mitigation efforts, while those states seen as non-Western or post-Soviet are often targeted for military intervention. Successful violent separatist movements result when international intervention takes military form.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, it begins with a general description of the pre-Soviet and early Soviet history of each of the cases examined – the intent here is to establish a

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<sup>175</sup> The level of the independent variable is, of course, influenced by the state policies that construct and institutionalize identities, meaning it is not truly independent of all external influence. However, since this dissertation puts forth a mid-range mechanism or model to explain a process bound in space and time – the process leading to either violent separatism or a peaceful outcome in states undergoing political transition – the level of institutionalized identity division is appropriate as an independent variable since it represents the most important pre-existing structural feature of this process and is not affected by any other variables within the process.

baseline of common knowledge for each case and to present a general overview of the objectives of Soviet policies. Next, the chapter examines the construction and institutionalization of identities by the Soviet state in each case; this section concludes with a summary of the level of institutionalized identity division by case, which is the value of the independent variable. The chapter itself then concludes with a summary of findings and a bridge to the discussion of mobilization and escalation in the period surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union.

## **II. Pre-Soviet and Early Soviet Georgia, Moldova and Estonia**

As was the case in many of the regions where the Russian Empire came into contact with other states, the histories of Georgia, Moldova and Estonia are marked by periods of independence interspersed with periods of internal strife and foreign domination. Georgia, including present-day Abkhazia and Ajaria, had at times been independent and united. At other times it had been subjugated to foreign domination, with Abkhazia and Ajaria periodically pulled away from Tbilisi's control. The territory of present-day Moldova was also caught between expanding empires and subjected to periodic invasion and partition, while Estonia was colonized successively by Germans, Danes and Swedes. In all three cases, this tumultuous history culminated in annexation into the Russian Empire.

### **Georgia: Abkhazia and Ajaria**

In their early history parts of both Abkhazia and Ajaria were colonized successively by Greeks and Romans, and then in the medieval period both became part of the unified Georgian feudal kingdom, Ajaria in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. and Abkhazia in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. However, by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century the expanding Ottoman and Persian Empires were pressuring the small, isolated Georgian kingdom and this pressure had a significant effect on the futures of Abkhazia and Ajaria. The Ottomans occupied most of Abkhazia by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and wrested

Ajaria from Georgia in 1614. Most of Abkhazia would remain under Ottoman rule until being gradually incorporated into the Russian Empire in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, while Ajaria would remain under Ottoman rule until the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, when it too was annexed by Russia. Since the rest of Georgia had been annexed by the Russian Empire by 1801, Russia's annexation of Abkhazia and Ajaria meant their reunification with Georgia.

Both Abkhazia and Ajaria were restless provinces that proved difficult for the Russian Empire to control. After the exile of the last Abkhazian prince and the completion of Abkhazia's annexation to Russia in 1864, Russian attempts to promote assimilation and to force the Abkhazian population to convert from Islam to Orthodoxy provoked widespread discontent that culminated in an uprising in 1866. After the defeat of this uprising the surviving Abkhazians were largely reduced to serfdom on Russian and Georgian estates. Between 1866 and 1877 more than 70,000 Abkhazians fled or were exiled to Ottoman Turkey to escape this persecution, and Tsarist authorities settled ethnic Slavs and Georgians in their place.<sup>176</sup>

After the February 1917 Russian Revolution Abkhazia asserted a right to autonomy within the new Russian state; when the Russian state collapsed after the Bolshevik coup of November 1917, Abkhazia declared its independence. After being invaded in March 1918 by Bolshevik troops, the Abkhaz leadership appealed to Georgia for help; a large Georgian force ejected the Bolsheviks and incorporated Abkhazia into Georgia. This status persisted until 1921, when Abkhazia again erupted into unrest, providing a pretext for Red Army invasion and annexation of all of Georgia into the USSR.

So the relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia in the pre-Soviet period was complex. On the one hand Abkhazia "had never sat easily within Georgia"; on the other, the

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<sup>176</sup> James Minahan, *The Former Soviet Union's Diverse Peoples*, Santa Barbara, CA, ABC-CLIO, 2004, 130.

long association with Georgians had left many cultural traces.<sup>177</sup> Georgianized princes ruled the region for centuries, the Georgian language was the principal language of governance, and many Abkhaz converted to Orthodoxy after the annexation of the province into the Russian Empire, which at the time meant a return to association with Georgia.

Ajaria was no less restless and rebellious than Abkhazia when confronted with the encroachment of Russian rule and the Orthodox religion that accompanied it. Russian advances in the 1820s resulted in an increase in the adoption of Ottoman and Turkish cultural forms by Ajarians: the Russo-Ottoman Wars of 1828-1829 saw increased mosque construction in Ajaria, adoption of Turkish surnames by families with Georgian names, and adoption of the chadri (veil) and fez as part of local dress.<sup>178</sup> In this same war, Russian commanders tried to convince Ajarian beys (local leaders) to support them, but the beys remained "fanatically anti-Christian".<sup>179</sup> Indeed, Ajarian support for Ottoman forces remained a common theme throughout the several Russo-Turkish wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: from the 1850s on the Russian Army was harassed by attacks from "fierce Ajarians and Laz irregulars",<sup>180</sup> and during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 Ajarians held a number of top posts in the Ottoman Armed forces and up to 10,000 served as Ottoman soldiers.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, after the Ottoman Empire's defeat in that war and the incorporation of Ajaria into the Russian Empire, some 6000 Ajarians fled to Turkey.<sup>182</sup>

Ajaria's annexation into the Russian Empire meant its return to Georgia, since Georgia had itself been annexed in 1801. Indeed, late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Georgian nationalist intellectuals saw

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<sup>177</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 321.

<sup>178</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border* 96-97.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>181</sup> George Sanikidze and Edward W. Walker, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia", Berkeley, CA, University of California Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, Fall, 2004, 8.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 6.



their reunion with Ajaria as uniting to Georgians their "brothers in blood, the nest of our heroes, the cradle of our civilization".<sup>183</sup> They were destined to be disappointed, as Ajarians did not share their enthusiasm: a Georgian official wrote at the time that the inhabitants of Ajaria "run away from us, as if they are running from the plague"<sup>184</sup> and Georgian nationalist intellectual Dmitri Bakradze, who traveled through Ajaria in the 1880s, wrote of the inhabitants, "to everything that is not related to religion they look with repulsion.... no matter what the subject of discussion is, they will invariably trace it back to a religious theme"<sup>185</sup>.

So Abkhazia and Ajaria shared similar pre-Soviet histories, marked by on-again/off-again union with the feudal Georgian kingdom, followed by several centuries of Ottoman rule and large-scale conversion to Islam, followed by incorporation into the Russian Empire and the resulting exile or flight of portions of their populations. As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century dawned and Russian imperial power waned, both provinces had strong local and regional identities and neither felt any significant attachment to Georgia or imperial Russia. Nevertheless, when Georgia enjoyed its brief period of independence between 1918 and 1921, it managed to incorporate both provinces into the Georgian state; both were then annexed with it into the Soviet Union.

#### *Moldova: Bessarabia and Transnistria*

As with much of Eastern Europe, the territory of present-day Moldova has a past marked by invasion, annexation and partition by larger powers. After some two centuries as an independent principality, it fell under Ottoman rule in 1538, but was never fully incorporated into the empire. Pressure from the expanding Russian Empire was felt in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and by 1806 Russia had occupied the land between the Nistru (Dniestr) and Prut Rivers, known

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<sup>183</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 98.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.

at the time as Bessarabia.<sup>186</sup> This land forms the greater part of present-day Moldova. The land west of the Prut, which now comprises the bulk of present-day Romania, remained under Ottoman rule.

The collapse of the Russian Empire and the end of the First World War in 1918 brought a Romanian occupation of Bessarabia, which lasted until its annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940. The Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) was proclaimed August 2, 1940, and consisted of the historical province of Bessarabia as well as the current area of Transnistria, which had been an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within Ukraine from 1924-1940. A renewed Romanian occupation came in 1941, in tandem with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union; Moldova was then re-taken by Soviet forces in 1944.

This history of invasion, annexation and partition had a profound effect on the demographic composition and culture of Moldova. Waves of immigrants decreased the proportion of native Moldovans in the population, and indigenous Moldovan culture was relegated to the countryside, with Russians, Jews and russified Moldovans dominating the cities<sup>187</sup>. The effect of this was that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Moldova was a cultural “blank slate”, with no culture or language dominant. A Romanian activist working there in the inter-war period said, “That Bessarabia has remained culturally backward is our greatest advantage. If there had been any culture at all in Bessarabia, it would have been Russian.... We are working in an environment where we have to create everything but destroy very little”<sup>188</sup>.

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<sup>186</sup> The historical name of this land between the Nistru and the Prut is Bessarabia. As mentioned, it forms the greatest part of present-day Moldova, but the de jure boundaries of Moldova also include Transnistria, which had not been annexed by Romania.

<sup>187</sup> Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia and the Politics of Culture*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 26.

<sup>188</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 46.

While Bessarabia remained a cultural backwater in the inter-war period, the Soviet Union was hard at work creating a Moldovan identity in the only majority Moldovan area it controlled: the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) within Ukraine, the greater part of which comprises modern-day Transnistria. As we will see, this situation had not changed significantly by the time the Soviet Union joined the newly-annexed Bessarabia with most of the MASSR in 1940, creating the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic in the process.

### Estonia

Like Moldova and Georgia, Estonia was subjected to early foreign domination and often direct foreign rule, culminating with annexation into the Russian Empire. Estonia was colonized by Germans and Danes in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and effectively ruled by Denmark until it was purchased from the Danes by the Livonian Confederation in 1346. The collapse of the Confederation in 1561 ushered in a period of Swedish rule, which lasted until Sweden's defeat by the Russian Empire in the Great Northern War in 1721. Estonia was a part of the Russian Empire until its collapse in 1918, and was independent until 1940, when it was annexed by the Soviet Union.

While Estonia, like Moldova and to a lesser extent Georgia, has a long history of Russian immigration – with Old Believers fleeing religious persecution arriving in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and Russian soldiers, officials and merchants settling there after its annexation by the empire in 1721 – the effect on Estonia's demography and indigenous culture in Estonia was less than in Moldova. As late as 1922, ethnic Estonians still comprised 87.6% of the population, with Russians making up only 8.2%.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> 1922 Census data from "EESTI-ERINEVATE RAHVUSTE ESINDAJATE KODU" internet resource at [http://www.miksike.ee/docs/lisakogud/tolerants/vahemused/vahemused\\_tekst.htm](http://www.miksike.ee/docs/lisakogud/tolerants/vahemused/vahemused_tekst.htm), accessed 9 January 2013.

The demographic predominance of Estonians enabled them to preserve essential elements of a national culture, even during periods of Russian rule, but the small size of the Estonian nation limited its staying power. Whereas Moldova in the Russian Empire remained a cultural “blank slate” and Georgia developed into an arena of competing cultural narratives due to the long period of Ottoman rule in Abkhazia and Ajaria, Estonia experienced a cultural revival in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Agrarian reforms, increases in education and contacts with Europe all contributed to an Estonian “national awakening” and the emergence of an Estonian national movement between the 1860s and 1880s.<sup>190</sup> By the end of the 1880s, however, this movement had lost momentum and had been replaced by a tendency toward russification, especially in the fields of education and religion, where Orthodoxy was promoted over the traditional Lutheranism of the Estonian countryside.

So Georgia, Moldova and Estonia shared a history of foreign domination culminating in their annexation by the Russian Empire, with Estonia entering the empire in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century and Georgia and Moldova following in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. All three also shared a certain level of division in identities in the pre-Soviet period. In Georgia, a Georgian national identity based on ethno-linguistic and religious factors was opposed by Abkhazian and Ajarian identities that centered on their religious difference with Georgians. In Moldova, the indigenous culture was relegated to the countryside while Russians, russified Jews and russified Moldovans dominated the cities. In Estonia, although ethnic Estonians dominated demographically, their national movement had lost steam by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century due to strong russifying tendencies in the government and the intelligentsia.

### **III. Soviet Policies and Institutionalized Identity Divisions**

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<sup>190</sup> Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1991), 57.

Prior to its toppling of the Russian Provisional government in November 1917, the Russian Bolshevik Party had invested little intellectual energy in studying what came to be known as the “nationalities problem”. Like religion, the concept of nationalities was seen by Marxism as a ruse perpetrated on the masses by capitalism in order to divide people and obscure their true class identities. Since nations were seen as artificial phenomena, the Bolshevik Party initially did not have a nationalities policy, but this soon changed as the anarchy of the civil war brought them into direct contact with emerging national movements throughout the territory of the former tsarist state.<sup>191</sup> Realizing that they “lacked even the most basic knowledge about the lands and peoples of the former Russian Empire”, the new Soviet government enlisted the help of ethnographers and economists to map the ethno-linguistic and economic terrain of their new state.<sup>192</sup>

The results of this research effort presented Soviet leaders with a quandary. While Marxist ideology dictated – and the Bolsheviks had promised – national self-determination for all peoples of the former empire, the economic terrain of their newly-inherited state dictated centralization. As Hirsch argues, the fact that Soviet Russia could not survive without cotton from Turkestan and oil from the Caucasus meant that the Soviet government needed to find a way to maintain control of these and other key regions while formally granting self-determination to the people residing there.<sup>193</sup> Their solution to this problem was to place all the peoples of the Soviet Union into a hierarchical structure of nationalities, with the largest and most “developed” of these groups being granted their own states in the form of Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR), each of which was to join the Soviet Union voluntarily and each of which

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<sup>191</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>192</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 7.

<sup>193</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 5.

retained the legal right to secession. Those nations granted SSRs had to have at least one million speakers of the native language and they had to be located along the external border of the USSR so that the right to secession did not become a “technical absurdity”.<sup>194</sup>

Those nationalities not qualifying for SSR status were nevertheless listed on the official list of Soviet nationalities and were often given their own homelands inside an SSR “belonging” to a larger nationality. This “nesting” of nationalities was not seen as problematic in the Soviet context, since nations were seen as transitory and artificial phenomena, merely way stations on the way to the development of a post-national consciousness among all peoples. This teleological view of human development was accompanied by a belief that the process was open to scientific intervention that would speed it up. Thus, those Soviet nationalities seen as less developed were subjected to a process of “State Sponsored Evolution”,<sup>195</sup> which sought to accelerate the development of their national consciousness, thus hastening the day when they would pass through that stage on their to the achievement of a post-national, Soviet identity. This teleological view of the development of identities combined with the belief that “scientific” intervention by the state could guide the direction and accelerate the speed of this development were hallmarks of nationality policy throughout the Soviet period. While the Soviet effort to construct nations was not unique in history, what was unique was the fact that this effort often intentionally constructed multiple nations within the borders of a single state.

The Soviet state used three major “baskets” of policies to construct and institutionalize identities within its population: policies that classified or labeled people; policies that educated people; and policies that influenced the settlement patterns of people. These policies led to the development of three types of identities: ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic, and regional. In

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<sup>194</sup> Rocky L. Rockett, *Ethnic Nationalities in the Soviet Union: Sociological Perspectives on a Historical Problem*, (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1981), 4.

<sup>195</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 8.

the theory presented here, the first “basket” is represented by three specific policies: language policy, policy with respect to how people are officially counted or classified, and policy or practice affecting access to political power or leadership positions. The second “basket” is represented by two specific policies: the content of the mass schooling curriculum and the structure of the university system - these policies have an outsized influence on the way that history is understood by the population of a state. The third and final “basket” of policies at the state’s disposal consists of two policies: policies that concentrate certain demographic groups in certain regions; and policies with respect to the awarding of political autonomy to certain regions. The rest of this section traces these policies in the four cases examined in this dissertation, explaining how state policies strengthened identity-divisions between Georgians and Abkhazians, Moldovans and Transnistrians and Estonians and Russians, while weakening the identity-division between Georgians and Ajarians.

*Georgia: Abkhazia and Ajaria*

In Soviet Georgia, the state inherited two restless, territorially concentrated minorities. The Abkhazians exhibited a distinct linguistic difference from Georgians and a rather weak religious difference,<sup>196</sup> while the Ajarians exhibited a small linguistic difference from Georgians and a strong religious difference.<sup>197</sup> At the time of the Bolshevik coup, a religious difference was often more salient than an ethno-linguistic difference between groups. In the case of Ajaria, examples of this are numerous. Mathias Pelkmans, who did doctoral dissertation research in

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<sup>196</sup> The Abkhazian language belongs to the Northwest Caucasian language family, while Georgian is a South Caucasian language. Although Abkhazians are a majority Christian people, there is a sizeable Muslim minority and a strong, enduring pagan tradition. Hewitt (1998) remarks that Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba, only partly in jest, characterized the Abkhaz as 80% Christian, 20% Muslim and 100% pagan.

<sup>197</sup> Ajarians speak the Gurian dialect of Georgian, which contains many Turkish loan words due to their long period of rule by the Ottoman Empire. Unlike the Abkhaz, the Ajarians were a Muslim majority people when Ajaria entered the Soviet Union.

Ajaria, writes that "well into the 20th Century, the inhabitants of Ajaria did not identify as part of the Georgian nation"; rather self-identification was in terms of local residence, family, clan and especially religion.<sup>198</sup>

Indeed, identification by religion was so strong in the Caucasus at this time that it often "dictated" how groups were classified ethno-linguistically. In the pre-Soviet period many of the ethnic groups in the Russian Empire who converted to Islam were thereafter known simply as Turks. Pelkmans recounts the story of the German scholar Rosen who did research in Ajaria in 1843. When asked what religion they adhered to before they adopted Islam, a group of Laz (a small ethnic group concentrated along the Ajarian-Turkish border) told Rosen, "We have been Turk for a long time now".<sup>199</sup> Georgian political scientist Giorgi Tarkhan-Mouravi argues that at beginning of the Soviet period most Ajarians did not consider themselves Georgian and that Turkish was widely spoken there.<sup>200</sup> So even groups later shown to be ethno-linguistically distinct from Turks often self-identified as Turks and spoke Turkish due to the overwhelming salience of the religious identity and the association of Islam with the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the Soviet period, this situation had completely reversed itself: religion was now essentially irrelevant as a marker of identity, while ethno-linguistic markers – emphasized by the Soviet state and in the case of Abkhazia, combined with distinct historical-symbolic and regional identities – served to create a significantly more explosive situation in Abkhazia than in Ajaria.

#### *The Construction of Ethno-Linguistic Identities: Abkhazia*

As discussed, there are three state policies that serve to construct ethno-linguistic identities: language policy, policy with respect to how people are officially counted or classified, and policy or practice affecting access to political power or leadership positions. Each of these

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<sup>198</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 9.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

<sup>200</sup> Giorgi Tarkhan-Mouravi, interview with the author, 4 July, 2012, Tbilisi, Georgia.



policies will be outlined in terms of how they served to construct ethno-linguistic identities in Abkhazia during Soviet rule there. At the outset, it is worth noting that Russian was the only language that enjoyed official status throughout the Soviet Union. Yet despite decades of Russification, by 1970 93.9% of Soviet citizens still claimed their native language as their first language.<sup>201</sup> In Georgia, attachment to native languages was even stronger than the Soviet average: 99.4% of ethnic Georgians in the GSSR listed Georgian as their first language in 1970.<sup>202</sup> Efforts at linguistic homogenization in Georgia were met with resistance: an educational reform effort in 1958 that gave parents a choice between Russian-language and Georgian-language schools was strongly opposed in Georgia, and a 1978 effort by Moscow to delete the clause from the union republic's constitution recognizing Georgian as the official state language of the GSSR was met by such strong protests that the Soviet government abandoned the plan.<sup>203</sup>

Much as Georgians resisted what they saw as efforts to linguistically russify them, Abkhazians resisted linguistic georgianization efforts and embraced russification. How this came to be is revealed by an examination of early Soviet language policy in Abkhazia. This policy sought to encourage the development of a distinct Abkhazian consciousness and identity, in large part through the promotion of the Abkhazian language. However, the underdeveloped state of the Abkhazian language presented Soviet officials with a problem: the language had only existed in written form since the 1850s and less than 5% of the Abkhazian population was literate in it.<sup>204</sup> Georgian was also not widely spoken among ethnic Abkhazians; instead, "the language of government and business in Abkhazia within living memory had always been

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<sup>201</sup> Rockett, *Ethnic Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 130.

<sup>202</sup> Zev Katz, Rosemary Rogers and Frederic Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 173.

<sup>203</sup> Rockett, *Ethnic Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 1.

<sup>204</sup> Timothy K. Blauvelt, "'From Words to Action!' – Nationality Policy in Soviet Abkhazia, 1921-38", in Stephen Jones, ed. *Democracy and State Building in Georgia, 1918-2010*, (Routledge, forthcoming July 2013), 7.

Russian".<sup>205</sup> This caused Soviet officials to classify Abkhazians as a “backward nation”, entitling them to special promotion of their language, among other things. Georgians, on the other hand, along with Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Armenians and Germans, were designated a “Western” nation within the Soviet ethno-federal system and therefore were not subject to any special treatment or expanded opportunities to advance in Communist Party structures.<sup>206</sup>

The debate over language policy in Abkhazia played out in Party newspapers and other publications. Advocates of designating Russian, Georgian or Abkhazian as state languages made their arguments, among other places, in the official newspaper *Trudovaiia Abkhazia (Workers' Abkhazia)*.<sup>207</sup> Advocates of Russian argued that it had long been the language of inter-ethnic communication in Abkhazia; advocates of Georgian argued that the use of Russian was reactionary and a continuation of Tsarist policy, and that therefore the solution was the gradual adoption of both Georgian and Abkhazian as official languages in Abkhazia; while advocates of Abkhazian argued that the best way for the Party to reach the workers and peasants who formed the core of its strength was through their native language.

In the end, advocates of Russian and Abkhazian won the debate. While Russian continued to be widely used, there was a concerted attempt to expand education in the Abkhazian language and to expand its use in official structures. In 1931, for example, the Central Committee of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic directed the removal of all secretaries of local Soviets who did not speak Abkhazian, the introduction of more ethnic Abkhazians into leadership structures, and the conduct of local administrative affairs in the Abkhazian language.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, X.

<sup>208</sup> Timothy K. Blauvelt, “Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era”, *Nationalities Papers* 35:2 (May 2007), 213.

One of the most contentious debates over language policy in the Soviet period revolved around the language of primary education. While Georgians maintain that the Soviet period saw an “estrangement from Georgian culture” in Abkhazia due to the lack of compulsory Georgian language instruction in the schools<sup>209</sup>, Abkhazians point to the Stalin period as an era of linguistic Georgianization in Abkhazia. Even the facts of the policies implemented are in dispute between scholars on opposite sides of this debate. Abkhazian scholar Vasilij Avidzba claims that under Stalin’s rule “the Abkhaz language was subjected to persecution: its alphabet in 1937 was changed to a Georgian base. In 1945 the language of tuition in Abkhazian schools was also changed to Georgian”.<sup>210</sup> George Hewitt, a British scholar sympathetic to the Abkhazian view, echoes this assertion, arguing that the Abkhazian language schools were “closed” in 1945-1956 and then reopened shortly after Stalin’s death in 1953.<sup>211</sup>

Georgian scholars dispute the assertion that the language of education was georgianized, even in the Stalin period. Davitashvili, for example, notes that education remained in the Abkhazian language through grade four for the entire Soviet period, even under Stalin’s rule.<sup>212</sup> Before the period of georgianization, instruction after grade four was in Russian; the changes under Stalin replaced Russian with Georgian as the language of instruction. Gvantseladze, another Georgian scholar, cites the 1938 resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on educational reform to make the point that these changes were not specific to Abkhazia. This resolution, which applied to all “special national schools” in the Soviet

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<sup>209</sup> Zurab Davitashvili, Professor of International Relations, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, interview with the author, 8 May 2012. As discussed in Note 155, Suny, one of the most respected scholars of the South Caucasus, generally supports this view of a pre-Soviet cultural affinity between Abkhazia and Georgia. Suny argues that the long period of association of between the two in the pre-Soviet period had left many Georgian cultural traces in Abkhazia.

<sup>210</sup> George Hewitt, Ed. *The Abkhazians: A Handbook* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 182.

<sup>211</sup> Hewitt, *The Abkhazians*, 171.

<sup>212</sup> Davitashvili, interview with the author.

Union<sup>213</sup>, decreed that from 1938 they should replace native-language instruction with instruction in either the language of the union republic (in this case, Georgian) or with Russian.<sup>214</sup>

In the event, the government of Georgian SSR moved cautiously in complying with this resolution, perhaps fearing a backlash in Abkhazia; the resolution was only implemented in 1945, and Georgian was selected as the primary language of instruction in Abkhazian schools.<sup>215</sup> So, despite the difficulty of teasing the historical facts out of the emotionally-charged scholarship on the language issue in Abkhazian schools during the Stalin period, the following picture does emerge: from 1945-1953 Russian was replaced by Georgian as the language of instruction after grade four, and in at least some schools Abkhazian was replaced by Georgian in the first four grades as well. However, no schools were closed, and even after the changes, the language of instruction in classes on Abkhazian language and literature remained Abkhazian. Scholars on both sides of the debate agree that after Stalin's death in 1953 primary education reverted to the pre-Stalin pattern of instruction in Abkhazian through grade four and then in Russian thereafter. In all, then, the period of linguistic georgianization in Abkhazian primary schools lasted for eight years.

Despite this period of georgianization, the Abkhazian language survived and even advanced within the Soviet system in the long view. Even Hewitt, although highly critical of Georgian linguistic policies in Abkhazia during the Stalin period, concludes that "apart from

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<sup>213</sup> Other than schools teaching in Abkhazian, these included schools teaching in German, Finnish, Polish, Lithuanian, Estonian, Greek and other minority languages.

<sup>214</sup> Teimuriaz Gvantseladze, "Functioning of the Abkhazian Language in Education", *Spekali* (Electronic Bilingual Scholarly Peer-Reviewed Journal), internet resource at <http://www.spekali.tsu.ge/index.php/en/article/viewArticle/2/20/>, accessed 28 March 2013.

<sup>215</sup> What is not clear, and this is likely a legitimate grievance on the part of Abkhazians, is why the Georgian Party did not maintain Russian as the language of instruction in Abkhazian primary schools, since the 1938 resolution appears to have allowed this.

those educated during the closure of Abkhaz language schools, Abkhazians themselves tended not to learn Georgian. Nor was there any need: Russian was the natural second language for Abkhazians".<sup>216</sup> Kaiser is blunter about the effect of Soviet policies on the status of the Abkhazian language, stating that "almost no linguistic assimilation" to Georgian had occurred in Abkhazia by 1989. Soviet census figures bear this assertion out: in 1989 97.3% of ethnic Abkhazians living in the Abkhazian ASSR listed Abkhazian as their native language, significantly above the average of 91.3% among all 23 of the ASSRs in the Soviet Union. Of those Abkhazians who did list another language, the vast majority listed Russian – only 1.0% of urban and 0.4% of rural Abkhazians admitted to speaking Georgian as their primary language.

Thus, over the period of Soviet rule as a whole, the use and significance of the Abkhazian language had increased significantly from its pre-Soviet status, and this resulted in a significant increase in Abkhazian identity and sense of difference from Georgians. The advances made by the Abkhazian language – even given the reverses of the Stalin period – are all the more remarkable when one considers that at the beginning of the Soviet period the Abkhazian language lacked a native language literature, and literacy in it was no more than 10%.<sup>217</sup> As Blauvelt concludes in his article on the issue, "The institutions and policies that made up Soviet nationality policy during this period clearly played a role in the development of Abkhaz national identity"<sup>218</sup>.

The second policy that the state uses to construct ethno-linguistic identities relates to how it counts or classifies people. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Bolshevik rulers of the Soviet Union rapidly transitioned from having no clear policy on nationalities to having an extensive list of nationalities that not only labeled groups of people according to ethno-linguistic

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<sup>216</sup> Hewitt, *The Abkhazians*, 174.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

<sup>218</sup> Blauvelt, "'From Words to Action!' – Nationality Policy in Soviet Abkhazia, 1921-38", 21.

criteria, but also ranked them according to their perceived level of national consciousness. The official list of Soviet nationalities was fluid over time, especially between 1920 and 1939, with the fluidity reflecting the level of ethnographic knowledge acquired by the Soviet government, the perceived loyalty of different groups to the Soviet state, and the process of the “drawing together” or “merging” of peoples that Marxist theory predicted and Soviet leaders claimed was underway.

An overview of the official lists of nationalities used for Soviet censuses serves to make this point. In the 1920 census there were 53 main groups listed, but by 1926 the number of officially recognized groups had risen to 188, along with several “catchall” categories such as “others” and “peoples not noted or noted inexactly”. This rapid expansion of the list is mostly a reflection of the increase in ethnographic knowledge of the peoples of the Soviet Union gained by the Soviet government in the period from 1920-1926. By 1939, with the Second World War approaching, the Soviet government began to have suspicions about the loyalty of some of the peoples in its border regions, especially those having ethnic kin in neighboring states. The list of nationalities for that year reflects this, listing 62 “Soviet” nationalities and 30 “diaspora” nationalities, with the latter subject to deportation to the interior of the country to prevent them from engaging in subversion. By 1959, the list of officially recognized Soviet nationalities had stabilized at some 95 different groups, with the “diaspora” nationalities having been rehabilitated and relisted with the other Soviet nations.<sup>219</sup>

It is important to note that in every one of these lists, both Georgians and Abkhazians appeared, and remained classified as separate national groups. There is a linguistic basis for this decision, since Abkhazian is a North Caucasian language and Georgian is a South Caucasian

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<sup>219</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 327-335; Barbara A. Anderson and Brian D. Silver, “Demographic Sources of the Changing Ethnic Composition of the Soviet Union”, *Population and Development Review* 15:4 (December 1989), 612-613.

language. However, given the already-noted cultural affinity between Abkhazians and Georgians and the persistent Soviet emphasis on the “drawing together” and “merging” of peoples, it is significant that there was no attempt to merge Abkhazians either with Georgians or with the closely related Abaza and Adygei ethno-linguistic groups in the nearby northwest Caucasus.<sup>220</sup> Among smaller groups related to the dominant Kartvelian group of Georgians, such merging did occur: whereas pre-Soviet censuses listed Mingrelians, Svans, Laz, Imeretians and Samurzaqanoans as distinct groups, by 1926 all these groups were listed as Georgians.

After the completion of the 1926 census the Soviet People’s Commissariat on Nationalities began work on ranking the groups on the list. Within the Georgian SSR, this involved determining which groups comprised the “major nationalities” of the state. The Commissariat eventually determined that Georgians, Armenians, Turks (later reclassified as Azeris) and Russians were the major nationalities of Georgia, while Abkhazians were listed as a major nationality specifically within Abkhazia.<sup>221</sup> Thus, throughout the Soviet period, despite the fact that they were culturally assimilated to Georgians and were ethno-linguistically related to other small nationalities in the North Caucasus, Abkhazians retained their status as a major Soviet nationality. This is even more significant in light of the fact that the Soviet government was ideologically obligated to demonstrate a “merging” of peoples (a “merging” that is reflected in the reduction in the size of the lists after 1926) and the fact that the Abkhazians comprised by far the smallest of the 18 groups that enjoyed their own ASSR over the duration of the Soviet period.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Blauvelt, “From Words to Action!’ – Nationality Policy in Soviet Abkhazia, 1921-38”, p. 27.

<sup>221</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 136.

<sup>222</sup> Anderson and Silver, “Demographic Sources of the Changing Ethnic Composition of the Soviet Union”, 612-613. In 1989 the Abkhazian population was 103,000; all other peoples with their own ASSRs had populations between 131,000 and 6.6 million, with the average being 1.03 million. In other words, the Abkhaz were 1/10<sup>th</sup> the size of the average group residing in its own ASSR.

Indeed, rather than “merging” identities between Georgians and Abkhazians, Soviet policies served to strengthen and reinforce the difference between them. As noted previously, linguistic and ethnic identities are inherently continuous, rather than dichotomous, variables. The boundaries between neighboring ethnic and linguistic groups are never clear and concise – mixing of blood and language inevitably occurs, resulting in border populations that are neither “this” nor “that” in any strict or pure sense. However, when the state begins the process of categorizing languages and ethnic groups, it invariably makes these blurry lines clear and makes permeable boundaries between groups impermeable. As we will see, when these newly rationalized and clarified categories serve as a basis for the apportionment of political power, boundaries between groups become even more meaningful and their interactions are likely to become even more contentious.

The final state policy that serves to construct an ethno-linguistic identity involves how the state determines access to power. Where this access is determined by ethno-linguistic criteria, it serves to strengthen and further institutionalize this identity. As noted earlier, Abkhazians were designated a “backward” national group, qualifying them for special access to political posts under the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* (“indigenization”). This policy was designed to create national elites among the “backward” peoples of the USSR, in the expectation that these elites would help speed the evolution of these peoples through the stages of group consciousness, ending with their joining the ranks of the post-national, “Soviet” people.

Soviet policy with respect to the creation of a national elite in Abkhazia can be divided into three periods: the effort to create an Abkhazian elite in the 1920s and early 1930s; the purge and destruction of large parts of that elite (along with most other national elites in the Soviet system) during the rule of Stalin; and the revival and consolidation of power by the



Abkhazian national elite after the death of Stalin. Although the low literacy rate, overwhelmingly rural character of Abkhazian society (96.3% lived in the countryside in 1926) and tiny size of the urban intelligentsia<sup>223</sup> presented challenges in the creation of an Abkhazian elite, significant progress was made in the first decade of Soviet rule. Whereas ethnic Abkhazians represented only 10% of the local Party apparatus in 1923, by 1929 that proportion had grown to 28.3%, or slightly above the overall percentage of ethnic Abkhazians living in Abkhazia, which stood at 28% then<sup>224</sup>.

This expansion of representation of ethnic Abkhazians in local Party leadership structures was enthusiastically promoted not only by the Soviet central government in Moscow, but by the government of the Georgian SSR in Tbilisi. In response to protests over collectivization plans in the Abkhazian city of Gudauta in 1931, the Georgian Central Committee blamed the protests on the "distance of the village Soviets and executive committees from the poor and middle peasants" and highlighted the "absolutely insufficient involvement of ethnic Abkhaz in the soviet and collective farm apparatus, [the] feeble implementation of *korenizatsiia* and weak nationalization of the apparatus in the center and the regions".<sup>225</sup> To address these issues, the Georgian Central Committee ordered the Abkhazian leadership to "decisively and firmly implement the *korenizatsiia* of the apparatus from top to bottom". To ensure the success of *korenizatsiia* "continuous six-month courses should be started in Sukhumi for eighty people" for which the Georgian Finance Commissariat would provide the necessary resources.<sup>226</sup>

However, the march of Abkhazians and almost all other minority groups toward the development of an ethno-national consciousness was soon to be temporarily interrupted.

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<sup>223</sup> Svante Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia*, (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Universitet, 2002), 5.

<sup>224</sup> Blauvelt, "Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era", 208.

<sup>225</sup> Blauvelt, "'From Words to Action!' – Nationality Policy in Soviet Abkhazia, 1921-38", 23.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

Whereas early Soviet policy had been concerned with undoing the Tsarist vestiges of “Great Russian Chauvinism” and its repression of minority rights, after Stalin consolidated control of the Party’s central structures, there was a backlash against “minority nationalism”. In Abkhazia, as in many other places in the Soviet Union, local leaderships were the primary victims of this backlash. After the death of Abkhazian Communist Party leader Stanislav Lakoba his supporters were purged from the ranks of the Abkhazian Party leadership. Suny describes the purges in Abkhazia in the following terms: “In Sukhumi the Abkhaz leaders, now labeled counter-revolutionaries, were tarred by their association with their late comrade Nestor Lakoba, who ...was posthumously linked to Trotskyism and national deviation”.<sup>227</sup>

In a hierarchical system that linked political power with ethnic identity, it is quite natural that the Abkhazian leadership and people discerned an ethnic motive behind the destruction of their political elite by a government run by Georgians in both Moscow (Stalin) and Tbilisi (Beria). However, this view neglects two important facts. First, the purges and the destruction of national elites was a phenomenon occurring across the Soviet Union under Stalin’s rule. Suny argues that across the South Caucasus the toll was very high, and that the party leaders in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia only saved themselves by being “‘vigilant’ enough Bolsheviks to ‘discover’, ‘expose’ and invent enough plots to satisfy Moscow”.<sup>228</sup> Second the purges were more about the consolidation of political control than the pursuit of ethnic vendettas. As Georgi Derluguian has argued, “The attempted forced Georgianization of Abkhazia falls into the late 1930s Stalinist trend to reduce the roster of national autonomies to a more manageable number

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<sup>227</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 276-277.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid*, 277.

and eliminate along the way the virtual fiefdoms like the one carved up by Lakoba in Abkhazia".<sup>229</sup>

Stalin's death, as it did elsewhere in the Soviet Union, ushered in a period of rehabilitation of the national elite in Abkhazia that saw it gain back the power it had lost in the purges, and more. After 1953 the surviving Abkhazian intelligentsia successfully petitioned Khrushchev to revert to "truly Leninist nationality policies", namely state sponsorship of Abkhazian culture and quotas for university admissions and government positions – this request was granted by Moscow.<sup>230</sup> Under the long-serving (1953-1972) First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party Vasilii Mzhavanadze, entrenched local authorities in Abkhazia and elsewhere in the GSSR were able to develop their own ethnic political bases from which they could "negotiate" with Tbilisi for increased power and control.<sup>231</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of, the re-establishment of such a regional fiefdom in Abkhazia, it remained a restless region of the GSSR. At ten year intervals in 1957, 1967 and 1977, partly in response to the perception that Stalin and Beria, as ethnic Georgians, had specifically targeted Abkhazia for repression, Abkhazian cultural movements and parts of the intelligentsia requested that Moscow integrate Abkhazia into the territory of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. Although it turned down these requests, the Soviet government responded with package of concessions that led to Abkhazians gaining disproportionate access to resources and key political positions, such that by 1990 67% of ministers in the Abkhazian

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<sup>229</sup> J. Craig Jenkins and Esther E. Gottlieb, Eds., *Identity Conflicts: Can Violence be Regulated?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 174.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

<sup>231</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 301.

government were ethnic Abkhaz (whereas ethnic Abkhazians represented only 18% of the total population of the Abkhazian SSR at that time).<sup>232</sup>

So the effort to promote the development of an ethnic Abkhazian Soviet political elite and the linkage of ethnicity with political power meant that by the end of the Soviet period in Abkhazia – despite the impact of Stalin’s purges – ethnic Abkhazians enjoyed a large advantage over ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia in terms of access to power. Kaiser summarizes this situation by remarking that over the course of Soviet rule Abkhazians “benefited from indigenization policies giving them a competitive advantage over Georgians for slots in higher education, for jobs and for political posts”.<sup>233</sup> This, combined with Soviet policies that bolstered the Abkhazian language and continued to consider Abkhazians a major nationality within Soviet Georgia, resulted in a high level of institutionalized identity division between Georgians and Abkhazians by the end of Soviet rule in Georgia.

*The Construction of Ethno-Linguistic Identities: Ajaria*

Although Ajarians are related to Georgians in the ethno-linguistic sense, at the beginning of the Soviet period Ajarians and Georgians were divided by the long period of adherence to Islam in Ajaria. Given that Soviet state policies emphasized the ethno-linguistic component of identity, tied it to access to political power, and delegitimized the previously-dominant religious component of identity, it will come as no surprise that by the end of the Soviet period, Ajarians considered themselves Georgians and Georgians accepted them as such. Indeed, the sense that Ajarians are and always were Georgians is so strong in contemporary Georgia that several of the policy-makers I interviewed in my research were dumbfounded that I was asking why there was no violent separatism in Ajaria after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>232</sup> Bruno Coppetiers and Robert Legvold, Eds., *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution*, (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005), 88.

<sup>233</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 362.

There could not have been war between Georgia and Ajaria, they insisted, because “Ajarians are Georgians”<sup>234</sup>. In essence, they were arguing that it is not conceivable that people of the same ethno-linguistic group would fight each other in a civil war. This speaks not only to the prevalence of ethnic markers of identity in the Soviet Union, but to the endurance of the effects of state policy, even to the point that these effects are felt over 20 years after the state’s collapse.

Language policy is one of the most potent tools of the state in the construction of identities, and the effects of Soviet language policies in Ajaria were significant. Although Ajarians speak “standard” Georgian now, at the beginning of the Soviet period their dialect was one of several Georgian dialects that had yet to be amalgamated into the standard Georgian language. In addition, the Gurian dialect spoken in Ajaria and the neighboring province of Guria was distinguished from the other Georgian dialects by its large amount of Turkish loan words.<sup>235</sup> In Ajaria, literacy in the Georgian language tended to be low in the early Soviet period, since pre-Soviet education had stressed literacy in Turkish or Arabic.<sup>236</sup> By the end of Soviet rule, however, literacy in the Georgian language was essentially universal in Ajaria. This explains Zuercher’s characterization of the assimilation of Ajarians as perhaps the greatest success of the Georgian national project.<sup>237</sup> So Soviet linguistic policy in Ajaria, which stressed the amalgamation of the various Western Georgian dialects into “standard” Georgian, was highly successful. This success was in part enabled by the linguistic complexity of the region, with

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<sup>234</sup> Although prevalent among Georgian policy-makers, this view was not shared by many of the scholars I interviewed, who acknowledged that Soviet ethno-federal policies were a prime cause of the previously separate Ajarian identity merging into the larger Georgian identity.

<sup>235</sup> Zuercher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 200.

<sup>236</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 105.

<sup>237</sup> Zuercher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 201.

several Georgian dialects, Turkish and Arabic all spoken. Making Georgian the lingua franca thus had obvious advantages as it enabled inter-group communication.

There was, however, another incentive for Ajarians to assimilate linguistically. The comparison of the contrasting fates of Ajarians and Meskhetians, a neighboring ethnic group, illustrates this. Both Ajarians and Meskhetians are Muslim populations, but while Ajarians spoke a Georgian dialect with Turkish loan words, Meskhetians spoke a dialect of Turkish. At the time of Georgia's incorporation into the USSR Meskhetians did not adhere to any strict ethnic identity; instead, their group identity was based on religion and language.<sup>238</sup> The origins of Meskhetians were and remain unclear, with some scholars arguing that they are ethnic Georgians who had been so thoroughly assimilated by centuries of Ottoman rule that they had "forgotten" their origins, and others arguing that they are ethnic Turks who settled long ago in what is now Georgian land.

Soviet nationalities policy, with its focus on ethno-linguistic markers of identity, struggled to find a label for Meskhetians: from 1926-1935 they were labeled Turks; in 1935 they were re-labeled Azerbaijanis; then several years later the term Turks was used again.<sup>239</sup> In the paranoid atmosphere of the Soviet Union during the Second World War, the fact that Meskhetians were a Muslim group and the suspicion that their ethnic origins might indeed be Turkish led the Soviet government to deport them en masse to Central Asia in November 1944.<sup>240</sup> The fate of Meskhetians and the lessons it contained for Ajarians was certainly not lost on the latter. The specter of a Muslim group with suspected Turkish ethno-linguistic origins

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<sup>238</sup> Tom Trier, George Tarkhan-Mouravi and Forrest Kilimnik, *Meskhetians: Homeward Bound*, (Tbilisi, Georgia: European Centre for Minority Issues: Caucasus, 2011), 10.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, 10. The term "Meskhetians" was not in use at the time, but was invented later.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*, 12. In all, the entire Meskhetian population of 94,955 was deported.

being deported in its entirety certainly would have provided an incentive for Ajarians to emphasize their ethno-linguistic kinship with Georgians in order to avoid a similar fate.

This brings us to the second state policy used to construct ethno-linguistic identities – the policy of classifying or labeling people. As it did with Meskhetians, the Soviet state struggled to find an appropriate label for Ajarians. In the 1926 Soviet census residents of Ajaria were allowed to register themselves as ethnic Ajarians, and some 70,000 did so, making them a narrow majority within the Ajarian ASSR.<sup>241</sup> After the List of Nationalities of the USSR was published in 1927, ethnographers and statisticians at the Soviet Central Statistical Administration began work on the list of “major nationalities”. At this time many of the groups in Western Georgia speaking dialects of Georgian – Mingrelians, Svans, Laz and Ajarians – were classified separately from other Georgians. Georgian representatives at the Central Statistical Agency argued that first three should be listed under the Georgian main nationality and argued that classifying Ajarians separately was “inaccurate” as well. However, in the end they agreed that it was necessary to tabulate data for the Ajarians since they were the titular people of the Ajarian ASSR. In the final list, the Central Statistical Administration listed Georgians, Armenians, Turks (later Azeris) and Russians to be the major nationalities of the GSSR, and listed Ajarians as a major nationality in the Ajarian ASSR.<sup>242</sup>

By 1939, however, Ajarians had disappeared from the list of Soviet nationalities. While this was not uncommon in the Soviet Union – recall that the list of recognized nationalities declined from 188 in 1926 to only 92 in 1939 - in Ajaria the reason for the change had much to do with religion, and Ajarians fell victim to the anti-religious policies of the Soviet government. Cornell argues that during the Soviet period the Ajarians were “a particular target of atheistic

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<sup>241</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 10.

<sup>242</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 136.

campaign enforced by Moscow, and did not enjoy any protection from Tbilisi given that the authorities in Tbilisi did not feel any particularly strong urge to protect the Islamic identity of a Georgian population".<sup>243</sup> When the Soviet state sought to curtail the influence of Islam, authorities in the Georgian SSR, many of whom held pre-existing anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic views, eagerly complied: all 172 madrassas and 158 mosques in Ajaria (except for one in Batumi) were torn down or put to other use, and many Muslim religious leaders fell victim to repression or fled to Turkey. The government of the Georgian SSR declared that women were required to remove the chadri (veil); while there was brief resistance to this edict, the overall reaction of Ajarians was one of "accommodation and retreat".<sup>244</sup> So the suppression of religion in general and the particular enmity directed toward Islam, along with the emphasis on ethno-linguistic identities by the Soviet state, resulted in Ajarians simply disappearing from the list of official Soviet nationalities. In the 1939 census, those who insisted on self-identifying as Ajarians were simply reclassified as Georgians when the census was published.<sup>245</sup>

By the 1989 Soviet census the assimilation of Ajarians was complete: 86% of Ajaria's population of 392,000 self-identified as Georgians. As Christoph Zuercher says, the disappearance of the Ajarians has a simple explanation: "unlike other Caucasian ethnic groups, they had not been deported but instead had fallen victim to the Soviet criteria for classifying ethnic groups. Language was regarded as an indicator of ethnicity, whereas religions were not. Hence, the Muslim Ajarians, speaking a version of Georgian, were not qualified as a distinct ethnic group".<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict*, 215.

<sup>244</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 106-107.

<sup>245</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 136.

<sup>246</sup> Zuercher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 201.



The final state policy which serves to construct ethno-linguistic identities is policy with respect to access to power. Whereas in Abkhazia an indigenous political elite was cultivated, then largely destroyed, and then reconstituted after Stalin's death, in Ajaria no such indigenous elite was created. Although Ajaria, like Abkhazia, was an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within Georgia, in almost all ways Ajaria had less religious and cultural freedom than other autonomous regions. In early Soviet days authorities conducted raids on Muslim leaders, attacked everything not considered Georgian, and Ajarians were almost absent in the local Party structures.<sup>247</sup> As *korenizatsiia* was underway in other autonomous regions, the reverse was happening in Ajaria. In 1922 the Russian consul in Batumi, the capital of Ajaria, remarked that "the Ajarian intelligentsia has been imprisoned... at the helm of power remained only Georgians- many of whom were not in the least qualified for the job"; he further characterized the process under way as the "Georgian colonization of Ajaria".<sup>248</sup>

Aside from religious persecution and ethnic assimilation, another reason that an indigenous elite failed to develop in the early Soviet period in Ajaria had to do with literacy. In pre-Soviet Ajaria most inhabitants were literate in Turkish and Arabic. Since this disadvantaged them in Soviet structures, non-Ajarian Georgians who had migrated to Batumi began to fill those posts reserved for the titular ethnic group<sup>249</sup>. Indeed, it was not until the 1950s that there was a local Party First Secretary, who was a native of Ajaria, and a local communist elite did not begin to develop until the 1960s, but by then this elite had begun to stress its Georgian identity.<sup>250</sup>

Ironically, the absence of Ajarians in party structures in the early Soviet period and the absence of a *korenizatsiia* effort in Ajaria might have prevented the formation of an Abkhazian-

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<sup>247</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 104.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

type narrative of grievance among Ajarians focused on the purges of the late 1930s. The purges of 1937 did not miss Ajaria. As Suny says, in that year “the Ajarian communist leadership was found guilty of being agents of foreign intelligence services and most were shot”.<sup>251</sup> But the fact that there was no ethnic category of Ajarian by then and the fact that native-born Ajarians were almost completely absent in local Party leadership structures meant that when the purges and executions came to Ajaria, the victims were Georgians, and therefore no ethnic or identity-based grievance could be constructed around the tragedies of that period.

The contrast between Abkhazia and Ajaria with respect to the construction of ethno-linguistic identities is stark. Although the ethno-linguistic difference between Abkhazians and Georgians certainly provided a stronger foundation for the construction of divided identities between the two, the Soviet state strengthened and institutionalized this difference, while it eliminated the difference between Ajarians and Georgians. Soviet policies modernized and promoted what had been largely a peasant language in Abkhazia, while they eliminated linguistic differences between the Ajarian dialect and standard Georgian by “folding” the former into the latter. Next, the emphasis on linguistic markers of identity and the suppression of Islam meant that while Abkhazians, despite their small numbers, remained on the list of official Soviet nationalities throughout the Soviet period, Ajarians, differentiated from Georgians on the basis of religion, were stricken from the list in the 1930s. Finally, the Soviet state created, then destroyed, then reconstituted an indigenous elite in Abkhazia while populating Ajaria’s political structures largely with Georgians from outside the Ajarian ASSR.

*The Construction of Historical-Symbolic Identities in Georgia: Background*

The state constructs historical-symbolic identities primarily through two related groups of policies: its system of primary education, and in particular, what Darden call the “constitutive

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<sup>251</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 276.

story”<sup>252</sup> of the nation taught in that system; and its university system, especially those departments dealing with language, literature, history and ethnology. These departments are the primary source of the history or constitutive story taught in primary schools, and in the Soviet educational system they often turned out to be breeding grounds for what Lieven calls “crypto-nationalists”.<sup>253</sup> I have already shown that Soviet policies greatly increased the salience of the ethno-linguistic component of identity in Georgia, while marginalizing the religious component of identity. What is important about historical-symbolic identities is whether they serve to reinforce the ethno-linguistic identity-division or cut across it by emphasizing unifying themes.

Darden argues that the content of the primary school curriculum at the time a nation crosses the threshold of 50% general literacy is the key to understanding the constitutive story of the nation that takes hold. In Georgia, although that threshold was not crossed until the early period of Soviet rule, the constitutive story taught in Georgian schools, at least until 1933, was a strongly nationalist one. During Georgia’s brief period of independence from 1918 until 1921, the state set up a primary school system with nationalist texts and teacher training. Even following the 1921 Soviet annexation of Georgia the Soviet government “deepened the national work begun” by pre-communist government, retaining teachers and curricula until the beginning of the backlash against “bourgeois nationalism” in 1933.

However, by this time the population was already schooled with an alternative pre-Soviet national curriculum, the content of which proved remarkably enduring. Darden cites Tamara Dragadze’s research in Georgian villages from 1970-1981, which revealed that dual cultures existed in the village: “the official culture of Soviet Georgia and what villagers viewed as

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<sup>252</sup> Darden, *Resisting Occupation*, 23.

<sup>253</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Road to Independence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 93.

the authentic pre-Soviet ‘Georgian’ culture”. Children were socialized into the latter culture at home, and Dragadze concludes that the crucial role of the family cannot be overstated for socializing the young and ensuring the national story endures. She recounts that some family members would tell children as young as three or four that what they have learned at school “is all untrue.”<sup>254</sup> Thus, the titular nationality in Georgia was educated in a fundamentally different way than most other nationalities in the USSR prior to the beginning of the Second World War.<sup>255</sup> During the period from 1921 to 1933, although Ajaria was part of Georgia as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and was thus presumably subjected to the same school curriculum, Abkhazia had greater independence. From 1921 until 1931 it was a “treaty republic” associated with the Georgian SSR, but in 1931 it was made an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Georgian SSR, giving it the same official status as Ajaria.

Georgia was unique among Soviet union republics not only for the content of its primary school curriculum, but also for the strength of its university system and the role of the intelligentsia in safeguarding what it saw as Georgia’s unique historical and cultural heritage. By the mid-1970s Georgia had a higher percentage of its population in schools of higher education than any other major nationality. Suny observes that “higher education in Georgia had become the prerogative of Georgians, and other nationalities found it difficult to enter schools of higher learning. In 1969-1970, Georgians, who made up about 67% of the republic’s population, accounted for 82.6% of the students in higher education”.<sup>256</sup> The strength of Georgia’s university system and the intelligentsia it trained and housed resulted in resistance to homogenizing policies emanating from Moscow. When in 1975 the USSR Ministry of Education

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<sup>254</sup> Darden, *Resisting Occupation*, 285.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid*, 277. According to Darden, Armenia was also allowed to maintain its nationalist primary school curriculum until 1933.

<sup>256</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 304.

issued a decree requiring that all candidate and doctoral dissertations be submitted in Russian, 365 prominent educators and writers signed a petition to Georgian leader Shevardnadze and Soviet leader Brezhnev arguing that it would “lead to a gradual diminution of the role and importance of the Georgian language” and would inhibit the development of Georgian scientific thought.<sup>257</sup>

As I will demonstrate, although Ajaria was subjected to essentially the same primary school curriculum as the rest of Georgia and was granted no special dispensation in the realm of higher education, this was not the case in Abkhazia. Over the course of the Soviet period in Abkhazia, the primary school curriculum, the structure of the university system and the content of pedagogy there increasingly diverged from that being taught in the rest of the Georgian SSR. The result was an undeclared academic war between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, with nationalist scholars from both sides propagating interpretations of the ethnic origins of Abkhazians and the history of Abkhazia that were diametrically opposed to one another.<sup>258</sup> When the Soviet Union and its educational system collapsed, “crypto-nationalist” scholars often made the most appealing arguments to increasingly nationalist constituencies, finding themselves elevated to positions of political power in the process. As Georgian scholar Ghia Nodia maintains, the first generation of post-Soviet leaders in both Georgia and Abkhazia came largely from the academic disciplines of the humanities, especially history, philology and literature. These disciplines were

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 310.

<sup>258</sup> Hewitt discusses what he labels the pseudo-theory of Georgian scholar Pavle Ingoroqva, who claimed in 1949 that the Abkhazians were relative newcomers to Abkhazia, having displaced the “native” Kartvelian/Georgian population in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Giorgi Anchabadze, one of the few remaining scholars able to work in both Abkhazia and Georgia, remarked that the situation between the two peoples is complicated by the widespread opinion among the Georgian public and among “weak historians” that the Abkhazians migrated to Abkhazia from the North Caucasus and are thus interlopers on Georgian land. Anchabadze calls this theory “absolutely untrue” (interview with the author, 4 July 2012).

“very nationalistic” and “very romantic” in their essence. According to Nodia, “these were people who were genuine ethnic nationalists, cultural nationalists”.<sup>259</sup>

*The Construction of Historical-Symbolic Identities: Abkhazia*

Although it is tempting to argue that the intensity of the division in identities between Georgians and Abkhazians is the “real” cause of both those Soviet policies that distinguished between the two groups on an ethno-linguistic basis and those that allowed the development of separate education systems propagating separate historical-symbolic identities, this is misguided for two reasons. First, the Russian Empire generally did not recognize the Georgian-Abkhazian division as one of special salience in the way that it administered Georgia. Indeed, at the beginning of the First World War, Georgia was divided into two *gubernii*, or governorates: one located in Tbilisi and encompassing eastern Georgia; and one located in Kutaisi, and encompassing Western Georgia, to include Abkhazia and Ajaria.<sup>260</sup> This “regional” or east-west division of Georgia had as much historical salience as did the Soviet ethno-linguistic division. After all, over the course of Georgia’s history it had more than once been divided between an “eastern” (or Kartvelian) kingdom centered on Tbilisi, and a “western” kingdom centered on either Kutaisi or Sukhumi.

Second, I have shown that there existed a strong division in identities between Georgians and Ajarians at the beginning of the Soviet period as well. There was no *a priori*

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<sup>259</sup> Ghia Nodia, PhD, Chairman of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, interview with the author, 10 May 2012. There are multiple examples of this phenomenon: Georgia’s first post-Soviet president Zviad Gamsakhurdia had a PhD in literature; Georgian para-military leader Djaba Ioseliani had a PhD in art history, and the first de facto president of post-Soviet Abkhazia Vyacheslav Ardzinba had a PhD in linguistic history.

<sup>260</sup> Within the Kutaisi Governorate there was a *Sukhumskii Okrug* (roughly equivalent to county) and a *Batumskaia Oblast’* (a larger division than an *okrug* but still smaller than a *guberniia*). What is important here is that the division of Georgia in the imperial period was centered on cities, not on the location of ethno-linguistic groups; and that the status of the region (*guberniia*, *oblast’* or *okrug*) was generally a function of its population, not the perceived level of national consciousness of the titular groups, as became the practice in the Soviet Union.

reason for the Soviet government to increase the salience of one identity-division while essentially eliminating another. Instead, this decision was guided by the dictates of Marxist ideology. Since it was officially atheist, Marxism recognized no religiously-based identities. While it did recognize the existence of ethno-linguistic identities, they were seen as transitory – mere stages on the road to the achievement of the post-national identity promised by the teleological Marxist view of history. Thus, the Soviet state saw nothing inherently dangerous or contradictory in recognizing and at times even promoting these ethno-linguistic identities, since they were seen as mere “form”, devoid of “content”.

As I noted earlier, literacy came late to Abkhazia, much later than it did to the rest of Georgia, which had a long-established literary language and the national high culture that accompanies it. By 1915, general literacy in the Abkhazian language was no more than 10%,<sup>261</sup> and although there had been attempts to devise a standard Abkhazian alphabet beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it was under Soviet rule in 1928 that the first state-sanctioned “Unified Abkhaz Alphabet” was devised.<sup>262</sup> It was not until the Soviet period, then, that universal primary education along with mass literacy existed together in Abkhazia. As noted previously, since Abkhazia was not an integral part of the Georgian SSR until 1931, and retained its political autonomy within the Georgian SSR from then until the end of the Soviet period, it is reasonable to expect that the constitutive story taught in Abkhazian schools differed significantly from that taught in the rest of Georgia. While the period of Georgianization of education in Abkhazia during Stalin’s time would probably have attempted to bring this constitutive story in line with that taught in the rest of Georgia, at only 8 total years (1945-1953) this period was not long enough to significantly affect the content of the Abkhazian identity being taught in its schools.

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<sup>261</sup> Hewitt, *The Abkhazians*, 172.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

The end of the Stalin period saw a quick roll-back of Georgianization and accelerated gains for independent education in Abkhazia. By 1966 there were 91 Abkhazian-language schools in the Abkhazian ASSR out of 365 schools total, with the remainder being mostly Russian-language schools.<sup>263</sup> This means that while ethnic Abkhazians made up just 15.9% of the population of the Abkhazian ASSR<sup>264</sup>, Abkhazian-language schools were 24.9% of the total there. The native language literature taught in primary schools in the Abkhazian ASSR can be divided into two periods. It was in the period from the beginning of the Soviet Union until 1955 that the birth of most genres of Abkhaz literature took place, and the content reflected “the significant influence of Russian literature” and “new ideas, mostly inspired by revolution”. Communist doctrine resulted in a highly ideological literature that reflected a “peremptory didacticism” reflecting the spirit of the times.<sup>265</sup> After 1955 there was “greater emancipation and freedom (although by no means complete) from ideological diktat”.<sup>266</sup>

So the story of primary education and the national constitutive story taught in Soviet Abkhazia is one that reflects the late development of a literary Abkhazian language and the late achievement of general literacy, both of which occurred in the period of Soviet rule. The Soviet emphasis on the ethno-linguistic component of identity combined with Abkhazia’s status as a “treaty republic” united with Georgia until 1931 and an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within Georgia thereafter gave educators in Abkhazia a high degree of latitude in devising and implementing their own primary school curriculum, the short period of Georgianization between 1945 and 1953 notwithstanding.

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<sup>263</sup> Hewitt, 173.

<sup>264</sup> This is according to the 1970 Soviet census, as listed in Hewitt, 237.

<sup>265</sup> Hewitt, 178-179.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*, 183.



Eventually, Abkhazia achieved the same level of independence from the rest of Georgia in managing its university system that it enjoyed in its primary educational system. Until 1977 the only institute of higher learning in Abkhazia was the Sukhumi Pedagogical Institute. This institute focused initially only training primary school teachers, but after Stalin's death in 1953 a faculty of Abkhazian language and literature was established there,<sup>267</sup> providing a repository for more nationalist ideas to incubate. In 1978, after a petition from Abkhazian intellectuals was received in Moscow requesting that Abkhazia be separated from Georgia, and this was followed by protests in Sukhumi against Georgianization, the Soviet government decreed the opening of an Abkhazian State University in Sukhumi.<sup>268</sup> Before the opening of this university, the state university in Tbilisi was the only university in the Georgian SSR; a number of places in this university were reserved for Abkhazian students. As Rockett remarks, this is in line with Soviet affirmative action policies, which included "quota systems, particularly in higher education, for the benefit of the less advanced nations and to the detriment of the more advanced nations".<sup>269</sup> After 1978 however, not only did opportunities to pursue higher education expand for Abkhazians, but they were able to get this education without ever leaving home.

Given the tendency of the study of humanities in the Soviet educational system to incubate "crypto-nationalists", it will come as no surprise that the separate universities in Tbilisi and Sukhumi engendered divided historical-symbolic identities in the Georgian SSR. The historical narrative that gained traction in Abkhazia in the Soviet period centers on three historical events: the exile of large parts of the Abkhazian population by the Russian imperial government in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century; the purges of the Abkhazian elite led by Stalin and Beria

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<sup>267</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 302.

<sup>268</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 300.

<sup>269</sup> Rockett, *Ethnic Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 126.

beginning in the 1930s; and the resettlement of ethnic Georgians into Abkhazia in the wake of both the exile and the purges. Both Georgians and Abkhazians agree that the exile or flight of some 70,000 Abkhazians, representing up to 75% of the total ethnic Abkhazian population<sup>270</sup>, to Ottoman Turkey between 1866 and 1877 represents a national tragedy; where they disagree is in their perceptions of its causes and effects. Georgians are perplexed that the Abkhazian historical narrative fixes them as the chief villains of this tragedy, since it was perpetrated by the Russian Tsarist government. Abkhazians respond that not only did Georgians fight on the side of the Tsarist government against the Abkhazians in the wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when Tsarist authorities classified Georgians as a “loyal people” and Abkhazians as a “disloyal people”<sup>271</sup>, but Georgians took advantage of the tragedy that befell Abkhazia. After the departure of the Abkhazians from their land, large numbers of ethnic Georgians from the western Georgian regions of Racha, Imereti and Mingrelia resettled there.

This example points to another, more general, Abkhazian fear and narrative of grievance that flourished during the period of Soviet rule in Georgia. As mentioned previously, there was a second resettlement of ethnic Georgians into Abkhazia, this one in the 1930s, coincident with the purges of the Abkhaz national elite by Stalin and Beria. Blauvelt argues convincingly that this resettlement had economic origins, as the native population was insufficient to work the newly established agricultural concerns.<sup>272</sup> But this economic decision played to pervasive and real Abkhazian fears of the extinction of their distinct identity and culture. The migration of large numbers of ethnic Georgians into Abkhazia further eroded the already tenuous demographic position of Abkhazians. Whereas in 1929 Abkhazians made up 28% of the

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<sup>270</sup> Natella Akaba, and Irakli Khintba. *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: Rethinking the Paradigm*, London, February 2011, 8.

<sup>271</sup> Natella Akaba, email interview with the author, 6 August, 2012. Translated from Russian.

<sup>272</sup> Blauvelt, “Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era”, 218.

population of the Abkhazian Republic, by the final Soviet census of 1989 they made up just under 18%, with Georgians forming the largest single ethnic group there. As Abkhazian scholar Natella Akaba recounts in her personal recollections of the origins of the Georgian-Abkhazian War, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, she was “tormented by anxiety for the future of the small Abkhazian nation, which had lived through a terrible experience in the Russian-Caucasian Wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (during which time the Georgians fought on the side of the Tsarist Army against the Caucasians, remaining loyal to Tsarist power), and also in the period of Stalin-Beria”.<sup>273</sup>

These purges of Stalin-Beria constitute the last major point in the Abkhazian narrative of grievance that was constructed in the Soviet period. Despite the facts that Stalin’s purges were a feature common in all Soviet Union Republics and that all groups, including Georgians and Russians, suffered decimation of the national communist elites, Abkhazians see in the purges an ethnic objective instead of an ideological one. How else, they argue, can one explain the fact while in 1929 ethnic Abkhazians held 28.3% of Party leadership posts in Abkhazia, by 1939 that proportion had fallen to 14.9%<sup>274</sup>? Thus, Blauvelt’s contention that the purges had more to do with the consolidation of political control than they did with ethnicity or identity<sup>275</sup>, fall on deaf ears in Abkhazia. Even today, interviews with Abkhazian experts, both within and outside of policy-making circles, focus on 1937 as the main driver of Abkhazian protest, and the Abkhazian present day elite is convinced that the Georgian SSR was able to pursue an assimilation policy in Abkhazia, despite the fact that all important decisions were made in Moscow<sup>276</sup> and that, with the exception of the Stalin-Beria period, those decisions almost invariably favored Abkhazia in

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<sup>273</sup> Akaba, email interview, 6 August 2012.

<sup>274</sup> Blauvelt, “Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era”, 217.

<sup>275</sup> Blauvelt, “‘From Words to Action!’ – Nationality Policy in Soviet Abkhazia, 1921-38”, 27.

<sup>276</sup> Akaba and Khintba, *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*, 6-11.

its contest with Georgia. But this insistence that ethnicity was behind the purges and that the Georgian SSR pursued a policy of assimilation in Abkhazia is understandable in a system, like the Soviet ethno-federal one, where ethnicity is the only relevant political identity and is tied to access to political power.

Soviet histories written outside of Abkhazia also contributed to the development of divided historical-symbolic identities between Abkhazians and Georgians. Blauvelt contends that the desire of the Soviet center to restrain ever-restless Georgia had much to do with this. Soviet historiographies often supported the Abkhazian position in key historical debates, such as that surrounding the Russian Civil War period from 1918-1921, when Abkhazians saw the Georgian Menshevik troops as an “unwelcome occupying force”, whereas Georgians saw themselves as protecting Abkhazia from unwanted incursions by Red or White forces<sup>277</sup>. This support for Abkhazian interpretations of history and the narrative of grievance against Georgians served to check Georgian nationalism during the Soviet period. To again quote Blauvelt, “From the very beginning of Soviet power, the center used Abkhazia as a restraint on Georgia and Georgian elites” .<sup>278</sup>

This historical narrative, full of grievances toward Georgia and Georgians, was strengthened by Abkhazia’s autonomous status and, after 1978, the independence of the Abkhazian State University from Tbilisi State University. A competing narrative took hold in Tbilisi – this narrative fixed Abkhazians as a “fifth column” within Georgia, conspiring with Moscow to undermine the integrity of the Georgian SSR and, as Soviet power waned, to prevent Georgia from declaring independence. These competing narratives even went so far as to deny the other group a historical claim to presence in Abkhazia. The Georgian narrative took as its

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<sup>277</sup> Blauvelt, “Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era”, 223.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid, 223.

foundation the theory of historian Pavle Ingoroqva, which claimed that the original Abkhazian people were actually Georgian tribes, while the contemporary Abkhazians were descended from Adyghean tribes who had come from the North Caucasus to settle in Abkhazia in the 17th-18th centuries. As Francis notes, this theory had serious political overtones since “by claiming that the Abkhaz were newcomers to the region, it challenged their titular status, their privileges and the very existence of the autonomous republic”. Abkhazian historians, with some support from the Soviet center, asserted their own historical claim to Abkhazia and denied there had ever been any significant historical Georgian presence there. Again to Francis, who notes that a 1960 Soviet textbook on Abkhazian history, published in the Abkhazian ASSR, asserted that the modern Abkhazians were the result of a merger between ancient Abkhazian tribes and “tribes from Asia Minor, who passed on their ‘higher’ culture” to the ancient Abkhazians. In this way, the Abkhazians “protected their own status and completely dismissed the notion of a Georgian presence in Abkhazia in the distant past.”<sup>279</sup>

These themes resonated deeply with the Abkhazian and Georgian populations, and those who articulated them most articulately and convincingly often gained significant public support. As noted, the first generation of post-Soviet leaders in Abkhazia and Georgia was populated largely by scholars in the disciplines of history, ethnography, language and literature. Georgia’s first president Dr. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was a scholar of literature, and Abkhazia’s founding president Dr. Vyacheslav Ardzinba is a professional historical linguist.<sup>280</sup> His first cabinet “consisted mostly of co-historians... highly-educated men and women who have spent their lives studying the origin of the Abkhaz language in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC and the outline of the

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<sup>279</sup> Celine Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*, (Brussels, Belgium: VUBPress, 2011), 68.

<sup>280</sup> Jenkins and Gottlieb, *Identity Conflicts*, 169.

first Abkhazian-Kartvelian Kingdom.”<sup>281</sup> In a poignant reflection on the role of the cultural intelligentsia in Abkhazia, Alexander Smolczyk writes:

“They have contributed words and reasons to the fight between Abkhaz and Georgians. They sharply watched cultural nuances, worked out divergences of the costumes of the farmers in the mountains, pointed out ancient injustice. In their offices hang maps, covered in spots of Tipp-Ex, because the Georgians – ‘to destroy the Abkhaz identity’ – attached an i to the end of every place name. Gone with the i!”<sup>282</sup>

Over the course of the Soviet period, then, Soviet policies contributed significantly to the development of an institutionalized historical-symbolic identity division between Georgians and Abkhazians. The late development of universal schooling and mass literacy in Abkhazia resulted in a constitutive story much different from the one being taught in schools in the rest of the Georgian SSR, and the granting by the Soviet government to Abkhazia of an unusually high level of autonomy in the sphere of higher education contributed to the development of a nationalist intelligentsia that waged academic and later military war with its equally chauvinistic Georgian opposite number.

*The Construction of Historical-Symbolic Identities: Ajaria*

Much as was the case in Abkhazia, when the period of Soviet rule began in Ajaria in 1921, there was a significant sense of difference between Ajarians and Georgians. Although Ajarians spoke a dialect of Georgian, their long period under Ottoman rule meant that literacy in Georgian was low, since most education stressed literacy in Turkish or Arabic, and the inhabitants of Ajaria were more likely to self-identify based upon their religion than on their language.<sup>283</sup> Early Soviet efforts sought to eliminate Islamic schools, which were seen as undesirable due both to the religious content of their curriculum and the fact that they tended

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<sup>281</sup> Alexander Smolczyk, "Reflections on Abkhazia, 1992-2012", internet resource at <http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/>, accessed 1 April 2013.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 9 and 105.

to teach in Turkish or Arabic and not Georgian. In 1929 the Communist Party resolved to close all existing religiously-based schools, leading to widespread anti-Soviet resistance in Ajaria.<sup>284</sup> This episode demonstrates that, at least as of 1929, the sense of religious identity was still strong there.

But the determination of the Soviet state to suppress religion and its institutionalization of the ethno-linguistic component of identity paid dividends over time. After overcoming the initial resistance to the closure of religious schools, the Soviet government persevered in its plan to make Georgian the language of primary education in Ajaria and to standardize the constitutive story emphasizing the Georgian historical and ethnic roots of Ajarians. The linguistic homogenization campaign and the accompanying Georgian literacy campaign were enabled by Ajaria's linguistic complexity.<sup>285</sup> With no single language predominating – Turkish and Arabic were the languages of education, a Georgian dialect predominated in the countryside and Russian was widely spoken in Batumi – the language promoted by the state, in this case Georgian, eventually won out.

The story of Ajaria and Ajarians taught in Soviet primary schools stressed their Georgian identity and viewed the three centuries of Ottoman rule there as an historical aberration. Pelkmans says that “throughout the Soviet period local historians and ethnographers were engaged in re-creating Ajaria's history in a way that tightly connected the region and its inhabitants to deep Georgian history, removing it from its more recent Ottoman past”.<sup>286</sup> As Georgian scholar Giorgi Anchabadze remarked, the fact that Ajaria's autonomy was “regional” in nature and not “national”, as was the case in Abkhazia, meant that no official national histories

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<sup>284</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 244.

<sup>285</sup> Bernard A. Cook, Ed. *Europe Since 1945: An Encyclopedia, Volume I, A-J*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 15.

<sup>286</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 108.

of Ajaria were written in the Soviet period.<sup>287</sup> Instead, Ajaria appears in Soviet histories as an integral part of Georgia and Ajarians appear no different than Georgians. Thus a 1967 Soviet encyclopedia entry on Ajaria, which declares that in rural Ajaria the “native inhabitants – Georgians, do not differ by appearance nor by language with other Georgian groups”.<sup>288</sup>

When they dealt with the Ottoman past, Soviet accounts generally explained the adoption of Islam as forced upon Ajarians, while stressing that Ajarians still managed to preserve their language and culture.<sup>289</sup> Whereas the 1921 Treaty of Kars envisioned a special status for Turkey as the guarantor of Ajarian autonomy and repository of key parts of the Ajarian identity, in the years before the Second World War the connection between Turkey and Ajaria was completely severed. In a herald of Cold War Berlin, the village of Sarpi, which straddled the Turkish-Soviet Georgian border along the Black Sea coast, was literally cut in half by a wall and a series of border posts. Direct travel to Turkey for Ajarians was forbidden, and Soviet citizens required special permission even to enter the border zone. This scene was repeated all along the Turkish-Soviet border in Ajaria, with the result being that for some 51 years until the border was reopened in 1988, Ajarians had absolutely no connection with their Muslim and Turkish past. Indeed, any perceived interest in or attraction to Turkey could be dangerous in Soviet Ajaria. Georgian scholar Giorgi Masalkin tells the story of doing field research in the Ajarian village of Sarpi with another young scholar in the 1970s. When one of them pointed in the direction of Turkey, they were immediately approached by two “well-dressed guys” who instructed them not to point in the direction of Turkey or even look that way for extended periods of time.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Giorgi Anchabadze, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.

<sup>288</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 9.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

<sup>290</sup> Giorgi Masalkin, interview with the author, 30 June 2012, Batumi, Georgia. Translated from Russian.



So a comprehensive Georgian literacy campaign along with the closing of Islamic schools and the promotion of a historical narrative stressing the common roots of Georgians and Ajarians - while vilifying Turkey - were the key elements of Soviet educational policy in the Ajarian ASSR. The structure of the higher education system in Soviet Ajaria supported this policy by ensuring that no independent university existed that could serve to shelter an Ajarian cultural intelligentsia. A Pedagogical Institute was founded in Batumi in 1923, and was upgraded to a two-year Teacher's Institute in 1935. This institute eventually housed departments of Georgian Language and Literature, Physics, Mathematics, History, Natural Sciences, Geography, and Russian Language and Literature. However, its mission remained the preparation of primary and secondary school teachers, not the conduct of independent scholarship and the awarding of doctoral degrees. Finally, the Batumi Pedagogical Institute was never upgraded to an independent university; it therefore served to reinforce the assimilationist curriculum taught in the primary schools of the Ajarian ASSR.

*The Construction of Regional Identities: Abkhazia*

The state constructs regional identities through policies that establish or alter the social, economic and political geography of the country. State policies can direct or influence the settlement patterns of their populations, affecting the demographic make-up of certain regions. They can direct or influence the migration of certain economic sectors to certain regions, affecting the economic geography of those regions. Finally, states can extend political autonomy to certain regions, thereby affecting the political geography of the country. Where policies do all three of these, the regional identity created can be very strong. When this regional identity overlaps with institutionalized ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic identities, the situation is most unstable in periods of rapid political transition.

In Abkhazia, Soviet policies served to construct and institutionalize a regional identity by altering the demographic balance in Abkhazia to the detriment of the titular nationality while simultaneously institutionalizing an economic division between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, and extending political autonomy to Abkhazia. Abkhazians had been sensitive to the demographic balance of Abkhazia ever since the exile of a large portion of their population by the Tsarist Russian government after the uprisings in the 1860s. Events during the Soviet period would only serve to heighten this sensitivity.

Census figures from the late Tsarist period through the end of the Soviet period tell the story. The first census in Abkhazia that is generally considered reliable<sup>291</sup> was that conducted by the Tsarist government in 1897. This census did not ask about ethnicity or nationality; instead, respondents were asked to list their language, religion and place of birth. The results of this census show that out of 106,179 total residents, 58,697 spoke Abkhazian (55.3%) and 25,873 spoke Kartvelian/Georgian (24.4%).<sup>292</sup> The next complete census was undertaken by the Soviet government in 1926. By this time Bolsheviks had completed the official list of Soviet nationalities, and respondents were asked to categorize themselves by nationality instead of by language. The All-Union Census of 1926 shows 186,004 residents of Abkhazia, of which 67,491 were Georgians (36.3%) and 55,918 were Abkhaz (30.1%), with Armenians, Greeks and Russians making up the bulk of the remainder of the residents.<sup>293</sup>

This apparent relative decline in the population of Abkhazians between 1897 and 1926 was not due to in-migration of ethnic Georgians – that would come later – but instead appears

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<sup>291</sup> Sources prior to census of 1897 are notoriously unreliable and have been used by scholars on both sides to score points. For example, the Cameral Description of 1873 has been used to claim the Abkhazian population was anywhere from 31.9-60.9%; the Family Lists of 1886 have been used to claim that Abkhazians were 85.7% of the population, or that Georgians were 50.6%. See Hewitt, *The Abkhazians*, 222-224.

<sup>292</sup> Hewitt, *The Abkhazians*, 225.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid*, 231-232.

to be a result of Soviet classification of the group known as Samurzaqanoans, who were settled in the southern portion of Abkhazia around the city of Gali. Most scholars consider Samurzaqanoans a mixed or transitional group between Abkhazians and the Georgian sub-group of Mingrelians, although they appear to have spoken primarily Abkhazian. Thus, when asked their language in the 1897 census, most would have answered that they spoke Abkhazian. However, the 1926 Soviet census asked about nationality, not language, and Samurzaqanoan was not listed on the list of nationalities. Instead, Samurzaqanoans were forced to choose between labeling themselves as Abkhazian, or as Mingrelian, which was still listed at the time as a distinct Georgian sub-group.

By 1939, those Samurzaqanoans who had labeled themselves Mingrelian would have been classified as Georgian, since Mingrelians along with several other Georgian sub-groups had been folded into the “major nationality” of Georgian. The population numbers from the 1939 census support this point: where there had been a total of 67,491 people of all Georgian/Kartvelian groups in 1926, by 1939 Georgians in Abkhazia numbered 91,967, for a growth rate of 36.3%. The ethnic Abkhazian population, meanwhile, had scarcely budged, rising from 55,918 in 1926 to 56,197 in 1939, a growth rate of only 0.5%.<sup>294</sup> So the growth in the Georgian population in the Abkhazian ASSR from a slight plurality in 1926 to a significant plurality in 1939 was driven not by in-migration, but by the vagaries of the Soviet ethno-national classification scheme.

But in-migration of Georgians would come. Although the resettlement of ethnic Georgians into Abkhazia began in earnest in 1937, it accelerated during and after the Second

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid, 235. What is shocking in this period is that the growth rates for Russians (379.6%), Armenians (93.6%) and Greeks (146.5%) outpaced even Georgians by a large margin. However, since all of these groups remained considerably smaller than either Georgians or Abkhazians in the Abkhazian ASSR, they were not seen as threatening by the Abkhazians.

World War. Sources mention Georgians “being, often against their will, dumped in truckloads by Beria’s henchmen in the Abkhazian countryside”.<sup>295</sup> By the 1959 census, the effects of this policy were clear: Georgians now made up 39.1% of the population while Abkhazians had declined to a mere 15.1%. For the first time in its history, Abkhazia also now had more ethnic Russians (at 21.4%) than it did ethnic Abkhazians.<sup>296</sup> In the final 30 years of the Soviet period, an outmigration of ethnic Russians from Abkhazia occurred, so that by the 1989 census the respective figures were as follows: Georgians - 45.7%, Abkhazians – 17.8%, Russians – 14.3%.<sup>297</sup>

Over the course of the Soviet period then, the policies of the state turned an ethno-linguistically complex and diverse region where no single group dominated into a region where the titular nationality (Abkhazians) was dominated demographically by another nationality (Georgians). First, state policies “simplified” the ethno-linguistic complexity of the region by merging smaller groups into a larger Georgian “major nationality”; next they altered the demographic balance of Abkhazia by resettling large numbers of Georgians there. At first glance these policies would seem to have a homogenizing effect, mitigating the division in identity between Abkhazia and the rest of the Georgian SSR, since Abkhazia was now more “Georgian” than “Abkhazian”. However, this turned out not to be the case because the Georgian population in Abkhazia, instead of being uniformly distributed through the ASSR, was concentrated in its southeastern corner around the city of Gali. Thus, the division of regional identities took on a “nesting doll” effect: a Georgian SSR with an Abkhazian minority concentrated in the Abkhazian ASSR, which in turn had a Georgian minority concentrated in its southeastern corner.

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<sup>295</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

There was also an economic difference between Abkhazia and much of the rest of the Georgian SSR, and this too is largely due to the policies of the Soviet government. Prior to 1930, the rich soil and excellent climate of Abkhazia were difficult to exploit due to endemic malaria. However, extensive public works and the mass planting of eucalyptus trees between 1930 and 1950 ended this threat and opened the way for large scale agriculture focused on the cultivation of tea and citrus, and for the development of tourist resorts that became famous throughout the Soviet Union, eventually bringing “the blessing of exceptional wealth” to Abkhazia.<sup>298</sup>

Ironically, it was economic imperatives that impelled the Soviet government to resettle ethnic Georgians into Abkhazia. According to Blauvelt, this resettlement was related to the demands of collectivization. Since the small Abkhazian population was insufficient to provide the labor required to run the large tea and citrus collective farms recently established on the territory of Abkhazia, the Soviet government made the decision to resettle the large and underemployed Georgian peasantry from the less fertile Mingrelian mountain regions to the more fertile Abkhazian coastal regions.<sup>299</sup> The distinctive economic structure of Abkhazia within Georgia gave rise to a set of dueling grievances: while Abkhazians complained that the government of the Georgian SSR invested less in Abkhazia per capita than it did in other regions, Georgians responded that Abkhazians had the highest standard of living in Georgia and therefore did not need economic assistance from the center.<sup>300</sup>

The Soviet decision to award political autonomy to Abkhazia reinforced the demographic and economic differences between it and the rest of Georgia. This is not to argue that Abkhazia was less deserving of being awarded political autonomy than other autonomous

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<sup>298</sup> Jenkins and Gottlieb, *Identity Conflicts*,

<sup>299</sup> Blauvelt, “Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era”, 218.

<sup>300</sup> Hewitt makes the former claim in his article entitled “Why Independence for Abkhazia is the Best Solution”, *Eurasia Critic*, (June 2008) 21-25.

regions; indeed, by the standards of the Soviet ethno-federal system Abkhazia was a prime candidate for autonomous status. However, as Cornell has argued, rather than mitigating the development of separatist tendencies, as it is often believed to do, political autonomy can actually accelerate them under certain circumstances.<sup>301</sup> In the case of Abkhazia, its political status was doubly-contentious: while Georgians tended to be suspicious of Abkhazia as a Soviet or Russian fifth column that threatened the integrity of the Georgian SSR, Abkhazians increasingly came to resent their inclusion in the Georgian SSR, even as an autonomous unit.

Upon the annexation of Georgia by the Soviet Union in 1921, Abkhazia was designated a Soviet Socialist Republic with the unique and ambiguous status of “treaty republic” with Georgia. This confederation-like arrangement lasted until 1931, when Abkhazia was designated an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) within Georgia, giving it the same status that Ajaria had held since 1921. The Abkhazian historian Stanislav Lakoba maintains that Abkhazian Communist Party leader Nestor Lakoba was forced to accept the reduction in Abkhazia’s status to ASSR from “treaty republic” in order to stave off Stalin’s demands for collectivization. S. Lakoba writes that Stalin let it be known that he would hold back from the introduction of collectivization in Abkhazia “on one condition, namely the entry of the ‘treaty republic’ of Abkhazia into the constituency of Georgia as an autonomous part thereof”. Lakoba saw this as “the lesser of two evils” and therefore agreed.<sup>302</sup>

Given the personal fiefdom that Nestor Lakoba had built in Abkhazia by that time, it is likely that this interpretation of events has merit. In 1931, Stalin’s power had not yet grown to the virtually unlimited proportions it would reach by the end of the decade, meaning Lakoba would therefore have had enough power vis-à-vis the Soviet center to cut such a deal. In any

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<sup>301</sup> Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict*.

<sup>302</sup> Hewitt, *The Abkhazians*, 94.

case, the fact that Abkhazia continued to enjoy autonomous status throughout the Soviet period, combined with the very real demographic threat felt by Abkhazians and the development of a regional economy distinct from that in the rest of the Georgian SSR contributed to a powerful and institutionalized regional identity in Abkhazia. This identity overlapped with the equally powerful and institutionalized Abkhazian ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic identities.

*The Construction of Regional Identities: Ajaria*

In Ajaria, Soviet policies also constructed and institutionalized a distinct regional identity, but this identity rested only on the pillars of economic differentiation and political autonomy. Unlike in Abkhazia, a demographic basis for the development of a regional identity was lacking. This is not to say that there was not in-migration of non-Ajarians into the Ajarian ASSR. Indeed, by the middle of the Soviet period, native Ajarians formed a minority in their capital of Batumi. Instead, non-Ajarian Georgians who had come to Batumi for the economic opportunities it offered or who had been sent there by the government of the Georgian SSR began to take advantage of the opportunities normally reserved for the titular category.<sup>303</sup>

While this would seem to further deepen the regional division by creating an intra-regional division, as happened in Abkhazia when Georgian migrants concentrated around the city of Gali, the absence of an “objective” basis for differentiation between Ajarians and Georgians according to Soviet policy tamped down the division. Once the Soviet government removed Ajarians from the list of Soviet nationalities, over time the sense of difference between Ajarians and other Georgians declined. Soviet demographic policies therefore did not contribute to the construction of a distinct regional identity in the Ajarian ASSR.

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<sup>303</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 105.

An economic distinction, however, did develop. As with Abkhazia, Ajaria's wealth in large part resulted from man-made activity: draining swamps and preparing hillsides for cultivation was a major effort of Soviet policy in Ajaria in the 1930s. By the 1970s Ajaria produced some 60-65% of all citrus fruits in the Soviet Union and was also a major producer of tea, corn and tobacco. Tourism was also important: a series of hotels, Komsomol camps and health resorts were erected on the Ajarian coast, and by the late Soviet period some 230,000 tourists per year were visiting Ajaria.<sup>304</sup> The third pillar of the Ajarian economy was oil and maritime transport, with the port of Batumi receiving oil from Azerbaijan via rail and exporting it on ocean-going oil tankers. An entry from a 1967 Soviet encyclopedia captures the three pillars of the Ajarian economy, concluding that Ajaria "will always be associated with citrus plantations and perfectly well-trimmed tea bushes, with the glossy fans of tropical palms rustling in the wind, and with the scenic Batumian bay...with its ocean steamers and oil tankers".<sup>305</sup>

Despite the fact that Soviet encyclopedias consistently portrayed Ajaria as firmly embedded in the planned economy of the Georgian SSR,<sup>306</sup> there is evidence that a regional identity based upon Ajaria's economic distinctiveness did develop during the Soviet period. In 1973 when the Soviet government mooted plans to further develop Ajaria's transport and tourism potential, Soviet Ajarian business executives urged the local Communist leadership "to reject proposals to set up a Georgian Steamship Line, to build new factories and to develop resorts and tourism, basing their advice on the premise that this would lead to the migration of people from other republics".<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>307</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 185.



Like Abkhazia, Ajaria enjoyed autonomous status within the Georgian SSR. Also like Abkhazia, there was controversy surrounding Ajaria's political status, but for entirely different reasons. The creation of the Ajarian ASSR was a result of the 1921 Treaty of Kars between the Soviet Union and Turkey, and was unique in the Soviet system in two respects. First, it was the only autonomous homeland based upon a religious difference;<sup>308</sup> second, it was one of the few autonomous homelands whose autonomy was guaranteed by an outside power, in this case Turkey. The suppression of religion by the Soviet state and the emphasis on ethno-linguistic markers of identity essentially removed the former basis for Ajaria's autonomy, and the Soviet vilification of Turkey as historical aggressor and Cold War enemy obviated any protection of Ajaria's status by that state.

This situation stands in stark contrast to that in Abkhazia, where the ethno-linguistic basis for autonomy was consistently emphasized by the state, and where Russia's role as historic protector of Abkhazians and guarantor of their status was maintained. Indeed, Pelkmans notes that Soviet textbooks generally failed to note Turkey's role in the establishment of the Ajarian SSR and failed to mention the role of autonomy in guaranteeing the rights of Ajarians to develop. This silence, he argues, "is strikingly different from texts about other autonomous republics, such as Abkhazia or Tatarstan, in which the importance of autonomous status for the development of "titular categories" was expounded on extensively".<sup>309</sup>

In practice then, Ajaria's level of autonomy differed significantly from Abkhazia's. While Zuercher notes that Ajaria had the same "trappings of statehood" that other ASSRs enjoyed – a supreme council with a presidium, 12 ministries, a tax inspectorate and a supreme court<sup>310</sup> -

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<sup>308</sup> Although there was a Jewish autonomous homeland in the RSFSR, Soviet nationalities policy classified Jews as a national group, not a religious group.

<sup>309</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 7.

<sup>310</sup> Zuercher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 202.

Pelkmans rightly notes that Ajaria was largely subjected to federal control in the same way that non-autonomous Georgian provinces were. Although it still had its own ministries, educational system, state security agencies, and press, all were dependent upon directives from Tbilisi.<sup>311</sup> Thus, while Abkhazians resented being “downgraded” to an ASSR within Georgia, there was a sense in the Georgian SSR that Ajaria didn’t “deserve” its autonomy, since it was granted on the grounds of a regional difference that Soviet state policy later made irrelevant, and was guaranteed by an outside power that the Soviet Union considered an enemy.

In Soviet Ajaria then, although the republic enjoyed formal political autonomy and had a regional economy distinct from that in the rest of Georgia, the regional identity that developed rested on these legs only, while ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic identities cut across the regional distinction. In other words, although there was a significant regional distinction and even the grounds for a narrative of political and economic grievance, the “us-them” distinction in the ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic areas was minimal. The absence of overlapping identity divisions made the post-Soviet struggle between Tbilisi and Batumi simply a struggle over division of political power and economic spoils, with no ethno-linguistic or historical-symbolic dimension. As we shall see, this helped moderate its escalation.

*Summary of Institutionalized Identity Divisions in Abkhazia and Ajaria*

At the beginning of the Soviet period a foundation was present for the construction of divided identities between Georgians and both Abkhazians and Ajarians. By the end of the Soviet period a strongly divided identity had been constructed between Georgians and

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<sup>311</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 7. Although Pelkmans highlights the symbolic nature of Ajarian institutions during the Soviet period, he rightly notes that in the post-Soviet period they became relevant as power bases and objectives in the struggle for power between Tbilisi and Batumi. This supports the point that it was the lack of a relevant division in identity between Ajarians and Georgians that helped keep the peace between them, and not the absence of a power struggle per se.

Abkhazians, and this division had been institutionalized by the policies of the Soviet state. As

Nodia remarks,

“The major change that occurred in the Abkhaz national project during the Soviet period was that Georgia and Georgians came to fill the slot of the ‘enemy image’ exclusively. In addition, Russia became Abkhazia’s chief protector against ‘Georgian imperialism’”.<sup>312</sup>

Between Georgians and Ajarians, on the other hand, the previous division in identity had essentially been erased, to the point where Georgians insisted that there could not have been a violent separatist movement in Ajaria after the Soviet collapse because “Ajarians are Georgians”. Understanding how these disparate outcomes came to pass requires understanding the role of the state in the construction of identities.

This section of the chapter has endeavored to contribute to this understanding by showing that Soviet policies with respect to Abkhazia created strongly-divided and institutionalized ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional identities, while in Ajaria they essentially eliminated the pre-existing divisions in identities. In Abkhazia, Soviet policies privileged the status and use of the Abkhazian and Russian languages over Georgian, preserved the place of the Abkhazians on the list of major Soviet nationalities, and created, destroyed, then recreated a privileged Abkhazian political elite. The effect of these policies was to heighten the salience of the ethno-linguistic component of identity, which magnified the differences between Abkhazians and Georgians.

Another set of Soviet policies reserved a privileged place for the Abkhazian and Russian languages in primary schools, and awarded Abkhazia its own university, independent from that in Tbilisi. These policies served to ensure that the constitutive story taught in Abkhazian schools was different from that taught in other schools in the Georgian SSR, and to provide a sanctuary

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<sup>312</sup> Ghia Nodia, “Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia”, *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley) Winter 1997-1998, 22.

for the development of an Abkhazian “cultural intelligentsia” that could pursue scholarship emphasizing the sense of difference between Abkhazians and Georgians. A final set of Soviet policies contributed to the development of a distinct regional identity in Abkhazia by compactly resettling ethnic Georgians in a region of the Abkhazian ASSR bordering the rest of Georgia, thus exacerbating the level of demographic threat felt by Abkhazians, by constructing a regional economy in Abkhazia distinct from and only marginally interoperable with the larger Georgian economy, and by awarding a high level of political economy to Abkhazia. The overall level of institutionalized identity division in Abkhazia at the end of the Soviet period can therefore be assessed as high.

In Ajaria, Soviet policies suppressed any expression of religious identity, engaged in a comprehensive effort to eliminate the regional peculiarities of the Ajarian/Gurian dialect, stressed literacy in standard Georgian over that in Turkish or Arabic, and eliminated Ajarian as a separate national category. In contrast to Abkhazia, there was no effort to develop a native political elite in Ajaria. As a result of these policies any ethno-linguistic division in identity between Ajarians and Georgians that had existed at the start of the Soviet period was essentially eliminated by the time of the Soviet collapse.

A second set of Soviet policies closed all religious schools in Ajaria, taught a constitutive story in primary schools that emphasized the common historical roots of Ajaria and Georgia while vilifying Turkey, and declined to allow the establishment of an independent university in Ajaria. A final set of policies contributed somewhat to the development of a distinct Ajarian regional identity by constructing a regional economy in Ajaria distinct from that in the rest of Georgia and by awarding political autonomy to Ajaria within Soviet Georgia. However, the development of a strong regional identity in Ajaria was somewhat retarded by the elimination of the Ajarians on the list of Soviet nationalities, which eroded the basis for demographic threats

and grievances among Ajarian natives, and by the fact that Ajarian autonomy was more formal than actual. Derluguian succinctly summarizes the effect of Soviet policies in Georgia by arguing that they “largely created the political relevance of Abkhaz cultural identity while simultaneously preventing Ajar cultural identity from becoming politically relevant”.<sup>313</sup>

### Moldova and Transnistria

The Moldovan SSR combined two regions that had not previously been unified in a single state. The first was the greater part of the historical province of Bessarabia, which had formed the eastern half of the medieval Principality of Moldavia, had fallen under Ottoman domination in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, had been annexed by the Russian Empire in 1812, and had then been annexed by Romania in 1918. The second was the greater part of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), which had been established within the Ukrainian SSR in 1924 with the initial intent of serving as a launching pad for the export of socialist revolution into Bessarabia. As a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol on spheres of influence in Europe, the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia in 1940 and combined it with most of the MASSR to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR).

The two regions grafted together to form the MSSR, while sharing different histories, did not have an obvious basis for animosity between them. Both were home to populations that were predominantly agrarian economically and religiously Orthodox; and despite the fact that Bessarabia had a solid Moldovan majority while the areas of the MASSR were more mixed, the ethnic balance was not obviously explosive. Indeed, even in those parts of the MASSR included in the newly-formed MSSR, Moldovans made up the largest single ethnic group at the time of incorporation, at 49% of the population.<sup>314</sup> Understanding the causes of the violent

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<sup>313</sup> Zuercher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 207.

<sup>314</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 95.

separatist movement that erupted in Moldova after the collapse of the Soviet Union, then, requires first and foremost an examination of the history of Soviet Moldova and the policies of the Soviet state.

*The Construction of Ethno-Linguistic Identities*

Soviet language policies, policies with respect to counting and classifying people, and policies affecting access to positions of political leadership contributed to the construction of an institutionalized division in ethno-linguistic identities between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova. In presenting this and the other sets of policies to be examined, it is helpful to divide the examination into two periods: that period from 1924-1940, when the MASSR in Ukraine was the only “Moldovan” political entity in the Soviet Union; and that period after 1940, when Transnistria (i.e. – most of the former MASSR) was combined with the bulk of Bessarabia to form the MSSR. The formation of the MASSR in 1924 was an excellent example of what Terry Martin has called the Piedmont Principle. The creation of a “homeland” for Moldovans inside the USSR, it was hoped, would foment revolution among their co-ethnics in Bessarabia, then under Romanian jurisdiction, strengthening Soviet claims to that territory.<sup>315</sup>

To this end, early Soviet language policy in the MASSR emphasized the distinctiveness of Moldovan from the standard Romanian spoken outside of Bessarabia and the MASSR. This policy was intended to highlight the similarities between Moldovans in the MASSR and those in Bessarabia, while emphasizing that these groups formed a group separate and distinct from the Romanians across the Prut River. To this end, Soviet authorities embarked on a large scale effort to expand Moldovan-language publishing in the MASSR and to increase literacy among the Moldovan-speaking population there. These newspapers and journals not only had to be published in Moldovan, but had to be written in a style accessible to Moldovan peasants. The

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<sup>315</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 274-275.

newspaper *Red Plowman* provides an excellent example here. In the mid-1920s it had been criticized for being “too Romanian”. Despite the fact that it was written in Cyrillic script, the grammar it employed and the terms it used were denounced as alien to the Moldovan peasant. By the late 1920s, by which time it had adopted a more “Moldovan” grammar and had injected more traditional terms into its lexicon, authorities in the MASSR pronounced it completely moldovanized.<sup>316</sup>

Soon thereafter, Soviet ambitions for the export of revolution expanded, and this required an adjustment to language policy in the MASSR. In a 1932 language reform that amounted to a “wholesale rejection of the indigenized Moldovan culture created after 1924”,<sup>317</sup> Soviet language policies dispensed with many words imported into Moldovan from Russian and introduced the Latin alphabet to the language. The goal of this effort was to make Moldovan essentially indistinguishable from Romanian in order “to facilitate Soviet influence in Romania and to hasten the day when Soviet power would include not only occupied Bessarabia, but the Romanian lands west of the Prut River as well”.<sup>318</sup>

This effort lasted until the late 1930s, when it too was suddenly and drastically reversed. This was not uncommon in border regions of the Soviet Union at the time. In the 1920s, when Bolshevism seemed to be on the march, it made sense to emphasize the commonalities between populations in Soviet border regions and their co-ethnics in neighboring states in the hope of exporting revolution across these borders. By the late 1930s, however, the looming threat of Fascism and the failure of socialism to expand into Europe caused the Soviet government to reassess its policies. Rather than attempting to export socialism, Soviet leaders now began to fixate on ensuring its survival within the borders of the Soviet Union. Thus, Soviet

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<sup>316</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 77.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

populations with ethnic kin in neighboring states began to be seen as potential liabilities instead of assets. Some, such as Poles, Germans, Estonians and Lithuanians, were deported to the Soviet east. Others, such as the Moldovans in the MASSR, underwent a sudden change in ethno-linguistic identity.

In 1938 then, the Soviet government dispensed with the Latin alphabet and began to again emphasize the distinctiveness of Moldovans and their language from Romanians and theirs. A resolution of the MASSR Central Committee on 19 May 1938 returned to republic to Cyrillic and denounced the latinization effort as an ill-conceived detour along the road of cultural construction: “Enemies of the people operating in Moldova have carried out a hostile policy on the front of national-cultural construction, polluted the Moldovan language with Romanian salon-bourgeois words and terms, and introduced the Latin alphabet, which is unintelligible to the Moldovan toilers”.<sup>319</sup> The newspaper Soviet Moldova echoed this charge, writing that “the transition to the Russian alphabet is a great strike against the Trotskyist-Bukharinist-bourgeois-nationalist-enemies-of-the-people-agents-of-fascism who wanted to tear flourishing Soviet Moldova from the Soviet Union”.<sup>320</sup> King says that the rehabilitation of the Cyrillic alphabet was embraced in the MASSR because it was in line with Moldovan traditions – as a peasant people, Moldovans had remained relatively untouched from the 19<sup>th</sup> century adoption of Latin alphabet and gallicization of literary Romanian that took hold among Romanians across the Prut River.<sup>321</sup>

The Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and the establishment of the MSSR in 1940 achieved the original goals of Soviet policy by uniting the Moldovan populations on either side of the Nistru River into a single state. Their political objective achieved, Soviet leaders no longer needed to invest inordinate amounts of energy in the creation a separate Moldovan linguistic

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid, 65.



identity. This is not to say that the effort died out altogether. It did not - after all, even in the late 1940s, there were still PhD dissertations being written in the MSSR claiming to prove that the Moldovan language was Slavic, not Romance, in origin.<sup>322</sup> But the effort to craft a distinct Soviet Moldovan identity no longer displayed the vigor and ideological zeal it had in the MASSR<sup>323</sup> in the period between 1924 and 1940. As King says, after the founding of the MSSR, Soviet policy was “simply stating that Moldovans and Romanians were different, without really trying to make them so”.<sup>324</sup>

Since the MSSR was a unitary republic, the Soviet law establishing both Russian and Moldovan written in the Cyrillic alphabet as state languages functioned throughout its territory. Although this policy remained unchanged from the establishment of the MSSR in 1940 until the end of the Soviet period, it obscured two gradual and contradictory processes that began to unfold in post-war Moldova. The first was a gradual linguistic Russification of the MSSR, with Russian assuming an ever-greater role in the everyday lives of its citizens, even those who were ethnically Moldovan. By 1989 Moldovans were the third most russified nationality in the Soviet Union: only in Belarus and Ukraine (both East Slavic nations which have common linguistic roots with Russians) did a higher proportion of the titular nationality report Russian as their native language<sup>325</sup>. The second process which began after the Second World War in the MSSR was a gradual Romanization of Moldovan language and literature. King argues that the post-war Soviet years saw “the quiet acceptance of standard literary Romanian (albeit in the Cyrillic alphabet) as the linguistic norm for the MSSR and, by extension, the gradual Romanization of

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<sup>322</sup> Arkady Barbarosy, PhD., Director of the Institute for Public Policy, Chisinau, Moldova; interview with the author, 13 July 2012.

<sup>323</sup> The exception, of course, is the “detour” between 1932-1938 when Soviet policy began emphasizing the commonalities between Moldovan and Romanian.

<sup>324</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 107.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

Moldovan intellectual life”<sup>326</sup>. By the end of the Soviet period there was little to distinguish Moldovan from Romanian aside from the Cyrillic alphabet and the words which had been imported from Russian.

So language policy in Moldova was highly ideologically charged in its early years, when Soviet Moldova consisted only of the MASSR within Ukraine. It was in these years, from 1924-1932 and again from 1938-1940, when the Soviet state invested inordinate amounts of energy in highlighting the distinctiveness between the Moldovan and Romanian languages, equating the latter with bourgeois imperialism and later with Fascism. It is important to note that these policies were only implemented in what now constitutes Transnistria, since the Bessarabian portion of what later became the MSSR was under Romanian domination from 1918-1940. After 1940, Soviet policy toward the Moldovan language lost its ideological zeal. This lack of attention allowed two contradictory trends to emerge: the gradual Russification of everyday language and life in the MSSR, and the gradual Romanization of the Moldovan language spoken by a shrinking group of people, a significant proportion of whom were intellectuals.

It can therefore be argued that three distinct attitudes with respect to language had emerged among the population of the MSSR by the end of the Soviet period. One group, concentrated in Transnistria, was deeply committed to the Soviet Moldovan identity and viewed the Romanian language with suspicion of not outright animosity. A second group, comprising the majority of Moldovans living in the Bessarabian portion of the MSSR, saw themselves as speaking Moldovan and acknowledged its close linguistic relationship to Romanian, but were increasingly comfortable in Russian as well. The final group, consisting of a small but growing number of intellectuals, emphasized the commonalities between Moldovan and Romanian and

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid, 107.

were engaged in a process of romanizing the Moldovan language to bring it even closer to Romanian.

The second policy the state uses to construct ethno-linguistic identities within its population is through the use of ethnicity or language to count and categorize people. Over the course of Soviet rule in Moldova, three major ethnic groups came to populate it: Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians. While Russians and Ukrainians remained on every list of Soviet nationalities, the status of Moldovans, and their relationship to Romanians, varied with time. In 1920, Moldovans were grouped together with Wallachians and Romanians, but by 1926 Moldovans had been separated from Romanians on the list used for that census, reflecting the determination of the Soviet Union to emphasize the differences between the two groups. By 1939, while Moldovans remained on the list of Soviet nationalities, Romanians had been moved to the list of “diaspora nationalities”, reflecting the increasing sense of threat the Soviet government perceived from groups with ethnic kin across an international border. By 1959, Romanians had been restored to the list of Soviet nationalities, and they remained there for the rest of the Soviet period, although within the Moldovan SSR no more than 0.6% of the population self-identified as Romanians for the rest of the Soviet period.<sup>327</sup>

So state policy with respect to ethno-linguistic classification mirrors the phases of the Soviet effort to construct a Moldovan identity distinct from Romanian. Moldovans moved from being grouped with Romanians in the 1920 census, to being listed separately in 1926, with Romanians moved off the list altogether (and onto the list of “diaspora nationalities) in 1939. After the Second World War Romanians returned to the list but were always listed separately

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<sup>327</sup> It is likely that these people, who numbered 1,663 in the 1959 census and 2,477 in the 1989 census, were Romanians from historical Romania – in other words, the land across the Prut River from the Moldovan SSR. The vast majority of those speaking a Romance language in the Moldovan SSR self-identified as Moldovans.

from Moldovans for the rest of the Soviet period. Russians and Ukrainians, whose numbers would increase substantially in the Moldovan SSR as the Soviet period continued, were always listed separately from Moldovans due to their Slavic ethno-linguistic background.

The third and final policy the state uses to construct ethno-linguistic identities is policy determining access to power. Where access to power is formally or informally tied to these identities, the potential for a considerable institutionalized identity-division exists. Soviet practice in selecting the leadership of the Moldovan SSR had both ethno-linguistic and regional components to it, and both of these served to put ethnic Moldovans from the former Bessarabia at a significant disadvantage. Over the long term, the primary beneficiaries of Soviet policies were ethnic Russians and Moldovans from Transnistria. However, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, their rise in Party leadership positions was interrupted in the late 1930s.

As with language policy, it makes sense to analyze the development of Soviet policies determining access to political power by examining first the period of 1924-1940, when the MASSR within Ukraine represented the only Moldovan political unit in the Soviet Union. In this period, as a part of the *korenizatsiia* process ongoing throughout the Soviet Union, the state placed strong emphasis on the development of a unique Soviet Moldovan identity and national elite. Indeed, in the early years of the MASSR, the central party institution often castigated local and regional leaders for failing to “moldovanize” themselves rapidly enough.<sup>328</sup> Given this emphasis, it is unsurprising that moldovanization of the leadership of the MASSR picked up noticeably in the second half of the 1920s: ethnic Moldovans increased from only 6% to over 25% of party members between 1925 and 1930.<sup>329</sup> However, in the late 1930s, in a parallel with Abkhazia and almost every other autonomous national territorial unit in the Soviet Union, ethnic

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<sup>328</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 73.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

Moldovan Party leaders were accused of national chauvinism and purged from Party structures. Of the nine members of the Moldovan ASSR Politburo elected at the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in May 1937, only one survived politically in the MASSR until September of that year: seven were declared enemies of the people and arrested, and one managed to escape. Nearly all former first secretaries of local party organizations and chairs of the Central Executive Committee were executed.<sup>330</sup>

It is more than a little ironic that the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union in 1940 and the creation of the Moldovan SSR was the event that “rehabilitated” Transnistrian Moldovans in the eyes of the Soviet government. Whereas prior to the formation of the MSSR, ethnic Moldovans in the MASSR could be suspected of harboring nationalist sentiments, the annexation of Bessarabia brought into the Soviet Union ethnic Moldovans whose loyalty to the Soviet Union was seen as even more questionable. As King maintains, after the formation of the MSSR “positions in the party and state hierarchy had been filled by persons with links to Transnistria” because they were seen as more trustworthy than their counterparts from the former “bourgeois” Bessarabia.<sup>331</sup> Indeed, in order to be selected for a position of political leadership in the MSSR, Soviet practice required individuals to prove a “family history” of loyalty to the USSR, a feat obviously impossible for Bessarabians, who had been under Romanian rule in the inter-war period.<sup>332</sup>

The effect of these policies was that throughout the Soviet period, Party cadres were primarily filled by ethnic Russians, and those ethnic Moldovans who did rise to prominence were invariably from Transnistria. Examples of this are numerous and span the entire period of Soviet

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>332</sup> Official of the Bureau for Reintegration of the Government of the Republic of Moldova (name withheld by request), interview with the author, 9 July 2012.

rule in Moldova. In 1963 the ethnic composition of the Moldovan Communist Party was 36.9% Russian, 34.6% Moldovan and 23.5% Ukrainian.<sup>333</sup> Recall that Moldovan representation in the Communist Party of the MASSR in 1930 stood at 25%, but ethnic Moldovans were only 30% of the MASSR's population at that time, meaning that they relatively well-represented in the Party. In the MSSR of 1963, by contrast, Moldovans made up only 34.6% of Party members despite comprising some 65% of the total population, meaning that Moldovan access to power had declined significantly between 1930 and 1963. At the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Moldovan Communist Party in 1971, the elections for the Central committee resulted in a nine-member body consisting of five Russians, three Ukrainians and a single Moldovan.<sup>334</sup> Lack of access to power for Moldovans was not limited to the political arena: in 1988, the MSSR had the lowest representation of members of the titular nationality in the posts of directors of economic enterprises and organizations of any Soviet Republic.<sup>335</sup>

Those ethnic Moldovans who managed to rise through the ranks of the Party leadership were almost never Bessarabians. The two longest-serving First Secretaries of the Moldovan Party serve as examples of this point: Ivan Bodiul (1961-1980) and Semion Grossu (1980-1989), while both ethnically Moldovan, were born in Moldovan-populated regions in Ukraine. Petru Lucinschi, the first leader of the MSSR from Bessarabia, was not appointed until November, 1989, by which time the processes of *glasnost'* and *perestroika* had already undermined much of the power of the Soviet state and enabled the development of national movements in many Soviet republics. Prior to Lucinschi's appointment, the Moldovan Party leadership had been

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<sup>333</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 419.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid*, 420.

<sup>335</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 241. This survey showed that Moldova had a representation of .77, where the number is arrived at by dividing the percentage of titular directors of enterprises by the percentage of titulars in the republic as a whole. All other union republics except Uzbekistan and Russia had values of over 1.00, and even Uzbekistan and Russia stood at .95.

hostile to Gorbachev's liberalization processes. Indeed, Lucinschi's predecessor Grossu is described as having been a "tenacious opponent of perestroika",<sup>336</sup> who managed to squelch the development of any reform movement in the MSSR until 1987, when members of cultural intelligentsia mobilized around issue of selecting replacement for head of Writers' Union. By early 1988 this reform movement had organized itself into the Popular Front of Moldova, foreshadowing a split in the MSSR between a Transnistrian-dominated government and an increasingly Romanized cultural intelligentsia, a split which developed in the context of rapidly declining central Soviet power.

Soviet policies thus served to construct ethno-linguistic identities in the MASSR and MSSR that resulted in the construction of institutionalized boundaries between ethnic Moldovans and Slavic citizens of these two Moldovan Soviet states, and another boundary between ethnic Moldovans and their Romanian neighbors. Soviet language policies, aside from the curious aberration of the period between 1932 and 1938, consistently maintained that Romanian and Moldovan were separate languages and sought to russify the latter to emphasize the differences between them. While this policy was largely successful, it was opposed in the late Soviet period by a small but growing segment of the cultural intelligentsia, which began to speak and write in an increasingly romanized form of Moldovan. Soviet policies with respect to counting and classifying people at first grouped Romanians, Moldovans and Wallachians together, but very quickly moved to separate them into separate national groups, even going so far as to move Romanians off the list of Soviet nationalities in 1939. Finally, policies and practice determining access to political and economic power consistently favored Russians over Moldovans, and ethnic Moldovans from the former MASSR over those from Bessarabia.

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<sup>336</sup> William Crowther, "Ethnic Politics and the Post-Communist Transition in Moldova", *Nationalities Papers*, 26:1 (1998), 148.

By the end of the Soviet period then, ethnic Moldovans from Bessarabia found themselves distinguished from both their fellow citizens in Transnistria and their ethnic kin in neighboring Romania. This resulted in the construction of three separate identities in the MSSR. The dominant position can be described as Bessarabism, and represented the outlook of most ethnic Moldovans in Bessarabia. This identity saw Moldova as distinct from Romania, but also advocated independence from the Soviet Union and a Moldovan identity that balanced between Slavic and Romance influences. The Eurasianist identity was strongest in Transnistria, and it saw Moldova as an integral part of the Soviet Union, rejecting independence and any cultural rapprochement with Romania. The Pan-Romanian identity was strongest among the cultural intelligentsia, and it saw Moldovans as merely a regional group of ethnic Romanians, leading some of its proponents to advocate unifying the two groups in a single state.<sup>337</sup>

This trichotomous division in ethno-linguistic identities, with the dominant position flanked by less powerful but more extreme positions, would seem less dangerous than a strong dichotomous division, as developed between Abkhazians and Georgians, for example. And indeed, it may have been so, had the center position not been weakened by the Soviet policies that constructed historical-symbolic and regional identities. The former set of policies served to demonize everything Romanian, and the latter set served to construct a strong regional identity in Transnistria. Thus, by the end of the Soviet period those adhering to the Bessarabist view found themselves pulled to choose between one of the other, more extreme views.

#### *The Construction of Historical-Symbolic Identities*

As they did in Georgia, Soviet policies in Moldova constructed and institutionalized historical-symbolic identities through two sets of policies: those that governed primary

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<sup>337</sup> Luke March, "From Moldovanism to Europeanization? Moldova's Communists and Nation Building", *Nationalities Papers* 35:4 (2007), 603-604.



education and those that governed the university system. At the beginning of the Soviet period, literacy rates in both Bessarabia, then under Romanian rule, and in the MASSR were among the lowest in Europe. This meant that if the state could rapidly increase literacy rates and introduce universal schooling, it would have little to stand in the way of the propagation of whatever national constitutive story it chose to introduce. Literacy in Tiraspol, the eventual capital of the MASSR and current capital of the unrecognized Transnistrian Moldovan Republic, stood at 39.4% in 1917 and 81.2% in 1939, meaning that in at least the urban areas of the MASSR, the 50% literacy threshold, seen by Darden as critical for a national constitutive story to take hold, was crossed before the unification of Transnistria and Bessarabia in 1940. The constitutive story taught in the MASSR between 1924 and 1940 emphasized the fraternal union of Soviet nationalities under socialism, and the identities promoted were ethnic with overarching Soviet loyalty.<sup>338</sup>

Bessarabia's literacy was even lower than that of the MASSR, and the inter-war Romanian state invested less effort in raising the level of literacy and instituting universal primary education. In the 1897 Russian census, Bessarabia had a literacy rate of 20%, the second lowest rate among the 50 *gubernii* (governorates) of European Russia<sup>339</sup>. While overall literacy had risen to 30% by 1930,<sup>340</sup> and the Romanian kingdom had made considerable investments in infrastructure development in Bessarabia, both literacy and education still lagged behind that across the Nistru River in the MASSR. The overwhelmingly rural nature of the Bessarabian population is one likely reason that literacy and education lagged there – nearly 93% of Romanian speakers in Bessarabia lived in rural areas.<sup>341</sup> However, King argues that other

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<sup>338</sup> Darden, *Resisting Occupation*, 208.

<sup>339</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 67.

<sup>340</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 41.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

factors were at work as well, remarking that “the Bessarabian people themselves proved to be the greatest obstacle to the region’s complete integration into Greater Romania”.<sup>342</sup> There were two main reasons for this. First was the ethnic diversity of the region; the large Russian, Ukrainian and Jewish populations resisted the closure of Russian-language schools and libraries by the Romanian government. Next, even among ethnic Moldovans, over a century of Russian imperial rule in Bessarabia prior to 1918 had left cultural traces, leading the population to resist the switch to the Latin alphabet and the adoption of the Gregorian calendar mandated by the Romanian state.<sup>343</sup>

So while the more urbanized MASSR was being subjected to a comprehensive literacy campaign and the introduction of universal schooling in the inter-war period, in more-rural and less-developed Bessarabia the Romanian state focused more on infrastructure development and less on literacy and education. The result of these different sets of policies was that by 1940, while a Moldovan Soviet identity had been largely formed in the MASSR, Bessarabia remained a cultural “blank slate”. When Bessarabia entered the Soviet Union in 1940 its total literacy rate was still 46%, and it crossed the 50% threshold later in that decade; by 1970 literacy in the MSSR was universal. This would mean that the constitutive story taught in Transnistria and Bessarabia at the time each crossed the threshold to mass literacy was the Soviet one – Transnistria in the inter-war period and Bessarabia in the post war period. However, it is a mistake to assume that these constitutive stories were identical. In inter-war Transnistria, the constitutive story would have had a much higher level of ideological content due to the looming showdown between Communism and Fascism, and it would have had a higher level of vilification of Romania. Once Romania became a “fraternal socialist nation” in 1947, the ideological grounds for its vilification

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid, 44. Prior to its annexation by Romania, Bessarabia had used the Cyrillic alphabet and the Julian calendar, as did the rest of Imperial Russia.

would have disappeared, explaining King's comment that after this time Soviet policy amounted to simply stating that Moldovans and Romanians were different, without actively trying to make them so.<sup>344</sup>

While the constitutive story that saw Moldova as an integral part of the Soviet Union and vilified Romania (Eurasianism) was therefore strong in Transnistria, the constitutive story that took hold in Bessarabia (Bessarabism) acknowledged differences between Romanians and Moldovans, and regarded Romania with some suspicion, but nevertheless sought a more balanced approach to Moldova's position between the Slavic and Romance worlds. Later, when *perestroika* opened the space for "rediscovery" of the Romanian origins of Moldovan identity by the cultural intelligentsia in Bessarabia, this was met with fierce resistance in Transnistria, the seat of Soviet Moldovan identity. The question then becomes how identities became divided and institutionalized into pro- and anti-Romanian camps in the MSSR if there was a consistent anti-Romanian bent to schooling there in the Soviet period?

Answering this question requires an examination of state policies regulating the university system and their effect on the development of the intelligentsia. In this area Moldova represents somewhat of a middle case between Abkhazia and Ajaria. While the first Moldovan institute of higher learning was located in present-day Transnistria and retained a level of independence from the university system later established in Chisinau, its focus was more on pedagogy and the physical sciences than on the development of a distinct historical narrative. The first institute of higher learning established by the Soviet government in Moldova was the Institute of Higher Education, founded in 1930 in the MASSR. After the Second World War the institute was renamed the Tiraspol Pedagogical Institute; it remained the primary institute of higher education in the MSSR until the founding of higher educational institutes in the former

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid, 107.

Bessarabia. Although the institute was later renamed Tiraspol State University, it remained primarily a pedagogical and scientific establishment - its faculties consisted of only Pedagogy, Zoology, Botany, Chemistry and Geology<sup>345</sup>. Therefore the level of institutionalized identity division according to this measure should be described as medium: while Tiraspol State University was not formally a branch of a university in Chisinau, it did not have the humanities departments necessary for the development of a separate Transnistrian “cultural intelligentsia”; instead, the faculty of Tiraspol State University can best be labeled a “technical intelligentsia”, making it a less fruitful breeding ground for Transnistrian “crypto-nationalists”.

After the foundation of the MSSR in 1940, the development of the university system in Bessarabia was characterized by two somewhat contradictory processes: on the one hand, higher education in the MSSR was dominated by Russians throughout the Soviet period; on the other hand, in the late Soviet period a small but boisterous Moldovan cultural intelligentsia developed. This group played a key role in the Romanization of Moldovan intellectual life described earlier, by promulgating a version of the Moldovan language and interpretations of Moldovan history closer to those of Romanian scholars across border. Higher educational institutions in the MSSR included the State University of Chisinau, founded in 1946, the Institute of Language and Literature, founded in 1957, and the Moldovan Academy of Sciences, established in 1961.

Despite the founding of these institutions, access to higher education for ethnic Moldovans remained limited. While the low level of development of Bessarabia at the beginning of Soviet rule certainly played a role in this, educational policies that favored Russians were also an important factor. In 1970 the MSSR ranked next to last in the USSR in terms of

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<sup>345</sup> The websites of both Chisinau State University (<http://usm.md/en/universitate/despre-usm/istoric/>) and Tiraspol State University (<https://sites.google.com/site/tiraspoluniversity/pages/history>) give their respective histories and their programs of study.

education, with only 39.7% of the population having secondary or higher education; the USSR average was 48.3%. Among Moldovans the rate of higher education was the lowest of any major group in the MSSR: while Moldovans were represented in higher educational institutions in the MSSR at a rate of 51 per 10,000, Russians were represented at a rate of 150 per 10,000 and Ukrainians at 70 per 10,000.<sup>346</sup> Stringent Russian language requirements, which screened out many Moldovan student applicants, were a major reason for the lack of Moldovan representation in higher education. Even within the Soviet Union these policies were seen as unusual given that Russian was not the republic's predominant language.<sup>347</sup> Even at the Academy of Sciences, the flagship institution on the MSSR, the majority of academicians and section heads were Russian as late as 1970.<sup>348</sup>

Given the domination of ethnic Russians in the higher educational institutions of the MSSR, it will come as no surprise that the history they produced and disseminated consistently reinforced a Soviet Moldovan identity and regarded Romania with suspicion or outright hostility. Arkady Barbarosy of the Moldovan Institute for Public Policy argues that the different 20<sup>th</sup> Century histories of Transnistria and Bessarabia were used to set the stage for the conflict between them. In the Soviet period, Barbarosy maintains that Soviet schools, radio and television consistently combined the word "Romanian" with the word "fascist", thus bringing to mind the brutalities of the 1940-1944 Romanian occupation.<sup>349</sup> Memories of the occupation were especially traumatic for residents of Transnistria, which saw the worst of the atrocities committed by Romanian leader Antonescu and his German allies.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 426.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid, 427.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid, 428.

<sup>349</sup> Barbarosy, interview with the author, 13 July 2012.

<sup>350</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 93.

The end of the war and the consolidation of Soviet power in Bessarabia were accompanied by the deportation or execution of some 90,000 Bessarabians suspected of having Romanian sympathies, and the establishment of a 50-km security zone along the Prut River between Romania and Moldova, described by some as a “watery Berlin Wall”.<sup>351</sup> This zone was similar to that which existed on the Soviet-Turkish border, but the Soviet-Turkish border was a border with a NATO enemy, while the Soviet Romanian border was, at least formally, a border with a Warsaw Pact ally and fraternal communist state. Despite this Communist fraternity, Soviet rule was characterized by “consistent Russian attempts to strengthen bases of Soviet power in Moldavia and to isolate the republic from Romania and Romanian influences”;<sup>352</sup> these attempts culminated in a complete cessation of contacts between the MSSR and Romania after 1964, when the latter began producing historical documents questioning the legality of the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia.<sup>353</sup> Moldovan political analyst and former parliamentarian Oazu Nantoi argues that the objective of official Soviet histories vilifying Romania – and by implication casting suspicion on Bessarabians – was to create “a Moldovan non-Romanian socialist nation with a brain modulated by Soviet ideology”.<sup>354</sup>

It is unclear to what extent the escalating war of historical interpretation between Romanian and Soviet Moldovan scholars penetrated the mind of the average soviet Moldovan citizen in Bessarabia. What is clear, however, is that for the small and academically disenfranchised ethnic Moldovan cultural intelligentsia, and for the general population of Transnistria, this war of words resonated deeply. These two groups found themselves on opposite sides of a deepening divide over the writing and interpretation of history. Whereas the

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid, 93, 148-149.

<sup>352</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 418.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid, 421.

<sup>354</sup> Oazu Nantoi, Program Director at the Institute for Public Policy, Chisinau, Moldova, interview with the author, 9 July 2013.

first group increasingly identified with much of the scholarship being produced across the Prut River in Romania, the second group, supported by the Communist Party of Moldova, vehemently rejected the conclusions of Romanian historians and vigorously asserted an opposing viewpoint. Between 1966 and 1989, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova held at least 27 sessions dedicated to counteracting “Romanian nationalist propaganda”. Documents from these sessions indicate that the Central Committee appealed to Moscow for help in this endeavor no less than seven times, and issued over a dozen directives to academic and media organizations in the MSSR directing them to refute the Romanian version of historical events and Romanian assertions that Moldovans were a sub-group of Romanians.<sup>355</sup>

While the official Soviet version of the historical narrative resonated in Transnistria, Romanian arguments found a more sympathetic audience among the Moldovan cultural intelligentsia. One reason that Romanian arguments were well-received by this group was likely ethnic affinity and residual Romanian nationalism from the pre-war period of Romanian rule in Bessarabia. Accounts from the Soviet period describe the views of the Romanian population of Bessarabia as characterized by “anti-Russianism and anti-Semitism”, noting that these views were widespread among the young and intellectuals.<sup>356</sup> However, another reason was certainly the discrimination this group experienced in the educational policies of the Soviet Moldovan state, which consistently privileged Russians at the expense of Moldovans. Recall that Chandra divides state institutions and their policies into those that structure cognition and those that structure incentives. In this case, the discrimination against ethnic Moldovans in the educational policies of the MSSR might have had the effect of radicalizing the Moldovan cultural

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<sup>355</sup> These documents can be found under the “Moldova” tab at the Digital Archive of the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars at: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/browse>.

<sup>356</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 429.

intelligentsia. Having experienced discrimination at the hands of the Russian-dominated government and intellectual establishment of the MSSR, the cultural intelligentsia would have an incentive to rebel against these institutions by embracing a historical narrative opposed to the dominant one.

So an analysis of educational policy in the two Soviet Moldovan states of the MASSR and MSSR uncovers a complex picture, but several patterns do emerge. Combining these patterns into a comprehensive picture reveals that while Soviet educational policies did serve to construct an institutionalized identity division between Bessarabia and Transnistria in the MSSR, it was not as deep or divisive as that between Georgia and Abkhazia in the GSSR. Soviet primary education policies served to inculcate a Soviet Moldovan constitutive story in both Transnistria and Bessarabia, but the process in the latter occurred after the Second World War and thus lacked the Bolshevik ideological zeal of the process in Transnistria. Soviet policies in the area of higher education had two main effects. The first was to establish separate higher education systems in Transnistria and Bessarabia, due primarily to the fact that the former was incorporated into the Soviet Union some 22 years earlier than the latter. Since the university in Transnistria was focused primarily on pedagogy and the natural sciences, it was infertile ground for the development of a Transnistrian cultural intelligentsia. It did, however, serve to produce teachers for Moldovan primary schools, teachers who had presumably been trained to teach the Moldovan Soviet constitutive story.

But a Transnistrian cultural intelligentsia was not a requirement for the development of competing historical narratives in the MSSR, because the second main effect of Soviet educational policies was that the official educational institutions of the MSSR were largely run by ethnic Russians. This ensured that the Soviet Moldovan historical narrative remained the official narrative of the MSSR. However, the proximity of Romania provided the opportunity for



an alternative historical narrative to gain traction, and the systematic discrimination against ethnic Moldovans in higher education provided a motive for Moldovan intellectuals to embrace this narrative. Despite Soviet attempts to prevent the ideas inherent in Romanian nationalist scholarship from contaminating the Soviet Moldovan intelligentsia, the fact that Romania and the USSR were fraternal socialist nations meant that a complete rupture of relations was impractical. Thus, unlike in Ajaria, where the connection with Turkey was completely severed, the ideological affinity between Romania and Soviet Moldova allowed for a certain degree of intellectual exchange.

So the end result of Soviet educational policies in Moldova was similar to the end result of Soviet ethno-linguistic policies, in that three distinct historical-symbolic identities could be discerned. The first was the Soviet Moldovan identity dominant among the general population of Bessarabia, which had a memory of its pre-war association with Romania but was schooled in the post-war Soviet Moldovan constitutive story. The second and third groups were smaller but the identities they held were stronger and the ideas they espoused were more radical. The population of the pre-war MASSR, the bulk of which became the Moldovan region of Transnistria, was schooled in the highly ideologically-charged Soviet constitutive story of the 1930s and had memories of the atrocities committed in the MASSR during the Romanian occupation of 1941-1944. This identity was therefore fanatically pro-Soviet and anti-Romanian. The final historical-symbolic identity was that of the small and marginalized Moldovan cultural intelligentsia, which became increasingly romanized in the late Soviet period and - perhaps due to the discrimination it experienced in Soviet educational policies - became increasingly anti-Soviet in its political views. Whether Moldova held together in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse would be in part of function of whether the centrist identity held, or was pulled in two

by the centrifugal forces of the more extreme ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic identities flanking it.

*The Construction of Regional Identities*

Three sets of state policies serve to construct regional identities: policies that direct or influence the settlement patterns of populations, affecting the demographic make-up of certain regions; policies that direct or influence the migration of certain economic sectors to certain regions, affecting the economic geography of those regions; and policies that extend political autonomy to certain regions, thereby affecting the political geography of the country. As discussed, there was only one Moldovan autonomous region in the Soviet Union, and this was the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) within Ukraine, which existed from 1924 until 1940. After the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia in 1940, the MASSR was carved up along ethnic grounds: those regions with majority Ukrainian populations reverted to the control of the Ukrainian SSR, while the regions with the greatest concentrations of ethnic Moldovans were joined with Bessarabia to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR).

The facts that the MASSR only existed as an autonomous unit for 16 years and that its purpose was to “formalize the Kremlin’s opposition to the incorporation of Bessarabia into Romania at the end of World War I and to provide a political nucleus for eventual reunification”<sup>357</sup> of all Moldovans argue against the extension of political autonomy having a significant effect on the development of distinct identities between Transnistria and Bessarabia. This is especially true in light of the fact that autonomy works to divide identities by giving an autonomous region not only the trappings of state legitimacy but a separate set of institutions that can be mobilized to construct separate identities. In Transnistria this was not the case, although there is a case to be made that the memory of its inter-war autonomous status and its

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<sup>357</sup> Katz, Rogers, and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 417.

role as the birthplace of the Soviet Moldovan identity gave Transnistrians a basis for arguing that they were indeed different than Bessarabians.

The combined impact of Soviet demographic and economic policies, however, did serve to construct an institutionalized identity division between Transnistria and Bessarabia. Demographic policies altered the ethnic balance in both regions, with the effects being more pronounced in Transnistria. Whereas at the founding of the MSSR the population in the districts of the former MASSR that were to form Transnistria was just under 49% Moldovan, 28.7% Ukrainian and only 14.2% Russian, by 1989 Russians had come to comprise 25.5% of the population, with Moldovans falling to 39.9% and Ukrainians increasing slightly to 28.3%.<sup>358</sup> There was also Russian immigration into the Bessarabian portion of the MSSR, which served to alter the ethnic balance there, but this alteration was relatively mild compared to that in Transnistria, at least in numerical terms. Whereas ethnic Moldovans comprised 68.8 of the total population of the MSSR upon its founding in 1940, they had declined to 64.5% of the total population by 1989; the proportion of Russians in the MSSR had increased from under 7% to over 13% of the total MSSR population in that same period.<sup>359</sup> So while there was Russian immigration into both Transnistria and Bessarabia, it was more pronounced and concentrated in the former.

But these demographic shifts alone were insufficient to create a strong institutionalized division in regional identities between Bessarabia and Transnistria. After all, by the end of the Soviet period the ethnic imbalance between the two regions was still rather mild. Even after almost 50 years of demographic shifts, by 1989 Moldovans still comprised the largest group in both regions, making up 67% of the population in Bessarabia and 40% in Transnistria. And

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<sup>358</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 95, 185.

<sup>359</sup> These figures come from King, *The Moldovans*, 95; and Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 174.

despite the fact that Soviet policies concentrated Slavic immigrants in Transnistria, in 1989 over 70% of all Russians and Ukrainian residents of the MSSR lived in Bessarabia, not Transnistria.<sup>360</sup> However, there was one Soviet demographic policy that, while it had only a minor numerical effect on the population balance in the MSSR, had a significant emotional effect on the ethnic Moldovan population and served to provide material for the anti-Russian/anti-Soviet historical narrative that emerged among the Moldovan cultural intelligentsia in the late Soviet period. After the Second World War, while residents of Transnistria were judged reliable and trustworthy due to their inter-war experience under Soviet rule, Bessarabians were often suspected of harboring Romanian sympathies due to their inter-war rule by Bucharest. To address this potential problem, the Soviet government made the decision to exile hundreds of thousands of ethnic Moldovans from Bessarabia to Siberia in several mass deportations in the late 1940s.<sup>361</sup>

So Soviet demographic policies produced a moderate ethnic imbalance between Transnistria and Bessarabia, and combined this with the memory of a historical injustice that provided the basis for a Moldovan narrative of grievance against Soviet rule. It was Soviet economic policy, however, which provided the most enduring and essential foundation for the development of separate regional identities in the MSSR. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, Soviet economic planners went to work remaking the economy of the newly-created MSSR. In Bessarabia, the first two tasks were collectivization and “de-kulakization” – the process of dispossessing the most powerful and affluent of the Moldovan peasantry. Overlaid on these processes were Soviet suspicions about the loyalty of Bessarabians due to their inter-war experience under Romanian rule. King characterizes the post-war

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<sup>360</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, xxviii.

<sup>361</sup> William H. Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 49.

collectivization process in Bessarabia as unusually brutal, and maintains that the famine of 1946-47 was provoked by Communist requisitions of grain, and was specifically directed against ethnic Moldovans. Similarly, he argues that the de-kulakization campaign of 1947-51 was aimed primarily at ethnic Moldovans.<sup>362</sup>

Meanwhile, Transnistria, which had been an industrial backwater prior to the Second World War, was designated for rapid post-war industrial development. It rapidly became a central component of the Soviet defense sector and heavy industry, so much so that by the late Soviet period it produced 100% of the MSSR's total output of large electrical machines, power transformers and gas containers, 96.6% of cotton textiles and 87.5% of electricity, all with only 13% of the total population of the republic.<sup>363</sup> Transnistria saw the construction of a steel mill in the town of Ribnitsa, power stations in Dubosari and Moldavskaiia, and refrigerator, clothing and alcohol plants near Tiraspol.<sup>364</sup> These industrial concerns were primarily responsible for the influx of Russian workers and managers to Transnistria in the post-war period.

Bessarabia, meanwhile, remained primarily rural, and ethnic Moldovans remained employed primarily in the agricultural sector. The concentration of Moldovans in low-paying jobs and the agricultural sector, caused at least in part by the influx of Russian immigrants, resulted in a perception of discrimination that remained strong throughout the post-war period in the MSSR.<sup>365</sup> There was also an urban-rural divide overlaid on the ethnic and regional divides between Moldovans/Bessarabians and Russians/Transnistrians – while 82% of the Moldovans in the MSSR lived in rural areas, 77% of Russians lived in urban areas. The urbanization and industrialization of Transnistria resulted in a significant difference in standard of living between

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<sup>362</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 96.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid*, 186.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>365</sup> Crowther, "Ethnic Politics and the Post-Communist Transition in Moldova", 148.

it and the rest of Moldova. While per capita income figures were generally not computed in the Soviet Union, the rate of car ownership provides a rough proxy for the different levels of wealth: while in Transnistria there were 75 cars registered for every 100,000 inhabitants, in the rest of Moldova there were only 48.<sup>366</sup> King summarizes the difference between the two regions well:

“In demographic and economic terms, the MSSR gradually developed as two republics in one: a largely rural, Moldovan and indigenous population in Bessarabia employed primarily in agriculture and light agro-industry; and a more urban, Slavic and generally immigrant population in Transnistria working in Soviet-style heavy industry”.<sup>367</sup>

Over the course of the post-war period then, a strong and institutionalized division in regional identities developed between Bessarabia and Transnistria, and this division was largely created by Soviet economic policies.

Bessarabia had been part of Fascist Romania in the inter-war period, had lost the war and been annexed by the Soviet Union, and had then been subjected to ruthless collectivization and de-kulakization processes. Not targeted for significant industrial investment in the post-war period, it remained more rural and poorer than Transnistria. Transnistria, by contrast, had gone through collectivization and de-kulakization in the pre-war period as part of the MASSR. While these processes were doubtless traumatic, there is no evidence that ethnic Moldovans there were specifically targeted for repression, as they were in post-war Bessarabia. The war itself represented another contrasting historical experience between the two regions, with the MASSR being subjected to the worst atrocities of the Romanian occupation but then being liberated by Soviet troops. For Transnistrians then, the war represented both a significant trauma at the hands of Romanians and a great victory for the Soviet Union, of which they had been a part since 1924. In the post-war period, Transnistria benefited from considerable Soviet

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<sup>366</sup> Vlada Tkach, “Moldova and Transdnistria: Painful Past, Deadlocked Present, Uncertain Future”, *European Security* 8:2 (1999), 143.

<sup>367</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 100.

economic development and was the recipient of large-scale immigration by ethnic Russians.

Transnistrians argue therefore that their separate regional identity is based upon historical factors that are not easily dispensed with. They were only joined with Bessarabia in 1940, they have long had a more Slavic view of the world, looking east – not west – for guidance and leadership, and the fact that they were the only industrialized area of the MSSR meant that, in contrast to Bessarabia, they developed a politicized proletariat.<sup>368</sup> King summarizes this view by remarking, “The key issue, though, was not how Russian the region became after the war, but how quintessentially Soviet”.<sup>369</sup>

*Summary of Institutionalized Identity Divisions in Moldova*

In Moldova, Soviet policies constructed and institutionalized identity divisions that created conditions conducive to violent separatism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While the conflict that erupted in Moldova was an identity conflict, it cannot properly be labeled an ethnic conflict, although that term is often applied to it in both journalistic and scholarly literature. Instead, the conditions conducive to violent separatism in post-Soviet Moldova were created by overlaying strong historical-symbolic and regional identity-divisions over a moderate division in ethno-linguistic identity. Rather than creating a stark, dichotomous division in ethnic identity, as between Georgians and Abkhazians, Soviet ethno-linguistic policies served to distinguish Moldovans both from their Slavic co-citizens in the MSSR and their Romanian cousins across the border. These policies gave official status to both the Moldovan and Russian languages in the MSSR, counted Moldovans, Russians and other ethno-linguistic groups separately, and gave precedence to Moldovans from Transnistria and to Russians in making appointments to high political office.

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<sup>368</sup> Andrew Williams, “Conflict Resolution after the Cold War: the Case of Moldova”, *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999), 79.

<sup>369</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 184.

Historical-symbolic policies had much the same effect. While the constitutive story taught in the primary schools at the onset of mass literacy emphasized a Soviet Moldovan identity in both Transnistria in the pre-war period and Bessarabia in the post-war period, the post-war constitutive story lacked the Marxist ideological zeal of that taught in the pre-war primary schools. The university system in Soviet Moldova allowed for a separate institute of higher learning in Transnistria, but this institute did not serve as a breeding ground for a Transnistrian nationalist intelligentsia, as it was focused on pedagogy and the physical sciences. The universities in Bessarabia, which did contain departments of history, language and literature, were thoroughly dominated by ethnic Russians, ensuring that the Soviet Moldovan historical narrative dominated. This left the Moldovan cultural intelligentsia increasingly marginalized in its own university system, a condition that opened it to Romanizing influence from increasingly nationalist Romanian scholars across the border.

So Soviet policies served to construct and institutionalize three distinct ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic identities in the MSSR. Luke March labels these the Pan-Romanian, the Eurasianist and the Bessarabian. The Pan-Romanian identity was strongest among the cultural intelligentsia, and it regarded Moldovans as merely a regional group of ethnic Romanians. The Eurasianist identity dominated among the Russian-speaking minorities and in Transnistria, and it saw Moldova as part of post-Soviet space and Moldovans as ethnically distinct from Romanians. The largest group of Moldovans subscribed to the Bessarabian identity, which advocated an independent Moldova, a balance between eastern and western orientations and a compromise between views on national identity.<sup>370</sup>

Whether Moldova negotiated the post-Soviet period peacefully would depend in part on whether the center could hold: whether the Bessarabian ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic

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<sup>370</sup> March, "From Moldovanism to Europeanization", 603-604.



identities proved strong enough to resist the forces pulling them toward the more extreme positions. Unfortunately for Moldova, Soviet demographic and economic policies constructed a strongly institutionalized regional identity division between Transnistria and Bessarabia. The influx of Russian (and to a lesser extent Ukrainian) workers and managers to Transnistria, the high level of Soviet investment in heavy industry there, and the relegation of Bessarabians to lower-paying jobs and agriculture created essentially two republics in one. In Bessarabia, this contributed to a sense of regionally-based grievance against Soviet policies, which served to weaken the Bessarabian identity and make the more extreme Pan-Romanian position more attractive. This radicalization of identities in Bessarabia was strongly resisted in Transnistria, where “the primary loyalty of individuals in the region was not to Russia – even though most spoke Russian and had ties to the Russian republic – but to the Soviet Union”.<sup>371</sup>

Thus, when war did come to Moldova, it took on regional and ideological dimensions rather than an ethnic dimension. While the post-war Moldovan state chose to adopt national symbols very similar to those of Romania, the Transnistrian separatist regime adopted strongly Soviet symbols, reflecting the historical-symbolic and regional division between the two entities. And despite the fact that some 1000 people were killed in the war, there were no documented instances of ethnically-motivated killings – as there were in Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia – and there was no ethnic cleansing, of either the ethnic Moldovan population of Transnistria or the Slavic population of right-bank Moldova. Indeed, even in the aftermath of the war, the ethnic Moldovan population of Transnistria fell by only 8%, from 39.9% to 31.9% of the total, and Moldovans still outnumbered both Russians and Ukrainians there.<sup>372</sup> And across the Nistru

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<sup>371</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 184.

<sup>372</sup> Figures are from the 2004 census conducted by the Transnistrian separatist authorities, as reported by the Ol’viiia-Press Information Agency, internet resource located at <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol37-09-05.htm>, accessed 12 April 2013.

River, the share of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians living in right-bank Moldova remained significantly larger than that living in Transnistria.<sup>373</sup> The character of the war between Moldova and Transnistria and the way in which it was conducted reflect the nature of the institutionalized identity division constructed by the policies of the Soviet state, which had a smaller ethnic component than in several other Soviet republics.

*Estonia and its Russian-Speakers*

In Soviet Georgia the state inherited two restless, territorially-concentrated minorities; Soviet policies then proceeded to essentially erase the boundary between one of these minorities – the Ajarians - and the Georgian majority, while strengthening and institutionalizing the boundary dividing Georgians from the other minority, the Abkhaz. In Moldova the Soviet Union thrust together two regions which had historically not been part of the same state, and attempted to create a Moldovan Soviet identity distinct from both the Slavic minority in the MSSR and the ethnic Romanians across the border. It then proceeded to undermine the legitimacy of this identity by systematically disenfranchising Bessarabians, who formed its geographic core, especially in the fields of education and the economy. Soviet policies instead privileged those from Transnistria, engendering a pro-Romanian reaction by parts of the Bessarabian intelligentsia in the late Soviet period.

In Estonia, as in Georgia, Soviet leaders were confronted with an established national majority, which comprised an “old” or “Western” nation in the vernacular of Soviet nationalities policy. Unlike Georgia, the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic was ethnically homogenous upon its establishment in 1940, with some 95-97% of the population made up of ethnic Estonians. By the end of Soviet rule deportations of Estonians and massive Russian immigration had

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<sup>373</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, xxviii.

decreased the proportion of Estonians to 61.5%.<sup>374</sup> These demographic shifts were combined with other Soviet policies that built significant ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic boundaries between Estonians and Russians. How these boundaries came to be constructed is the focus of this section of the chapter.

*The Construction of Ethno-Linguistic Identities*

As in the examinations of Georgia and Moldova, this section of the chapter will analyze three policies that serve to construct ethno-linguistic identities: language policy, policy with respect to classifying and counting people, and policy or practice determining access to power. Soviet language policies in Estonia and Georgia had much in common. In both republics, instead of attempting to russify the titular nation, which Soviet nationalities policy recognized as highly-developed, Soviet policies focused on linguistic Russification of minorities. Rannut argues that the Soviet government sought to consolidate minorities on the basis of the Russian language through three policies: the creation of a parallel Russian-medium environment, with no need to speak Estonian; the transfer of specific functional and territorial domains to Russian; and ideological incentives to prefer Russian over Estonian.<sup>375</sup> Examples of these policies include making Russian the second official language of education nationwide and the primary language of instruction in areas populated by minorities; and the switch from Estonian to Russian as the primary language in several functional domains, to include banking, statistics, law enforcement, transportation, mining and energy production.<sup>376</sup> These policies proved highly effective in russifying the non-Estonians of the ESSR: by 1989 78.4% of Jews, 67.1% of Belarusians, 63.4% of

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<sup>374</sup> Mart Rannut, "Language Policy in Estonia," *Revista de Sociolingvistica* (Spring-Summer 2004), 2-3. Prior to the Second World War, the ethnic Estonian population had stood at 88%; the increase after the Soviet annexation was primarily due to the Soviet government awarding several districts with large Russian populations to the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic instead of leaving them in Estonia.

<sup>375</sup> Rannut, "Language Policy in Estonia", 4.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

Poles and 54.5% of Ukrainians (and virtually all Russians) listed Russian as their native language.<sup>377</sup>

Linguistic Russification of minorities and the creation of parallel Russian and Estonian language environments were not the only effects of Soviet language policies in the ESSR. Ironically, Soviet policies served to strengthen and consolidate the status of the Estonian language among the titular population. Despite the strides made in standardization and harmonization of the Estonian language in the inter-war period of Estonian independence, Lieven says that at the time of the Soviet annexation,

“Use of the Baltic languages in education and higher culture was still new and fragile. Despite Russification, the fact of official status for their languages, and the opportunities afforded by Soviet republican institutions (such as schools and universities in the Baltic languages, Writers’ Unions, and so on) put the Balts in a better position to defend their language and identity than several other small linguistic groups in modern Europe: the Gaelic Irish in the last (19<sup>th</sup>) century, or the Basques, Bretons and Welsh in this one, for example”.<sup>378</sup>

Other analysis supports this contention. For example, Rockett’s examination of 1970 census data for six Soviet nationalities shows that Estonians had by far the highest number of books published in their native language relative to their proportion of the total USSR population: there were 889.7 books published in Estonian for every 100 native speakers of that language, compared to 562.2 books for every 100 Russian speakers and 211.9 for every 100 Armenian speakers.<sup>379</sup> Other analysts put it in these terms:

“Estonians can read everything from Homer and Shakespeare to Segal’s ‘Love Story’ and graduate-level physics texts in their own language. The Russian language does not represent an indispensable link to the rest of the world”.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>378</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 95.

<sup>379</sup> Rockett, *Ethnic Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 133.

<sup>380</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 79.

Baltic scholars Taagepera and Misiunas summarize the situation by arguing that while the Soviet period marked a step backward for the Baltic peoples in many areas, it left them linguistically more secure than they were in 1914: “in the eighty year perspective, the overall picture was still one of a massive shift from Russian to the national languages”<sup>381</sup>.

The protection of the Estonian language offered by the institutions of the ESSR and the ready availability of major works published in Estonian meant that Estonians had little need for intercourse with Russians; the distance between the two groups was increased further by the fact that rates of literacy and education in Estonia were significantly higher than in Russia itself, and that the bureaucratic business of the ESSR was largely conducted in Estonian.<sup>382</sup> Thus over the course of Soviet rule in Estonia the language policies of the state served to strengthen the Russian language among Russians and other minorities, to strengthen the Estonian language among the titular population, and to create parallel linguistic universes, with some domains - banking, statistics, law enforcement, transportation, mining and energy production – dominated by Russian and others – higher education, publishing and bureaucratic business – dominated by Estonian. The effect of these policies was to contribute to the construction and institutionalization of a considerable boundary in ethno-linguistic identities between Russians and Estonians in the ESSR.

The next factor of interest is the classification of groups by the state. Soviet nationalities policy consistently distinguished between Estonians and Russians throughout the Soviet period. Before the 1940 annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union, only those ethnic Estonians living in the Russian republic were included in Soviet census counts. In 1937, Estonians in the Soviet Union were classified as a potentially disloyal “diaspora nationality” and

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<sup>381</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 95.

<sup>382</sup> David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 67.

largely deported to the interior of the country to separate them from their ethnic kin across the border in independent Estonia.<sup>383</sup> After the Soviet annexation of Estonia and the end of the Second World War, the Soviet state returned Estonians to the list of Soviet nationalities. For the rest of the Soviet period, Estonians and Russians continued to be classified as separate national groups.

The final factor to be examined is the effect of Soviet policies on access to political power, which in Estonia proved to be paradoxical. On the one hand, in a parallel with Moldova, ethnic Russians and Estonians brought up in Russia dominated the structures of power. On the other, Soviet authorities tolerated a significantly higher level of expression of national identity among ethnic Estonian leaders than they did among Moldovans. As in Moldova, in Estonia overt political resistance to rule from Moscow was largely broken in a purge of 1950-51 which led to the replacement of all native Estonians by Russians or Estonians brought up in Russia.<sup>384</sup> Even after the end of the purge, key posts in Estonia were reserved for Russians or those Estonians deemed reliable by virtue of having been raised in Russia, similar to the practice in Moldova of placing Russians or Transnistrians in leadership posts. For instance, the Posts of Second Secretary and Deputy Chief of the KGB in Estonia were effectively reserved for Russians, to keep a check on their native bosses. And the long-serving Estonian First Secretary Ivan Kaebin, who served from 1950 until 1978, was deemed reliable, despite his Estonian nationality, only due to the fact that he was raised in Russia.<sup>385</sup>

Despite the dominance of Russians and Russified Estonians in the political elite, ethnic Estonians did make gains in representation in the Party overall during the period of Soviet rule. Between 1961 and 1973, the proportion of ethnic Estonians who were members of the

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<sup>383</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 291.

<sup>384</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 96.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

Communist Party rose from 2.5% to 4.5%, for an increase of 80%. In Rockett's study of six Soviet nationalities over that same time period, this represents by far the largest increase in Party membership.<sup>386</sup> Significantly, however, the percentage of ethnic Estonians in the "Soviet political elite", defined as the Politburo plus Secretariat of the Central Committee of the CPSU, was zero. Even Uzbeks, who had a lower overall rate of Party membership than Estonians, at 3.1% in 1973, occupied 4% of the positions in the Soviet political elite.<sup>387</sup> This demonstrates that while there was a rise in Estonian Party membership and the emergence of an ethnic Estonian Party leadership, this group remained exclusively concentrated in the ESSR rather than attempting to migrate to central Soviet power structures in Moscow.

These conditions, in turn, allowed the Estonian Communist Party to pursue a mildly nationalist agenda, and ensure that Soviet policies designed to prevent the estonization of the Party largely failed. For example, despite his Russian upbringing and early hardline views, Kaebin emerged as a qualified defender of Estonian interests.<sup>388</sup> He also adapted to Estonian cultural forms, changing his first name from Ivan to Johannes and working to improve his knowledge of the Estonian language. But Kaebin's defense of an Estonian national identity went beyond mere form. In 1975, Western analysts of Soviet nationalities policy noted, "occasionally, the Soviet Estonian establishment has objected to immigration, and the desire to avoid problems on the home front has made First Secretary Kaebin effectively shelter moderate nationalism from Moscow's suspicions".<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Rockett, *Ethnic Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 132-133. The other nationalities Rockett studied were Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Armenians and Uzbeks. Among these, the next highest increase in Party membership was registered among Ukrainians, who went from 3.6% to 5.7% in the same period, for an increase of 58.3%.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid, 132-133. Ukrainians, who had a slightly higher rate of Party membership than Estonians, at 5.7% in 1973, occupied 16% of the posts in the Soviet political elite.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>389</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 89.

A final difference between Estonia and most other republics lies in the relationship between the Party and the dissident movement. Many republics had intellectual dissident movements that challenged Soviet authority and protested Russification policies emanating from Moscow. However, in Estonia, Lieven says that preservation of language and culture was possible “only because a sufficient number of ‘Communist’ cultural, academic and even Party figures were prepared to use these institutions discreetly to defend their national cultures”.<sup>390</sup> In Estonia, therefore, the national leadership was able to preserve Estonian language and culture, and even exercise a fair amount of political autonomy, within Party structures rather than outside them, or “underground”, as in most other republics outside the Baltics.

As we will see, this had major repercussions in the waning days of the Soviet Union. The fact that the Estonian Party leadership had at least a modicum of nationalist credentials meant that it was better positioned to resist nationalist “outbidding” from former nationalist dissidents. And the fact that in the Soviet period the national parliaments, largely seen as symbolic, were open to members of the titular group without the sort of restrictions placed on access to Party leadership posts, meant that a proto-Estonian nationalist movement was able to grow within the institutions of government. In many other republics, the national movement had its origins in the dissident movement and among the “cultural intelligentsia”, setting the stage for a confrontation between the government and the national movement and the radicalization of the latter. This phenomenon, to the extent it occurred at all, took a much milder form in Estonia.

The overall effect of Soviet state policies on the construction of ethno-linguistic identities in Soviet Estonia was to create highly-institutionalized ethno-linguistic boundaries between Estonians and other nationalities of the ESSR, but especially Russians. Soviet language

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<sup>390</sup>Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 99.



policies effectively created two parallel linguistic universes, with little overlap between them and little incentive for Estonians to learn Russian or Russians to learn Estonian. In fact, Estonia was one of only two Soviet republics – Armenia being the other – where native language retention increased and knowledge of Russian actually decreased between 1959 and 1989.<sup>391</sup> Soviet nationalities policy also consistently distinguished between ethnic Russians and ethnic Estonians, and moved the latter to the list of “diaspora nationalities” in 1937, opening the way for Estonians then living in the Soviet Union to be exiled as a potentially disloyal population.

Finally, ethnic Russians and Estonians brought up in Russia dominated the leadership posts in the ESSR, further contributing to the construction of an institutionalized division in ethno-linguistic identity. However, despite their relative marginalization within the power structures of their own republic, Estonians did manage to make gains within the Party over the course of the Soviet period. But instead of attempting to climb higher on the ladder of Soviet political power by moving to Moscow, the Estonian political elite remained in Tallinn, where it could nurture a mildly nationalist agenda within Party structures. While this factor did not lessen the stark division in ethno-linguistic identity between Russians and Estonians, it did mean that the Estonian nationalist movement was not exclusively located in the dissident intelligentsia, as were its counterparts in Georgia and Moldova. As we will see, this contributed to the emergence of a comparatively more moderate Estonian national movement in the late Soviet period.

#### *The Construction of Historical-Symbolic Identities*

As it did in Georgia and Moldova, the Soviet state constructed and institutionalized historical-symbolic identities in Estonia through two sets of policies: those that governed primary education and those that governed the university system. Like the Bessarabian region

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<sup>391</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 266.

of Moldova, Estonia did not come under Soviet rule until 1940, and this rule was not consolidated until the expulsion of German occupation troops by the Red Army in 1944. But literacy and widespread primary education in Estonia, unlike in Moldova, existed long before the arrival of Soviet institutions. Raun says that “the beginning of Estonian elementary education dates from the 1680s and was virtually the work of one man, Bengt Forselius”,<sup>392</sup> who directed a teacher training school that produced some 160 schoolmasters. By the time of his death in 1688 there were some 46 schools with about 1000 students in the Estonian provinces. Although this hardly constitutes universal primary education, and mass literacy had not yet been achieved, it does show that the foundations of a non-religiously-based education system in Estonia were laid much earlier than in most areas of the future Soviet Union.

After Estonia’s annexation by Russia in 1721, a power struggle between St. Petersburg and local German nobility over content of school curriculum ensued. Competition between Russian and German elites over the identities and allegiances of Estonians resulted in rapid gains in literacy as each side sought to indoctrinate Estonian peasants through exposure to its language, literature and academic content. While it still had not crossed the 50% threshold, the level of literacy in the late 18th century was exceptional for the time, at 40% in North Estonia and 55% South Estonia.<sup>393</sup> The emancipation of serfs in Estonia in 1816 preceded that in most of the Russian Empire, further enabling the achievement of universal primary education and mass literacy. Kaiser finds evidence that rural teachers played a large role in nationalizing the countryside in Estonia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but finds no evidence that this was occurring at that time in the Slavic *gubernii* (governorates) of the Russian Empire.<sup>394</sup> By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, literacy was nearly universal and the German nobility was able to prevail in the struggle for the

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<sup>392</sup> Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, 33.

<sup>393</sup> “Serfdom and the Intensifying Manorial Economy”, from [www.estonica.org](http://www.estonica.org), accessed 15 April 2013.

<sup>394</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 75.

identity and allegiance of Estonians. The constitutive story it instituted in Estonian schools and universities reflected nationalist Romantic ideals like those of Herder and Fichte.<sup>395</sup> Darden concludes,

“The result of competition between the Russian and German elites was an exceptionally high literacy rate and the dominance of indigenous Estonian and Latvian national constitutive stories with a pro-Western (German) orientation. By the mid-19th century the literacy rate for all Estonians over the age of 10 approached 90 percent”.

Later, the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the 23 years of Estonian independence that followed allowed the content of the primary school curriculum to become more explicitly nationalist, further embedding the Estonian constitutive story within the population.

By the beginning of the Soviet period, then, universal primary education and mass literacy had been the rule in Estonia for almost a century. This presented the Soviet government with a dilemma: according to Marxist doctrine, national identities were transitory phenomena, mere stages in the march to the achievement of a post-national, proletarian consciousness. But in Estonia, as in Georgia, Marxist doctrine was confronted with something that Soviet nationalities policy was forced to acknowledge: an “old” or “Western” nationality with a strong sense of its own identity. Perhaps in order to demonstrate that the process of the “drawing together” or “merging” of nationalities predicted by Marxism was indeed underway, the Soviet state decided to institute a series of educational reforms in 1958. These reforms were designed to give parents a choice between educating their children in Russian or in the native language of each Soviet republic. The likely intent of the reforms was to make education in Russian the more attractive option, since it was the language of education in many universities and post-secondary facilities. Thus, if the reforms were successful, the Soviet state would have tangible evidence of the merging of nations on the basis of the Russian language.

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<sup>395</sup> Darden, *Resisting Occupation*, 214

These reforms were met by a flurry of resistance from national groups, delaying their implementation by a full year. Analysis of this resistance and of educational data from the 1955-56 school year by Aspaturian showed that the strongest resistance occurred among the “old” or “Western” nationalities, among them Georgians and Estonians. Aspaturian further concluded that that resistance to the 1958 reforms was strongest in areas where the percentage of pupils enrolled in Russian-language schools was closely correlated with the percentage of ethnic Russians in the republic. In Estonia, he found that 21.7% of the population was Russian and 22% of the population attended Russian-language schools, suggesting almost complete segregation of the primary schools.<sup>396</sup>

So as with language policy, after failing to Russify Estonians, the Soviet state settled on a policy of creating a separate, Russian-language educational sphere in the ESSR. In a parallel with Dragadze’s finding that “dual cultures” existed in Soviet Georgian villages – the “official” Soviet Georgian and the “authentic” pre-Soviet Georgian – Darden writes that in Estonia,

“This cultural dualism, with an active nationalist subculture preserved under the veneer of official Soviet life, was characteristic of the Baltic states and Western Ukraine as well. Hank Johnston and Aili Aareleid-Tart write that for the Estonian generation that grew up after the Second World War, ‘adaptation to the system caused a split between public and private life that went to the core of their existence.’ They give the example of a respondent who wrote in her notebook in the 1950s, ‘I am an Estonian and ever Estonian will be. This verse other Estonians will see.’ Her teacher scolded her with the admonishment that ‘we all feel this way, but we must never make our feelings known’”.

So Estonia presents a case of a strongly-held constitutive story that preceded the establishment of Soviet power. Failing to Russify the Estonian population, the Soviet state contented itself with the establishment of a separate, Russian-language primary education system, contributing to the construction and institutionalization of a boundary in historical-symbolic identities between Estonians and Russians in the ESSR.

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<sup>396</sup> Rockett, *Ethnic Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 126.

In addition to being confronted with an established primary education system in Estonia, the Soviet state found itself inheriting an established university system with a strong scholarly tradition focused on the study of Estonian subjects: indeed, Kaiser notes that there is evidence of Estonian scholarly interest in the history, customs and language of Estonians as early as 1820s.<sup>397</sup> Estonia's pre-Soviet scholarly community was centered in the southeastern town of Tartu, making it an easier target than the widely dispersed primary education system. Accordingly, the Soviet occupation of Estonia was characterized by a severe round of repressions. By 1945, it was estimated that only 22% of the pre-war faculty and staff of Tartu University remained – the rest had fled, been deported or been executed.<sup>398</sup> This led to a decline in Tartu's importance as a center of higher learning, and Soviet authorities accelerated this decline in 1946 by establishing the Estonian Academy of Sciences in Tallinn and designating it as the primary research facility in the ESSR.<sup>399</sup>

By 1970, Tartu had largely recovered and now stood with Tallinn as one of the two centers of higher learning in the ESSR. In that year, there were six institutions of higher education in Soviet Estonia, all in Tallinn or Tartu. The most prestigious was Tartu State University. Keeping in mind that in the 1959 Soviet census, 74.6% of the residents of the ESSR were ethnic Estonians and 20.1% were Russians, the dominance of Estonians in higher education becomes clear. In 1960 89% of courses at Tartu State University were taught in Estonian, and 90% of the faculty had Estonian surnames in 1962. Tartu University press publications from 1958-1962 were 88% in Estonian and 7% in Russian. In 1970 82% of all higher education students were Estonian, with the highest concentration of ethnic Estonians in the Tallinn

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<sup>397</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 36.

<sup>398</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 92.

<sup>399</sup> Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, 185.

Pedagogical Institute and the highest concentration of non-Estonians in the Tallinn Polytechnical Institute.

Northeastern Estonia, where the growing Russian minority was concentrated, was home to no institutes of higher learning. Narva and Sillamäe, the largest towns in the northeast, were industrial centers. Sillamäe was a closed city due to the secret uranium processing plant there, managed and manned largely by ethnic Russians. Unlike the primary education system, which although formally unitary, was *de facto* segregated into Russian-language and Estonian-language schools, the higher education system in Estonia was unitary and dominated by Estonians. Thus, unlike in Moldova and especially Georgia, in Estonia there was little fertile ground for the development of a regionally-based minority cultural intelligentsia.

The revival of the Estonian university system and the dominance there of ethnic Estonians, especially in the humanities, combined with the emergence of a moderately nationalist Estonian Soviet political leadership to ensure the pre-Soviet Estonian constitutive story survived. By 1970, Western analysts were concluding that “Estonian cultural nationalism has become widely accepted by the regime”.<sup>400</sup> Even if primary school curricula taught that annexation by the Russian Empire and later by the Soviet Union had a “progressive” effect on Estonia,<sup>401</sup> what children learned at home was often quite different. Estonian scholar Tulviste echoes Darden when he argues that,

“Two conflicting versions of the history of their country were acquired by children in Estonia during the Soviet rule. While the official version was taught systematically at school, the unofficial one, banned from the public sphere, was discovered individually by each child with the help of parents or other adults, family photo albums, surviving books from the 1920s and 1930s, and other sources.”<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 89.

<sup>401</sup> Lieven says that this was the case after the Second World War, when “with the advent of officially sanctioned Russian nationalism, history was rewritten to give the Russian Empire a ‘progressive’ colouring” (92).

<sup>402</sup> Peeter Tulviste, “History Taught at School Versus History Discovered at Home: The Case of Estonia”, *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 9:2 (June 1994), 121-126.

So the overall effect of Soviet educational policies on the development of historical-symbolic identities in Estonia is rather mixed. On the one hand, the primary school system was strongly segregated by language of instruction, and while the Soviet Estonian constitutive story dominated the official curriculum, the pre-Soviet origins of universal literacy and mass schooling allowed the pre-Soviet Estonian constitutive story to survive at home among ethnic Estonians. The pre-Soviet story was further strengthened by the domination of ethnic Estonians in the university system, especially in the disciplines of the humanities, and the absence of an institute of higher learning in northeastern Estonia. Ethnic Russians who desired to study in Estonian universities had to leave home and travel to Tallinn or Tartu, where the pre-Soviet Estonian version of history dominated. The overall result of Soviet policies was to create a moderately high institutionalized division in historical-symbolic identities in Estonia, with the level of division being higher in the segregated primary education system than it was in the Estonian-dominated university system.

#### *The Construction of Regional Identities*

The state constructs regional identities in three ways: by directing or influencing the settlement patterns of populations, affecting the demographic make-up of certain regions; by directing or influencing the migration of certain economic sectors to certain regions, affecting the economic geography of those regions; and by extending political autonomy to certain regions, thereby affecting the political geography of the country. Unlike Georgia, where both Abkhazia and Ajaria enjoyed political autonomy, and Moldova, where Transnistria had been a part of the inter-war Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Estonia had no autonomous regions at any time in its Soviet history. Soviet policies did, however, exert a considerable effect on the demography and economic geography of the ESSR, and this contributed to the construction of a strong regional identity in northeastern Estonia.

Soviet policies in post-war Estonia resulted in a large influx of Russian immigrants and a decline in the ethnic Estonian population. Recall that Estonians living in the USSR prior to the 1940 Soviet annexation were labeled a “diaspora people” and deported to the Soviet east and Central Asia as a security risk. After the annexation the Soviet government maintained the distinction between Soviet and diaspora nations, and made Soviet citizenship in newly-annexed Estonia easier to acquire for Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians than for Estonians.<sup>403</sup> The result of these policies was large-scale Russian immigration that inexorably altered the demographic balance of the ESSR. After the adjustment of Estonia’s borders by the Soviet government, which awarded several border regions to the Russian Soviet Republic, ethnic Estonians comprised some 95-97% of the population of the ESSR.<sup>404</sup> New Russian immigrants began arriving right after the war in large numbers. The overall population of Estonia had fallen from 1.13 million in 1939 to 850,000 in 1945, largely due to the war and post-war repression of suspect groups. However, by 1955 the overall population had again risen to 1.15 million, largely because of the arrival of some 230,000 mostly-Russian immigrants.<sup>405</sup>

This unequal growth in numbers between ethnic Estonians and Russians continued throughout the Soviet period. Between 1959 and 1970 the ethnic Estonian population of the ESSR grew by 32,000 while the non-Estonian (mostly Russian) population grew by 127,000, and the proportion of Estonians in the overall population of the ESSR dropped from 75% to 68%, while that of Russians increased from 20% to 25%.<sup>406</sup> By 1979 Estonians had dropped to 64.7% of the overall population of the ESSR and Russians had risen to 27.9%, and the final Soviet census of 1989 showed a population that was 61.5% Estonian and 30.3% Russian.<sup>407</sup> As these

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<sup>403</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 306.

<sup>404</sup> Rannut, “Language Policy in Estonia,” 3.

<sup>405</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 183.

<sup>406</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 78.

<sup>407</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 174.



numbers imply, in-migration by ethnic Russians accelerated in the late Soviet period, with the annual average rising from 4800 in the 1979-1983 period to 7700 in the 1984-1986 period.<sup>408</sup>

As in Moldova, these new arrivals were geographically concentrated, but to an even greater extent than in Moldova's Transnistrian region – several of the large cities of northeastern Estonia had ethnic Russian populations in excess of 80% (and Russian-speaking populations of over 90%) by the end of the Soviet period. This trend is strikingly illustrated by examining the demographic statistics for two cities in the Estonian northeast. Whereas in 1934 the cities of Narva and Kohtla-Järve had Russian populations of 29.7% and 6.1%, by 1979 these had risen to 85.1% and 60.4% respectively.<sup>409</sup>

Soviet policies affected the regional concentration of Estonia's Russian population in another way as well, and that was to essentially wipe out large groups of Estonia's pre-war Russian immigrants. Lieven says that after the Soviet occupation, Stalin's determination to eliminate any potentially unreliable Russian populations in the Baltics – Old Believers, former Tsarist officers and their families, and other select groups - meant that the majority of those who failed to escape abroad were executed or died in camps; the Russian community of Tallinn suffered especially badly.<sup>410</sup> This, combined with post-war immigration policies, had the effect of further concentrating the Russian population of the ESSR in the republic's far northeastern corner.

This demographic imbalance in the ESSR also had an economic-class imbalance overlaid on it, despite the fact that it took place within the context of a formally classless society. Lieven remarks that post-war industrialization of the ESSR "proceeded at breakneck speed, accompanied by what most Balts would see as the most malign of Soviet legacies – a massive

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<sup>408</sup> Pollard, *USSR Facts and Figures Annual, Volume 12, 1986*, 486.

<sup>409</sup> Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, 207.

<sup>410</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 183.

influx of Russian labor”.<sup>411</sup> By the mid-1970s, Western observers were concluding that ethnic Russians formed an underclass, “doing the unskilled jobs shunned by Estonians, especially in construction”.<sup>412</sup> “High-status occupations”, in contrast, tended to be filled by Estonians: by 1989 Estonians made up 81.4% of all directors of enterprises and organizations, despite comprising just 61.5% of the total population of the ESSR.<sup>413</sup> The proletarian nature of the Russian immigration increased the undesirability of it for many Estonians. Again to Lieven, who says that he has “seen Estonians, normally so very calm, twitching and shaking with repressed physical hatred as they speak of the ‘Asiatic, Mongolian barbarians’ who have settled among them, and their foul habits”.<sup>414</sup> Even among highly educated and professional Estonians, this view of Russian immigrants lingers today. Estonians who spoke to me about the Russian population often conveyed a subtle condescension, describing them as “children” in their mental attributes – often warm and friendly, but intellectually limited and not to be taken seriously.<sup>415</sup>

In addition to the demographic and class divisions, Soviet economic policy resulted in an economic divide between the northeast and the rest of the ESSR. Northeastern Estonia contains deposits of shale, which led Soviet economic planners to invest heavily in the development of facilities in the northeast dedicated to the extraction of uranium from this shale and its enrichment for nuclear purposes. The main plant dedicated to this enterprise was located in Sillamäe, and the town remained closed to outsiders throughout the Soviet period; supporting

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>412</sup> Katz, Rogers and Harned, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities*, 78.

<sup>413</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 241.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid, 185-186.

<sup>415</sup> Interviews with current and former Estonian government officials, 15-21 July 2012. Interestingly, Lieven says that the image of the proletarian Russian immigrant is somewhat overblown, remarking that the large Russian minority in northeast Estonia has produced its own educated class of teachers, doctors and managers and scientists at factories and power stations (187). However, the perception of the Russian immigrant population among Estonians does not match this reality.

factories were also located in Narva. The concentration of heavy industry and the concentration of ethnic Russians in the northeast of the ESSR had predictable consequences in terms of the coincidence of economic and demographic divides. By the early 1980s, despite making up just over 30% of the total population of the ESSR, ethnic Russians comprised over half of those employed in the industry and transport sectors of the economy.<sup>416</sup>

Soviet economic and demographic policies, when taken in total, strongly contributed to the construction of a high level of institutionalized identity-division between the northeast and the rest of Estonia. Soviet demographic policies resulted in a large increase in in-migration by ethnic Russians, which served to increase Estonian fears of being eclipsed by outsiders in their own republic.<sup>417</sup> Instead of being dispersed throughout the republic, these new Russian immigrants were concentrated in the northeast of the country, where they formed solid majorities in the most important towns. And despite the emergence of a Russian professional class in the northeast by the late Soviet period, the overwhelming nature of Russian immigration to Estonia was blue-collar and proletarian, resulting in a class divide between Estonians and Russians. Finally, the concentration of industrial concerns in the northeast, especially around the Russian-majority towns of Narva and Sillamäe, overlaid an economic-sectoral divide on these other identity-divisions. Contrary to the expectations of Soviet ideologists, the immigration of Russians to the ESSR and mixing between Russians and Estonians did not cause an erosion of national self-consciousness, but instead “served as a catalyst in the mobilization of

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<sup>416</sup> Rannut, “Language Policy in Estonia”, 4.

<sup>417</sup> In fact, it can be argued that Estonians had the most to fear from immigration of the groups under study. In the Soviet period, Abkhazians rose slightly as a proportion of the total in the Abkhaz ASSR but Georgians rose slightly more quickly (Russians began leaving in the late Soviet period, allowing the proportions of Abkhazians and Georgians to both increase). Moldovans were declining slightly as a proportion of the Moldovan SSR while Russians were increasing rapidly. Estonians were declining rapidly while Russians were rising rapidly in the Estonian SSR.

national communities behind the goals of self-determination”<sup>418</sup>. In this light, the words of a joint Estonian-Latvian *samizdat*<sup>419</sup> publication, describing Russian immigrants as “civil garrisons” and “an ominous tumor in the body of the Estonian and Latvian nations”<sup>420</sup> become understandable.

*Summary of Institutionalized Identity Divisions in Estonia*

As they did in Moldova and in Abkhazia within Georgia, Soviet policies constructed and institutionalized identity divisions that created conditions conducive to violent separatism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Language policy in the Estonian SSR created separate and parallel linguistic environments, with Estonian dominating among ethnic Estonians and in certain economic and governmental spheres, and Russian dominating among ethnic Russians and other minorities, and within other economic spheres. Soviet policy also reflected suspicions about the loyalty of Estonians, classifying them as a “diaspora nationality” and deporting Soviet citizens of Estonian descent in the pre-war period, and making citizenship in the post-war Estonian SSR easier for Slavic immigrants to acquire than for ethnic Estonians.

Soviet policies shaping access to political power resulted in an Estonian Communist leadership with a high percentage of ethnic Russians and Russified Estonians, especially in the early post-war period. Later, when a native Communist political leadership did begin to develop, it remained in Tallinn rather than migrating to Moscow in search of greater opportunities for advancement. This fact allowed the late Estonian Soviet leadership to nurture a mildly nationalist political agenda and protect Estonian cultural development within the context of the Communist regime. This avoided the national movement being forced to reside

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<sup>418</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 170-171.

<sup>419</sup> *Samizdat* (literally “self-published”) publications were circulated secretly because their content made them illegal to publish and distribute openly.

<sup>420</sup> Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, 182.

exclusively within the dissident movement and the cultural intelligentsia, which tended to pursue more radical nationalist programs. In total, then, the effect of Soviet ethno-linguistic policies was to construct a significant division in ethno-linguistic identities between the Estonian majority and the Russian-speaking minority.

Soviet education policies portray a more mixed picture. On the one hand, the Soviet state confronted in Estonia a literate society where universal primary education had been the norm for a century prior to the establishment of Soviet rule. While it formally contested the pre-Soviet Estonian constitutive story by introducing a new curriculum that portrayed Russian imperial and Soviet rule as exerting a progressive influence on Estonia, in practice the Soviet state contented itself with the establishment of sharply segregated primary school systems. In Estonian-language schools, the formal Soviet curriculum was taught without relish and expressions of Estonian national consciousness were officially discouraged but generally not punished. In Russian-language schools, by contrast, the official Soviet Estonian constitutive story was robustly promoted, leading to a sharp division in how ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians perceived Estonia's history.

In the universities, ethnic Estonians dominated both in the student population and among the faculty and administration. The large, geographically-concentrated Russian-speaking population of northeastern Estonia had no institutions of higher learning of its own, forcing Russian students to travel to Tallinn or Tartu to pursue higher education within the Estonian SSR. Thus, a Russian-speaking cultural intelligentsia capable of promoting and propagating an alternative to the Estonian national myth never developed in the ESSR. Instead, the professional class of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia tended to be a "technical intelligentsia", with advanced degrees in medicine, management and industrial science. This meant that in the

competition between historical narratives, the pre-Soviet Estonian version enjoyed a significant advantage.

It was in the construction of regional identities that Soviet policies had arguably the most powerfully divisive effect, despite the fact that northeastern Estonia never had political autonomy. Not only did post-war Soviet policies privilege Slavic immigration into Estonia, intensifying Estonian fears of cultural extinction, but the proletarian nature of Russian immigration seemed to validate Estonian narratives of their own cultural superiority over Russians. Next, Russian immigrants tended to cluster in the northeast, where they formed solid majorities in the major towns. Finally, there was a stark economic sectoral divide between Estonia's northeast and the rest of the republic, with the former being highly industrialized and certain economic sectors such as uranium-enrichment, shale extraction and power generation located exclusively there. The urban and industrial nature of northeastern Estonia, as in Moldova's Transnistria, would seem to have been favorable for the development of a strong regional identity and the mobilization of that identity in response to the Estonian movement towards independence in the late Soviet period.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Soviet Policies and the Construction of Institutionalized Identity Divisions**

The table below summarizes the effect of Soviet policies on the construction of institutionalized identity divisions in each case studied by analyzing this variable according to the criteria described for its operationalization in Chapter 2. A review of this table shows that Abkhazia had the highest potential for conflict according to the theory advanced in this dissertation, while in Ajaria, where the sense of difference from and enmity toward Georgians had been quite high in the pre-Soviet period, conflict potential was the lowest of the cases under examination. Moldova and Estonia present intermediate cases: while the potential for

conflict certainly existed, it was by no means inevitable that a violent separatist movement would break out in either republic.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Georgia-Abkhazia</b>	<b>Georgia-Ajaria</b>	<b>Moldova-Transnistria</b>	<b>Estonia-Russian Minority</b>
Level of division in Ethno-Linguistic Identities: language policies	High	Low	Medium	High
Level of division in Ethno-Linguistic Identities: ethnic classification policies	High	Low	Medium	High
Level of division in Ethno-Linguistic Identities: access to power	High	Medium	High	Medium
Level of division in Historical-Symbolic Identities: primary school system	High	Low	Medium	High
Level of division in Historical-Symbolic Identities: university system	High	Low	Medium	Low
Level of Division in regional identities: demographic and economic policies.	High	Medium	High	High
Level of Division in regional identities: autonomy	High	High	Medium	Low
<b>Overall level of institutionalized identity-division</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low/Medium</b>	<b>Medium/High</b>	<b>Medium/High</b>

Language policy contributed to a high level of division in ethno-linguistic identities in Abkhazia by privileging both Abkhazian and Russian over Georgian in Abkhazia, and by investing a significant amount of effort in creating a standard, literary Abkhazian language from what had been largely an unwritten, peasant language in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In Ajaria, Soviet language policies effectively assimilated Ajarians on the basis of the Georgian language by eliminating most of the peculiarities of the Gurian dialect spoken by Ajarians, which contained a large number of Turkish loan words. They also embarked upon a large-scale Georgian literacy

campaign, since at the beginning of the Soviet period most educated Ajarians were literate in either Turkish or Arabic. In Moldova, language policies consistently maintained that the Moldovan language was distinct from the Romanian, and sought to Russify Moldovan by injecting Russian loan words and mandating use of the Cyrillic alphabet. In Estonia, the Soviet state failed to Russify Estonians, so instead focused on the establishment of parallel and completely separate linguistic spheres, where either Estonian or Russian was spoken almost exclusively.

Ethnic classification policies contributed to the construction of a high level of division in ethno-linguistic identities in Abkhazia by maintaining Abkhazians on the major list of Soviet nationalities over the entire period of Soviet rule. Despite the fact that the Soviet state consistently strove to demonstrate the “merging” of nations, it did not combine Abkhazians with the closely related Abaza and Adygei groups in the north Caucasus, in the way that the various Kartvelian groups were “merged” into the Georgian group. Ajarians, despite their religious difference from Georgians and their three centuries of rule by Ottoman Turkey, were re-designated as Georgians prior to the Second World War. In Moldova, Soviet ethnic classification policies strove to portray Moldovans as a sort of “middle ground” ethnicity between Romanians and Russians. In the 1920 Soviet census, Moldovans and Romanians were classified together, but were always listed as separate groups thereafter, with Romanians moving to the list of suspect “diaspora nationalities” as the Second World War approached. Finally, in Estonia Soviet policies consistently maintained the ethnic distinction between Estonians and Russians, moving the former to the category of “diaspora nationality” in 1937 as well.

Ethnic criteria figured greatly in determining access to power in Abkhazia, further contributing to the strong division in ethno-linguistic identities between Abkhazians and Georgians. Georgians consistently complained that the leadership of the Abkhazian ASSR, which



was dominated by ethnic Abkhazians, was out of balance with its demographic composition, which was only 17.9% Abkhazian by 1989. Abkhazians responded that the purges of Stalin and Beria had decimated the pre-war Abkhazian leadership, and that a return to the “true Leninist” policy of affirmative action was therefore only just. In Ajaria the low level of literacy in Georgian in the early Soviet period and the elimination of Ajarian as a Soviet national group meant that immigrants from other regions of the Georgian SSR captured most of the political posts reserved for representatives of the titular group in the early Soviet period. While this likely engendered some resentment among locals, it also prevented the emergence of an Abkhazian-like grievance when most members of the Ajarian leadership were found guilty of being agents of foreign intelligence services and shot in 1937. In Moldova, the Communist leadership was largely drawn from among the ethnic Russian population or from ethnic Moldovans from outside Bessarabia, leading to a grievance on the part of the Bessarabian majority. While the policy in Estonia was similar on its surface, with much of the leadership coming from the ethnic Russian community or from Russified Estonians, in practice a non-Russified, moderately nationalist Estonian Communist leadership had developed within the ESSR by the late Soviet period.

In the construction of historical-symbolic identities, the role of the primary school system was considerable in all four cases. In Georgia the nationalist primary school curriculum, formulated at Georgia’s independence, was maintained by the Soviet government until at least 1933, by which time Georgia had crossed the threshold to mass literacy. Until that same year, Abkhazia’s status was that of “treaty republic” allied with Soviet Georgia, but not subject to direct rule from Tbilisi, giving Abkhazian leaders a high degree of autonomy over the content of their own primary school curriculum. So the primary school curricula of Georgia and Abkhazia at the time of the onset of mass literacy served not to unite them on the basis of a shared historical and cultural affinity, but to divide them. In Ajaria the process was exactly the

opposite: the Soviet government closed Islamic religious schools, embarked on a massive and exceptionally successful literacy campaign in Georgian, and introduced a primary school curriculum that emphasized the common ethno-linguistic roots of Georgians and Ajarians while characterizing the three centuries of Ottoman rule as an historical aberration. In Moldova, the primary school curricula in both Transnistria and Bessarabia emphasized the difference between Moldovans and Romanians and the historical affinity between Moldovans and Russians. However, since Transnistria was subjected to this curriculum and passed the threshold to mass literacy in the inter-war period, the version of the Soviet Moldovan constitutive story that took hold there would have had a higher level of Marxist ideological content. In Estonia the Soviet state was confronted with a nation that had over a century's experience with mass literacy and near-universal primary education. Rather than attempt to undermine the pre-Soviet Estonian constitutive story that had taken hold, Soviet policies constructed a separate Russian-language primary school system to propagate the Soviet Estonian constitutive story.

The role of the university system mirrors the role of the primary school system in all cases except Estonia. In Abkhazia, a separate and independent state university with its own humanities departments was established in Sukhumi, which not only strengthened the division in primary school curricula between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, but housed a "crypto-nationalist intelligentsia" that engaged in scholarly battles with its Georgian counterpart in Tbilisi. In Ajaria no independent university existed, and the Batumi Pedagogical Institute, the only institute of higher learning in Ajaria, focused on the training of teachers. Given the Soviet emphasis on ethno-linguistic markers of identity as the most legitimate and salient, this institute would have turned out teachers trained to teach the standard Georgian constitutive story to Ajaria's schoolchildren. In Transnistria, as in Ajaria, the only institute of higher learning was a pedagogical institute, so conditions were not favorable to the establishment of a Transnistrian

nationalist intelligentsia. However, the domination of the entire university system in the Moldovan SSR by ethnic Russians had two effects: first, it ensured the Soviet Moldovan constitutive story dominated throughout the republic's schools; and second, it marginalized and increasingly radicalized the small ethnic Moldovan intelligentsia. Estonia is the one case where the effect of the primary school system and the university system did not complement one another. Whereas the segregated primary school system contributed to the construction of highly-divided identities between Estonians and Russians, the structure of the university system had a somewhat mitigating effect. Not only was there no institute of higher learning at all in northeastern Estonia, but ethnic Estonians so thoroughly dominated higher education in the ESSR that the emergence of a Russian nationalist intelligentsia in Estonia was out of the question.

Finally, there is the effect of Soviet policies on the development of regional identities. In Abkhazia, the resettlement of ethnic Georgians there to work the newly-established tea and citrus collectives was perceived as a demographic threat by ethnic Abkhazians. This was overlaid on the establishment of an economy separate from and not interdependent with the rest of Georgia and the provision of political autonomy to Abkhazia. The result was the construction of a highly developed regional identity that was significantly different from that elsewhere in the Georgian SSR. In Ajaria, although the situation appears similar, the effect was not. There was immigration into Ajaria from other areas in Georgia, and the economy that was established there in the Soviet period was more similar to that in Abkhazia than in the rest of Georgia. Ajaria also enjoyed political autonomy. However, the elimination of the ethno-linguistic distinction between Ajarians and Georgians by the Soviet state had the effect of ensuring that the regional identity that developed in the Ajarian ASSR was not overlaid on another identity-division. Powerful regional identities also developed in Transnistria and

northeastern Estonia. Both of these were based on the coincidence of demographic policies that encouraged immigration by people ethnically distinct from the titular population of the republic, and economic policies that established highly specialized and distinctive regional economies. Although neither of these regions had autonomy, Transnistria had previously enjoyed autonomous status within the Ukrainian Soviet Republic from 1924-1940.

This chapter has endeavored to demonstrate that the state, in this case the Soviet Union, plays a significant role in the construction of identities within the populations under its rule. It has argued that when the identities constructed are institutionalized and the level of division between them is high, the threat for mobilization and escalation along this identity-boundary is substantial if the state enters a period of political transition that puts factors such as the form of government, citizenship criteria, state borders and center-periphery relations into play.

In Georgia, Moldova and Estonia, although the objectives of Soviet policies were the same – the perpetuation of the Soviet Union and the achievement of a unified post-national, Soviet identity among its citizens – the starting conditions in each republic were not. Different levels of ethno-linguistic diversity, national consciousness, historical memory and economic development called for marginal adjustments in policy among the republics in order to achieve Soviet government objectives. However, it would be a mistake to argue that Soviet policies amounted to the continuation of the trajectories Georgia, Moldova and Estonia were on prior to their incorporation into the Soviet Union. Where it decided to, the state proved fully capable of altering those trajectories, as it did in Ajaria. The Soviet Union proved to be a powerful actor with a pervasive effect on the identities of its population. The next chapter picks up the story in the late Soviet period, when the Soviet center signaled through Gorbachev's policies that its monopoly on power and decision-making authority was open for negotiation, a process which

eventually led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The chapter then examines the process whereby the level of institutionalized identity-division in each case combined with the critical juncture of the Soviet collapse to determine the level of mobilization and escalation which occurred.

## CHAPTER 4 – MOBILIZATION AND ESCALATION IN THE CRITICAL JUNCTURE OF THE SOVIET COLLAPSE

### **I. Introduction**

Mark Beissinger argues that despite its 74 year record of survival through war, famine, mass annihilation of its citizens by its rulers, and rapid modernization, between 1988 and 1991 the Soviet “state exploded, largely under the pressure of its ethnic problems”.<sup>421</sup> Lieberman and Singh argue that “the state’s institutionalization of ethnic group boundaries provides a powerful basis for political mobilization and insurgency against the claims to authority and a monopoly on violence by the national state, in turn increasing the potential for civil war”.<sup>422</sup> According to these arguments, the act of institutionalizing ethnicity in the Soviet Union alone laid the groundwork for both the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil wars that erupted in its aftermath.

This dissertation departs from these approaches by arguing that ethnic problems were not the prime cause of the Soviet collapse, that the institutionalization of ethnicity alone was not sufficient to cause groups to challenge the authority of the Soviet state, and that the post-Soviet wars should not be seen as uniformly about ethnicity. Instead, it argues that the institutionalization of ethnic and other identities combined with the liberalization process initiated by the Soviet center itself to open space for the expression of grievances among Soviet populations, and that these grievances were not purely ethnic in origin.

There are three major points that need to be developed here. First, the late 1980s was not the first time ethnic and national problems had arisen in the Soviet Union, but in previous periods that state had been able to mitigate ethnic and national grievances through a

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<sup>421</sup> Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, 1.

<sup>422</sup> Lieberman and Singh, “Institutionalized Ethnicity and Civil War”, 6.

combination of concessions and repression. Instead of a slow but inevitable rise in ethnically-based challenges to the authority of the state, as Lieberman and Singh would seem to predict, the pattern of ethnic and national sentiment resembles a sine wave, with peaks and valleys over time.<sup>423</sup> Second, the explosion of ethnic and nationalist sentiment in the late 1980s was a result of the decline in the authority of the Soviet center, not its cause. Indeed, Gorbachev's *perestroika* had primarily economic origins: its intention was to restructure the Soviet economy to allow it to compete more effectively with Western economies and to provide more of the goods that Soviet consumers demanded.<sup>424</sup> Even after the Soviet center signaled that the infallibility of its policies was open for debate, early protest centered on environmental and economic policies instead of ethnic issues. It was only later - when the examination of the failures of the Soviet state in these areas had eroded its perceived legitimacy - that ethnic protest began in earnest.<sup>425</sup> Finally, the post-Soviet wars should not be uniformly classified as ethnic conflicts, as they sometimes are. Instead, although all of them can be classified as identity conflicts, ethnicity was usually not the only identity mobilized, and was sometimes not the most salient identity in play.

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<sup>423</sup> Two periods of specific concern about the rise of ethnic and national sentiment in the Soviet Union were the late 1930s and the early 1970s. In the first period, the concern was that the *korenizatsiia* process had gone too far and had encouraged the rise of "minority nationalism" among non-Russian populations. The policy solution was a series of repressions of these national minorities. In the early 1970s, there was concern among many Western analysts of the Soviet Union that "the much more rapid rate of growth of the non-Russian, and especially Asiatic, populations" (Pipes in Katz, Rogers and Harned, 1) would destabilize the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union did finally collapse, the "Asiatic" populations were the least mobilized and most quiescent of all Soviet nationalities.

<sup>424</sup> Mark Kishansky, Ed., *Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization* (New York: Longman, 2001), 322.

<sup>425</sup> Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, 65-66. Beissinger acknowledges that economic and environmental protest formed independent vectors of protest, which sometimes intersected with nationalist protest. By mid-1987, environmental protests had already occurred in Yerevan (Armenia), Tartu (Estonia), Leningrad, Kazan and Irkutsk (Russia); the first large scale ethno-national demonstrations did not occur until early 1988, and had peaked by January 1989 (p. 105).

This chapter proceeds as follows: first it revisits the concept of critical junctures and restates the argument for analyzing the Soviet collapse as a critical juncture. In doing so, it picks up the narrative where Chapter 3 left off, examining each case in terms of the level and type of institutionalized identity-division present in the late Soviet period. This examination sheds light onto the types of leaders that emerged in the late Soviet period and the mobilization strategies they pursued. Next, it examines the process of escalation in each case, using the criteria for operationalization of this variable outlined in Chapter 2. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the level of escalation observed and its predicted effect on the actions of international actors.

## **II. Critical Junctures, Agency and Mobilization in the Late Soviet Union**

As discussed previously, there are three characteristics that serve to define critical junctures: agency, probability jump and temporal leverage. Recall that critical junctures are defined as short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest.<sup>426</sup> Probability jump is defined as a comparison of the outcome of the critical juncture with the probability of that outcome occurring absent the critical juncture. Temporal leverage is defined as the duration of the impact of the critical juncture compared to the duration of the critical juncture itself.<sup>427</sup>

The Soviet collapse meets all three criteria for classification as a critical juncture. First, the rapid decline of Soviet central power allowed agents to emerge within the union republics, and the choices these agents made had a considerable effect on the outcome experienced in terms of war or peace. Next, while any quantitative assessment of the probability of these outcomes absent the Soviet collapse is impossible since it involves a counter-factual, the fact

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<sup>426</sup> Capoccia and Keleman, "The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism", 348.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid, 363.



that previous episodes of ethnic and nationalist grievance in the Soviet Union had been successfully dealt with argues that absent the erosion of the center's authority in the wake of *perestroika*, large-scale separatist conflict would have been impossible. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union was for most people an unexpected event, and the period of time from the beginning of *perestroika* to the collapse of central power was relatively short, at most four years.<sup>428</sup> However, the effects of the decisions made by leaders and their followers in terms of conflict and cooperation have lasted until the present day: none of the regions examined here that chose to pursue violent separatism have been reintegrated with the states they broke away from.

As discussed, one of the criticisms of critical junctures is that they understand the actions of agents as “highly efficacious but essentially unpredictable”.<sup>429</sup> This dissertation addresses this criticism by showing that while the choices of agents in the critical juncture surrounding the Soviet collapse were indeed efficacious, they were far from unpredictable. Even in critical junctures, agents don't make decisions in a vacuum – instead, the high degree of uncertainty and uniqueness in the situation compels them to attempt to make sense of their preferences through readily-available frames of reference. In the late Soviet period, these frames of reference were heavily-influenced by the previous policies of the Soviet state. In each of the cases examined here, Soviet policies constructed frames of reference that that emerging leaders used in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period to articulate preferences and mobilize followers.

These frames of reference were largely built upon the identities constructed by the Soviet state. In Georgia, therefore, while Abkhazian leader Vyacheslav Ardzinba pursued a

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<sup>428</sup> Ada Marshania, Deputy of the Supreme Council of the Abkhazian Government in exile and former Deputy of the Parliament of Georgia, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.

<sup>429</sup> Mahoney in Katznelson and Weingast, Eds., *Preferences and Situations*, 313.

separatist agenda early and consistently, Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze eschewed overt separatism, even when the capacity of the Georgian state had declined so precipitously that there was effectively nothing to prevent him from doing so. These outcomes could have been predicted by the levels of institutionalized identity-division in these two cases – high for Abkhazia and low/medium for Ajaria.

But the analytical framework advanced in this dissertation should not only serve to predict the level of violent separatism in these cases, it should also shed light on which identities leaders choose mobilize as bases for struggle and the type of conflict that is therefore likely to follow. Abkhazia in many ways is the ideal type case of a highly institutionalized and divided set of identities that made violent separatism very hard to avoid. Abkhazians and Georgians were set apart not only by the institutionalization of their ethno-linguistic differences, but by institutionalized differences in their education systems and their economies. Finally, Soviet demographic policies served simultaneously to magnify the perception of demographic threat among ethnic Abkhazians and to provide ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia with a ready-made set of grievances revolving around their low level of representation in the leadership of the Abkhazian ASSR. Thus, we would expect early mobilization around these divided identities and a rapid escalation in conflict between the two sides that drew on a discursive framework emphasizing ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional differences and grievances.

In Ajaria, although the overall level of institutionalized identity division was low/medium, the analysis of institutionalized identity divisions presented in the previous chapter directs our attention toward three potential bases for mobilization: the composition of the Ajarian leadership, the economic differences between Ajaria and the rest of Georgia, and the institution of Ajarian autonomy. Since two of these factors serve to construct the regional identity, we should expect the conflict between Georgia and Ajaria to have a high regional

content. Although the argument presented here sees the overall potential for violent separatism as in Ajaria as relatively low, it does predict that what struggle there is between Tbilisi and Batumi will revolve around political posts, economic spoils and Ajaria's autonomous status.

In Moldova and Estonia, as indicated by their medium/high levels of institutionalized identity division at the end of the Soviet period, predicted outcomes were not as clear as they were in Abkhazia and Ajaria. Whether Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov and Estonian-Russian leader Vladimir Chuikin would pursue violent separatism is not readily apparent from the framework of the previous chapter. As median cases of potential for violent separatism, Moldova and Estonia are best examined relative to each other. The fact that they share a number of important factors makes the comparison more apt: both had territorially concentrated Slavic minorities that were largely the result of post-war immigration, both had economic divisions that exacerbated the ethno-territorial divisions, and both entered the Soviet Union in 1940 as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, meaning they largely missed out on the pre-war *korenizatsiia* process and the purges that followed it.<sup>430</sup> However, the analysis of the previous chapter does direct our attention toward certain differences between these two cases. First, we should expect the conflict in Estonia to exhibit a significantly higher degree of ethno-linguistic content than that in Moldova. After all, in Estonia the institutionalized division in ethno-linguistic identity was strongly dichotomous, while in Moldova the Moldovan ethno-linguistic identity served as a middle ground between the Slavic and Romanian ones. Next, we should expect the conflict in Moldova to exhibit a higher degree of historical-symbolic content than that in Estonia. Although the Estonian primary school system was almost completely linguistically segregated, the almost complete absence of a Russian-speaking cultural

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<sup>430</sup> Transnistria is the exception here, since it was within the USSR from 1924-1940 as the MASSR.

intelligentsia in Estonia made the propagation of a local Russian nationalist discourse there difficult. In Moldova, by contrast, while the divisions constructed by the primary school system and the university system are both classified as medium, these divisions reinforced one another, as opposed to in Estonia where they acted to cancel each other out. In Moldova, while both the primary school system instituted in the MASSR in the inter-war period and that instituted in Bessarabia in the post-war period emphasized the Moldovan Soviet identity, the former had a much higher level of Marxist ideological content. The university system, while thoroughly dominated by ethnic Russians at the higher levels, nevertheless served to accommodate a small Moldovan cultural intelligentsia. This group became increasingly romanized in the late Soviet period, in part, certainly, due to the discrimination it experienced in academia.

Finally, the framework advanced in the previous chapter predicts a slightly higher level of regional content in the struggle between Moldova and Transnistria than it does between Estonia and its Russian minority. While both experienced high levels of regional division due to Soviet economic and demographic policies, Transnistria had enjoyed autonomous status within Ukraine from 1924-1940 as part of the MASSR. Transnistrians could also argue that they had not historically been joined with Bessarabia in the same state. In summary then, we can predict that mobilization in Estonia will have a great ethno-linguistic basis, that mobilization in Moldova will have a greater historical-symbolic basis, and that although both exhibit potential for mobilization on a regional basis, that potential is marginally higher in Moldova.

The next section of this chapter traces the process of escalation in the conflicts in Georgia, Moldova and Estonia. Relying on the operationalized definition of escalation presented in Chapter 2, each case will be examined according to the following factors: the prevalence of discriminatory rhetoric in the public discourse; the existence of discriminatory laws or legal battles between groups; the prevalence of violent rhetoric in the public discourse; the existence

of non-state armed groups; and violent clashes between groups. While the process of escalation is not seen as necessarily sequential and irreversible – for instance, sometimes there are violent clashes that then are followed by periods of calm – a steady and sustained increase in the observed levels of these factors argues for an escalation of conflict that has high potential for ending in a separatist war.

### **III. Analyzing and Explaining Escalation Levels in Georgia, Moldova and Estonia**

#### *Georgia: Abkhazia and Ajaria*

Many Georgians today acknowledge that their government made serious mistakes in the early post-Soviet period, and that these mistakes are at least in part responsible for the outbreak of war in Abkhazia. Two mistakes are often highlighted by Georgians discussing the early post-Soviet period: the nationalist rhetoric of the first post-Soviet Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the internal Georgian power struggle that chased Gamsakhurdia from Tbilisi, after which time he and his armed supporters mounted a low level insurgency in western Georgia against the State Council headed by former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.<sup>431</sup>

The charge that early post-Soviet Georgia pursued an assertive form of nationalism is widely echoed. Thomas de Waal argues that Gamsakhurdia pursued a "messianic image of Georgia as a special European country" in an effort to distance his nation from the Soviet/Russian past and from the tortured life of the Caucasus as a region.<sup>432</sup> Even Svetlana Chervonnaya, author of a pro-Georgian account of the origins of the war in Abkhazia, acknowledges that the Georgian government made statements,

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<sup>431</sup> These themes came up repeatedly in my interviews with former Georgian government officials and scholars, especially Paata Zakaresihvili, Zurab Davitashvili and Giorgi Volskii.

<sup>432</sup> Bruno Coppetiers and Robert Legvold, Eds., *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005), 20.

“Putting forward categorical demands for immediate and overall change to the Georgian language, telling the ‘newly-come’ peoples to leave the ancient Georgian land, and proclaiming the special mission of Christian Georgia as an advanced post of European civilization in the Muslim East”.<sup>433</sup>

The speed with which the Soviet center lost its monopoly on power and authority certainly helped escalate the situation in Georgia and elsewhere. As Ada Marshania remarked, the unpreparedness of both the elite and the population for the collapse of Soviet authority combined with the large number of tragic historical facts associated with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union led naturally to nationalism and chauvinism on both the Abkhazian and Georgian sides. The rapidly declining power of the Soviet center provided an incentive for political forces in the union republics organize themselves rapidly in order to compete for power. Marshania recounts the first meeting of the Popular Front of Georgia in 1989, before the beginning of the conflicts. Guests from the Popular Fronts in the Baltic republics attended in an effort to provide assistance to the Georgians in organizing. According to Marshania, the guests were “embarrassed and surprised” when they saw that the “Georgian political forces were almost killing each other” and couldn’t agree on a common plan of action.<sup>434</sup> The high level of representation by the cultural intelligentsia in the Georgian national movement certainly played a role in the emotional nature of its deliberations and the content of its platform. The Georgian national movement, to an even greater extent than in other union republics, was dominated by leaders who were, in Nodia’s words, “genuine ethnic nationalists, cultural

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<sup>433</sup> Svetlana Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, (Glastonbury, UK: Gothic Image Publications, 1994), 55. Chervonnaya sees the Abkhazian war as fomented by pro-Soviet Russian “reactionary forces interested in doing away with the democratic movement in Georgia”, enabled by “lunatic nationalist” utterances from some on the Georgian side (56). I argue that this overstates the role of geopolitical factors in laying the foundation for mobilization and escalation. These factors were certainly present and helped escalate the conflict to outright war and determine its outcome. But, given the extremely high level of institutionalized identity division between Georgians and Abkhazians, mobilization around this identity division and escalation of the conflict was largely unavoidable given the collapse of the Soviet Union.

<sup>434</sup> Marshania, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.

nationalists”, and were steeped in academic disciplines that in the Soviet context were “very romantic”.<sup>435</sup>

The second mistake often referenced by Georgians discussing the post-Soviet political trajectory of their country is the intra-Georgian “Tbilisi War” of December 1991-January 1992. In this conflict between forces loyal to Gamsakhurdia and armed opposition groups, largely made up of former officials in the Gamsakhurdia government, 113 people were killed before Gamsakhurdia escaped from Tbilisi, eventually making his way to Chechnya. From there he continued to rally his supporters, known as “Zviadists”, and direct a low-level insurgency against the new Georgian government headed by Shevardnadze. This insurgency, based in the Western Georgian region of Mingrelia and at times crossing over into the Mingrelian-dominated areas of the Gali District in Abkhazia, weakened the government in Tbilisi and eventually, as we shall see, provided a catalyst for the outbreak of the Georgian-Abkhazian war in August, 1992.

But there is a fundamental problem with ascribing the outbreak of war in Abkhazia to Georgian nationalist rhetoric or the intra-Georgian power struggle between Gamsakhurdia’s supporters and those of Shevardnadze. The problem is that these two factors are constants in the Georgian case, but the outcomes in terms of violent separatism vary, and a constant cannot explain a variable. In other words, Georgian nationalist rhetoric should have been as threatening to other ethnic minorities in Georgia, such as Armenians and Azeris, and the intra-Georgian power struggle and attendant collapse of Georgian state capacity should have allowed other regions, especially Ajaria, remote from Tbilisi and endowed with political autonomy, to pursue violent separatism.<sup>436</sup> But in the end none of these groups chose to pursue violent

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<sup>435</sup> Nodia, interview with the author, 10 May 2012.

<sup>436</sup> Especially since Gamsakhurdia did explicitly threaten to revoke Ajaria’s autonomy while publicly pledging to preserve Abkhazia’s.

separatism. The Abkhazians, however, pursued a separatist agenda fairly consistently through the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period.

*Analyzing and Explaining Escalation: Abkhazia*

As discussed in the first section of this chapter, the level of institutionalized division in all types of identity examined in this dissertation – ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic and regional – was quite high between Abkhazians and Georgians by the late Soviet period. We therefore would not expect to see a single facet of identity dominate in the escalating conflict between the two groups. Instead, we would expect to see mutually reinforcing escalatory arguments and events based upon differing ethnic identity and language, conflicting interpretations of history, and regional distinctiveness. This section of the chapter traces the process of escalation in Abkhazia, using the five factors noted previously: the prevalence of discriminatory rhetoric in the public discourse; the existence of discriminatory laws or legal battles between groups; the prevalence of violent rhetoric in the public discourse; the existence of non-state armed groups; and violent clashes between groups.

Ghia Nodia and others have made the point that the Georgian and Abkhazian national movements should be seen as interdependent processes.<sup>437</sup> Indeed, the event that crystallized Georgian demands for independence from the Soviet Union – the killing of 19 Georgian protestors by Soviet security forces in Tbilisi on 9 April 1989 – was itself sparked by events in Abkhazia. The violence on 9 April broke up a large Georgian protest against the so-called “Lykhny Assembly” in Abkhazia on 18 March 1989, when several thousand Abkhazian protestors demanded that the Abkhazian ASSR be removed from Georgia and admitted to the Soviet Union as a separate union republic. Before 9 April, support for independence from the USSR among

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<sup>437</sup> Nodia, interview with the author, 10 May 2012.



Georgians was “equivocal and context driven”<sup>438</sup> and the Abkhazian issue was not prominent.<sup>439</sup>

After 9 April everything changed: by September of 1989 89% of the Georgian population favored independence, significantly more than in Estonia, seen up to then as a hotbed of pro-independence feeling.<sup>440</sup>

When the tide of Georgian public opinion turned strongly toward independence, this set off a reaction in Abkhazia, where public opinion had long been suspicious of Georgian motives and looked to the Soviet Union for protection of the distinctive Abkhazian identity. Mobilization and escalation require organization, and in Abkhazia nationalist groups were already in existence and willing to provide this organization. The Aidgylara (“Unity”) National Forum, established on 13 December 1988 and registered in June 1989, embodied Abkhazian nationalism. Francis notes that “the Abkhaz intelligentsia lay at the root of the movement, whose founding members included writers, scientists, a museum director and painters. Its first chairman was Aleksei Gogua, a writer and the chairman of the Union of Writers of Abkhazia.”<sup>441</sup> The strong presence of the cultural intelligentsia in Aidgylara and the effect of Soviet state policies that neatly united the various Western Georgian groups under the heading “Georgian” while differentiating them from Abkhazians can be seen in the debate over membership in the group. At the founding of Aidgylara, Abkhazian lawyer Zurab Achba spoke in favor of including Svans and Mingrelians in its membership. Despite the fact that these Western Georgian ethnic groups had a long historical association with the Abkhazians, his suggestion “was categorically rejected by other influential organizers”.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, 182.

<sup>439</sup> Nodia, interview with the author, 10 May 2012.

<sup>440</sup> Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, 185.

<sup>441</sup> Celine Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*, (Brussels, Belgium: VUBPress, 2011), 71.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid*, 198.

With the establishment of competing nationalist movements and the more uncompromising stance toward independence among Georgians after the events of 9 April, the stage was set for the escalation of conflict between Abkhazians and Georgians. The earliest and most prominent instances of discriminatory rhetoric, predictably, emanated from the nationalist intelligentsia and press of the two sides. Anchabadze says that the removal of censorship in 1987 was followed by a significant rise in the number of professional and amateur historians engaged in the ideological struggle over history. Anchabadze wrote that in this period “there have never been so many people working simultaneously in the field of Abkhazology”, and that “Georgian scientific productions, questioning the autochthonous status of the Abkhaz people were brought up to date”.<sup>443</sup> Pavle Ingoroqva’s theory – so offensive to Abkhazians – was revived in publications such as *Mat’iane*, the journal of the Helsinki Group led by Gamsakhurdia, then a nationalist dissident intellectual.<sup>444</sup>

The end of censorship led to the development of an increasingly unrestrained – and at times irresponsible – Georgian language press, which quickly picked up a nationalist tone. For example, a 21 November 1988 editorial in the Georgian newspaper *Komunisti* advocated “a balanced propagation of separate nations living in Georgia: to keep to the limited level of their simple reproduction (two children). To those who wish extended reproduction: to grant the right to leave for a place of residence outside the republic”.<sup>445</sup> Aside from being offensive, this idea of limiting the reproduction of Georgia’s ethnic minority populations was particularly threatening to Abkhazians, already a minority in “their” ASSR and faced with a Georgian population that had been steadily increasing in Abkhazia since the 1930s.

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>445</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, 55.

Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric, both before and after he became president, also contributed to the sense of threat among Georgia's minorities: his supporters often referred to them as "guests" in Georgia and resorted to slogans such as "Georgia for Georgians". In the case of Abkhazia, Georgian nationalists sometimes attempted to deny altogether the existence of a distinct Abkhazian ethnic identity. For instance, Georgian writer Chabua Amirelibi remarked in an interview that "the Abkhaz are Georgian tribes. Those who came here from the North Caucasus are trash, Adygea (a related ethnic group), murderers, semi-barbaric tribes".<sup>446</sup>

Abkhazians responded both with rhetoric of their own and with legal action designed to upgrade Abkhazia's political status and disenfranchise ethnic Georgians living there, setting off the so-called "war of laws" between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. The Gulia Institute of Language, Literature and History became a hotbed of Abkhazian nationalist sentiment and rhetoric, especially after future Abkhazian leader Vyacheslav Ardzinba was appointed its director in 1988. Slogans similar in structure but diametrically opposed in content to those being expressed in Georgia came to dominate, with "Abkhazia is not Georgia" and "Abkhazia for the Abkhazians" emanating from its halls.<sup>447</sup> This rhetoric was accompanied by the dismissal of Georgians from offices and leading posts in the administration of Abkhazia, based solely on their ethnicity.<sup>448</sup>

The war of laws – and in large part the countdown to the actual war – between Sukhumi and Tbilisi can be dated to 18 March 1989. As discussed, on that date, and on the initiative of the Abkhazian national movement Aidgylara, a group of the nationalist intelligentsia publicly called for Abkhazia's removal from the Georgian SSR. In November 1989, seven months after the violence against Georgian demonstrators in Tbilisi by Soviet security forces, the Georgian Supreme Soviet declared the 1921 annexation of Georgia by the Soviet Union illegal, a first step

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<sup>446</sup> Akaba and Khintba, *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: Rethinking the Paradigm*, 7.

<sup>447</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, 34.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

toward asserting Georgia's sovereignty. The next step was taken in March 1990, when the Georgian Supreme Soviet declared Georgia's sovereignty under international law. The counter-stroke from Sukhumi was not long in coming. On 25 August 1990, in the absence of the ethnic Georgian deputies and again at the urging of Aidgylara, the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhazian ASSR adopted the 'Declaration of the State Sovereignty of the Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic'. The next day, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR annulled this decision. On 9 April 1991, the second anniversary of the killing of the 19 demonstrators in Tbilisi, Georgia formally declared independence from the Soviet Union.

But conflicting and discriminatory laws were not limited to declarations of sovereignty and independence by the two sides. In the run-up to the October 1990 parliamentary elections in Georgia, the first multi-party elections to be held since the Soviet annexation, Georgia's Supreme Soviet passed a new electoral law that banned parties not represented throughout Georgia from running in the elections. Thomas De Waal calls this law a transparent device to prevent minorities from gaining seats in Georgia's new parliament.<sup>449</sup> By the election, influenced primarily by the tension over Abkhazia, the Georgian nationalist movement had split into moderate and radical camps, with Gamsakhurdia's Round Table-Free Georgia bloc among the latter. When parliamentary elections were held on 28 October 1990, Gamsakhurdia's followers won by far the majority of the seats, with the Communists coming a distant second. The next event that both exposed and deepened the political divisions between Tbilisi and Sukhumi was the All-Union referendum on the preservation of the USSR, held in March 1991. Having already declared sovereignty and moving rapidly toward a declaration of independence, the Georgian government considered this issue moot, and declared that the referendum would not take place on Georgian territory. However, the Abkhazian population did take part in it, and

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<sup>449</sup> Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 133.

Abkhazian votes showed an overwhelming level of support for the preservation of the Soviet Union. The Georgian inhabitants of Abkhazia, who strongly supported the restoration of Georgia's independence, instead held an alternative referendum two weeks later, in which Abkhazian officials refused to take part.<sup>450</sup>

By mid-1991 then, the "war of laws" had reached a stalemate: Georgia had declared itself independent from the Soviet Union but lacked the capacity to transfer this *de jure* statement into independence *de facto*; and Abkhazia had declared its own sovereignty vis-à-vis Georgia, renaming itself the Abkhaz SSR in the process, thus implying it had the status of union republic within the Soviet Union and not autonomous republic within Georgia. Nevertheless, there was some movement toward legal compromise between Tbilisi and Sukhumi in this period, as the two governments negotiated an agreement on power-sharing within the parliament of Abkhazia. This agreement ratified the dominance of governmental structures by ethnic Abkhazians despite their small numbers, but also provided ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia with substantial representation and a guarantee that no major legal changes could be made without their concurrence. The agreement reserved 28 seats in the parliament for Abkhazians, 26 for Georgians, and 11 for the other nationalities of Abkhazia. It also required a 2/3 majority to pass changes to the constitution, thus guaranteeing that such changes could not be made without the approval of at least 5 of the 26 ethnic Georgian deputies.

Between the conclusion of the power-sharing deal in July 1991 and the convening of the new parliament of Abkhazia in January 1992, two major events occurred that undermined its prospects for success. The first was the formal end of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991. This made Abkhazia's self-proclaimed legal status as a sovereign republic of the Soviet Union moot, leaving it with a choice between subordination to Georgia and a declaration of

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<sup>450</sup> Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*, 75.

independence. The second was the “Tbilisi War” – the violent ouster of Gamsakhurdia from power by the former commander of his National Guard Tengiz Kitovani and warlord Jaba Ioseliani. After deposing Gamsakhurdia, these two joined with Gamsakhurdia’s former Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua to rule Georgia as the State Council from January until March of 1992, when Shevardnadze returned to assume executive authority.

The ouster of Gamsakhurdia and the assumption of control by the State Council served to undermine the power-sharing agreement for Abkhazia, since the new Georgian leadership was not committed to defending an agreement negotiated by the leader they had just deposed. As Francis says, “For Shevardnadze, this compromise was clearly the greatest mistake his predecessor had made. By challenging it, the new head of state could prove that he was better at protecting Georgian interests than Gamsakhurdia, thereby consolidating his own power.”<sup>451</sup>

The new Georgian government’s lack of interest in compromise is recounted by Giorgi Anchabadze, who in early 1992 was part of a four-man delegation sent to negotiate with Abkhazian authorities about how to resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian problem. According to Anchabadze, Abkhazian leader Ardzinba received them well; the collapse of the Soviet center had removed the sense of protection that Abkhazia felt, and the Abkhazians were open to compromise. Ardzinba proposed a model: “The Republic of Abkhazia within the Republic of Georgia”, and proposed to let Georgia be responsible for armed forces, foreign policy and state finances. All other competencies were to be divided between Georgia and Abkhazia based upon the recommendations of a joint commission. When the Georgian negotiators brought this proposal back to Tbilisi, it was discussed and several members of the government supported parts of it, but as a whole it was rejected.<sup>452</sup> Among Georgian delegates in the Abkhazian

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>452</sup> Anchabadze, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.

parliament, the lack of support for the power-sharing agreement from Tbilisi and the increasing feeling that the Abkhazian deputies were subverting it led to a high sense of frustration. The end result was a walkout of the Georgians in May 1992, after which time the Abkhazian parliament functioned with no representation from the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia.<sup>453</sup>

The Georgian walkout paved the way for the resumption of the war of laws, and it promptly resumed. First, on 13 June 1992 the newspaper *Abkhazia* published “The treaty principles of inter-relations between the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of Georgia”, a draft proposal for a confederal arrangement between them, in which Abkhazia and Georgia would undertake “voluntary unification”.<sup>454</sup> This declaration essentially restored Abkhazia to its early Soviet status as a “treaty republic” united with Georgia of its own will, preserving its right to secede. Next, on 23 July 1992 with Shevardnadze in Mingrelia handling yet another internal Georgian crisis, the Abkhazian parliament (now absent the Georgian deputies) turned the treaty published in the newspaper into political reality. On that date, the parliament readopted the 1925 Constitution of the Abkhazian SSR, which proclaimed Abkhazia independent but united with Georgia on the basis of a treaty; in the same resolution, it also altered the Abkhazian national emblem and flag. Two days later the Georgian State Council convened and nullified the resolution of the Abkhazian parliament. The legal war between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, aided by Abkhazia’s autonomous status, had reached its culminating point.

Violent rhetoric and occasional physical violence had been unfortunate facts of life in late Soviet and early post-soviet Abkhazia, and the culmination of the legal war promised more violence to come. Non-state armed groups had also established a considerable presence in

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<sup>453</sup> Francis says that among the Georgian complaints were that the Abkhazian deputies put forward and elected the Georgian candidate for the chairman of the Council of Ministers, despite the fact that the agreement reached reserves to the Georgian deputies that right.

<sup>454</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, 108.

Georgia, and these abetted the escalation of violence. In Abkhazia, the interaction between armed groups and violence played out as follows: a large-scale violent clash between Georgians and Abkhazians in 1989, followed by three years of relative calm during which time the war of laws was waged and each group armed and organized itself for more physical violence, followed by an explosion of large-scale organized violence in late summer 1992.

As discussed, the first large scale violence in the late Soviet period occurred when Soviet security forces violently dispersed the demonstration in Tbilisi on 9 April, 1989, killing 19 people in the process. Although the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship was the catalyst for the protest, the violent episode did not involve Abkhazians. The first significant instance of bloodshed between Georgians and Abkhazians in the post-war Georgian SSR occurred on 15 July 1989, and the catalyst was a dispute over the status of the Abkhaz State University in Sukhumi. The leadership of the Georgian SSR had recently approved a request by the Georgian faculty and students there to separate them from the university and to subordinate them directly to Tbilisi State University. Abkhazians perceived in this decision attempts to downgrade the status of the Abkhazian section of the university and to create conditions for the relocation to Sukhumi of “tens of thousands of students, professors and other workers” from Tbilisi, which could have led to a new wave of Georgian demographic expansion in Abkhazia.<sup>455</sup>

In reaction to the decision, gangs of armed Abkhazians attacked Georgian Secondary School Number 1 in Sukhumi, where the examination commission of Tbilisi State University was housed. Violence quickly spread and that night 14 people – 9 Georgians and 5 Abkhazians – were killed. The violence continued for two more days, and for the first time involved armed detachments of the Abkhazian People’s Forum “Aidgylara”.<sup>456</sup> Beissinger maintains that

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<sup>455</sup> Akaba, email interview with the author, 6 August 2012, translated from Russian.

<sup>456</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, 67.



Abkhazian police forces enabled the initial attack on the school by cutting off its water and power, and then replacing the Georgian police guarding it with a detachment of police from the Abkhazian ASSR. This detachment then stood aside and allowed the crowd to storm the building.<sup>457</sup> After this incident, the situation in Abkhazia remained relatively calm but tense for the next three years. In part this was certainly due to the escalation of tensions in the Georgian region of South Ossetia, where tensions began rising in the second half of 1990. Open fighting between the newly-formed Georgian National Guard and Ossetian irregular forces began in January 1991, finally ending with a cease fire in June 1992.

The rising tensions in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the perception among the increasingly nationalist Georgian leadership that Soviet military and interior forces were hostile to Georgia's interests led to a decision to establish ethnic-Georgian armed groups. One of these was the *Mkhedrioni* ("Knights" or "Horsemen"), founded in 1989 by "former playwright, bank robber and mafia boss Jaba Ioseliani",<sup>458</sup> and defined by their Georgian patriotic fervor, machismo and roots in the criminal underworld. Before long, another Georgian quasi-official armed group was formed, and it proved to be a rival to the *Mkhedrioni*. After the October 1990 elections in Georgia the new parliament recalled ethnic Georgians serving with the Soviet Army and used them to form the nucleus of the National Guard.<sup>459</sup> The National Guard was commanded by Tengiz Kitovani and was under the ultimate authority of Georgian parliamentary leader and later president Gamsakhurdia, who decided that the *Mkhedrioni* represented a threat to his authority. He therefore outlawed the group and had its leader Ioseliani jailed. When Gamsakhurdia later relieved Kitovani of his duties as National Guard commander in August 1991, the latter left Tbilisi with a significant portion of his forces. Kitovani returned in

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<sup>457</sup> Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, 302.

<sup>458</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 133-134

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

December 1991, freed Ioseliani from jail, and together these two and their armed forces toppled Gamsakhurdia.

Even this apparent intra-Georgian struggle, though, had its roots in the identity-divisions constructed within Georgia. First, the perceived need for unofficial armed groups arose from the tensions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the perception that the official Soviet military and interior troops in Georgia were biased against Tbilisi. Next, the immediate catalyst for Kitovani's ouster by Gamsakhurdia was a falling out over the August 1991 putsch attempt in Moscow. The perception in Georgia that the Soviet center was using Abkhazia as a brake on Georgia's drive for independence led to a spiral of nationalist, anti-Soviet outbidding between Gamsakhurdia and Kitovani, especially in the wake of the events in Moscow. When Gamsakhurdia ordered the disbanding of the Georgian National Guard in the wake of the coup attempt, Kitovani claimed he had done so on orders from Moscow and refused to disband. After the failure of the putsch attempt, each side accused the other of supporting Soviet power. While the growing opposition to Gamsakhurdia claimed he had supported the putschists in Moscow, Gamsakhurdia characterized Kitovani and the rest of the opposition as "a coalition of disgruntled intellectuals, the Communist 'mafia', and the criminals of *Mkhedrioni*".<sup>460</sup> The ouster of Gamsakhurdia in January 1992 and the resulting "infiltration" of the Georgian state by the remnants of the *Mkhedrioni* and the National Guard<sup>461</sup> should thus be seen as interconnected with the escalating Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During this time, when the Georgian government was preoccupied with South Ossetia and its own internal divisions, both sides in Abkhazia continued to arm themselves. Beissinger says that as early as March-April 1989, "For self-protection, some Georgian inhabitants of

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<sup>460</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 327.

<sup>461</sup> Nodia, interview with the author, 10 May 2012.

Abkhazia were already arming themselves with hunting rifles”.<sup>462</sup> Immediately prior to the bloodshed at the university, Abkhazian elders informed the First Secretary of the local Party that “special brigades of Abkhazian youth have been organized” and that these were willing to use force to protect Abkhazian interests.<sup>463</sup> Larger-scale and better-organized armed groups soon followed. After the incidents surrounding the university in Sukhumi in July 1989, Vadim Bakatin, Soviet Interior Minister at the time, says that both Georgian and Abkhaz police forces “offered very weak resistance” to raids on their armories by crowds and “even facilitated them to some extent”.<sup>464</sup>

In July 1990, tensions rose again as the first anniversary of the violence in Sukhumi approached. Boris Kakubava, leader of one of the two Georgian political groups in Abkhazia notified Giorgi Anchabadze, then acting as an informal mediator between Abkhazians and Georgians, that the Abkhazians planned to commemorate the anniversary of the bloodshed, and that this could lead to more violence. Other than the fact that there was essentially no interaction among the various Abkhazian and Georgian political organizations in Sukhumi, meaning a joint effort to prevent violence was out of the question, Kakubava expressed concern over the “potential presence of armed individuals who were ready to leave (or had already left) Tbilisi and the Northern Caucasus for Abkhazia”.<sup>465</sup> Although in this case large-scale violence was averted, the warnings about armed groups entering Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia and from the Russian North Caucasus proved prescient, as we shall see.

The ouster of Gamsakhurdia and the final, ceremonial end of the Soviet Union in late 1991 and early 1992 provided the final catalysts for both sides to increase their levels of

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<sup>462</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 301.

<sup>463</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, 66.

<sup>464</sup> Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 303.

<sup>465</sup> Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*, 194-195.

armament and organization. Shortly after the demise of the USSR, in an unusual move, Soviet forces based in Abkhazia were placed directly under the authority of the Abkhazian regional government rather than being transferred to the government of the former union republic, in this case Georgia. Francis says that these forces formed the nucleus of an Abkhazian National Guard consisting of 250 former Soviet soldiers and officers, as well as a battalion of several thousand that was subordinated to the Abkhazian Ministry of the Interior.<sup>466</sup> The ethnic Georgian Interior Minister of Abkhazia – ministries had also been divided ethnically according to the power-sharing plan – had earlier been forcibly removed from office and replaced by an ethnic Abkhaz.<sup>467</sup> Two months later, in March 1992, Abkhazian leader Ardzinba issued a decree “On the calling-up for military service and measure on the enforcement of the law on general military duties on the territory of the Republic of Abkhazia”, which obliged the directors of enterprises, organizations, collective farms and schools to begin the training of eligible people for military service. The decree also announced a military conscription for later in the spring.<sup>468</sup>

In July 1992, as was the case in all other former Soviet republics except the Baltics, Georgia inherited a portion of the Soviet military units stationed there. In Georgia, the major combat formation was the 10<sup>th</sup> Soviet Division (“Akhalsikhe Division”), which had some 108 tanks and considerable artillery.<sup>469</sup> Once both sides were heavily armed it was not long before

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>467</sup> Nodia, “Causes and Visions of the Conflict in Abkhazia”, 34.

<sup>468</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, 96.

<sup>469</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 153. This is also confirmed by then-Georgian Minister of Defense (and former National Guard Commander) Tengiz Kitovani, who said in an interview later that his personal relationship with Russian Defense Minister Grachev was responsible for the decision of the latter to give Georgia “the 108 tanks of the Akhalsikhe Division” (Interview with former Defense Minister Tengiz Kitovani by Armaz Sanablidze: “They’re Spreading Rumors About Me; At Least They Remember Me”, US Foreign Broadcast Information Service, internet resource at: [http://data.synthesis.ie/site\\_media/trec/FBIS/FBIS4-46714.txt](http://data.synthesis.ie/site_media/trec/FBIS/FBIS4-46714.txt), accessed 26 April 2013). Kitovani’s assertion that his relationship with Grachev was the reason for the decision is dubious: turning over the bulk of Soviet equipment to the Ministry of Defense of the former Soviet republic where it was located was the norm at this time.

violence ensued. Once again, the intra-Georgian struggle between the “Zviadist” supporters of Gamsakhurdia and the new State Council headed by Shevardnadze was the catalyst. On 9 July 1992 “Zviadists” attacked the car of Georgia’s Vice Premier Alexandr Kavsadze in Mingrelia (Western Georgia), kidnapping him. Shevardnadze went to Mingrelia on 23 July to secure his release, leaving a group of high-ranking officials from his government there to continue negotiations, while Shevardnadze himself returned to Tbilisi. On 11 August Zviadists attacked this delegation, kidnapping them and taking them to the Gali District of Abkhazia, then inhabited almost exclusively by ethnic Georgians. The previous night several trains had been robbed by Zviadists and Abkhaz bandits operating together.

The increasing lawlessness in Western Georgia and the apparent unwillingness of Abkhazian authorities to end support for it within Abkhazia brought Shevardnadze to a fateful decision. On the night of 13-14 August a railway bridge across the Inguri River was destroyed, leaving only a road bridge intact linking Sukhumi with the Georgian coastal towns of Poti and Batumi. After apparently discussing the situation with Abkhazian leader Ardzinba and announcing the plan for the operation on Georgian television,<sup>470</sup> Shevardnadze instructed the Georgian National Guard under Kitovani to free the hostages and guard the roads and railroad in southwestern Abkhazia. On 14 August Kitovani crossed the Inguri River with 3000 men. Ardzinba immediately gave an address on Abkhazian television and radio calling for a “patriotic war” against the “enemy”, which constituted “a hostile state”.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Nodia, “Causes and Visions of the Conflict in Abkhazia”, 36. Nodia concludes that it is impossible to prove conclusively whether Shevardnadze and Ardzinba actually discussed the pending operation, but Shevardnadze’s announcement of it on television the night prior to it beginning implies that at a minimum the Abkhazian side was intended to be informed in advance of the operation’s objectives.

<sup>471</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, 118. Chervonnaya, who takes a pro-Georgian stance on the war, claims that Shevardnadze and Ardzinba discussed the deployment of Georgian forces to Abkhazia and that joint operations between Georgian units and Abkhazian police were discussed. Abkhazian sources generally reject this claim.

The stage for large-scale violent conflict and separatism in Abkhazia was now set. The institutionalized identity-division between Abkhazians and Georgians, strong in all areas - ethno-linguistic, historical-symbolic, and regional – had combined with the demise of the Soviet Union to create a critical juncture that resulted in large-scale mobilization around this identity-division and rapid escalation of the Abkhazian-Georgia conflict. Ethno-linguistic content was apparent in events such as the ethnically-motivated firings of officials in Abkhazia, the collapse of the power-sharing agreement and the ethnically-charged rhetoric in the press and in intellectual circles. Historical-symbolic content was reflected in the ‘wars of history’ and the revival of debunked theories “proving” the Abkhazians to be interlopers on Georgian land. Finally, regional content was expressed most vividly through the institution of political autonomy granted to Abkhazia in the Soviet period. This enabled the “war of laws” between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, and was also reflected in the Georgian law excluding regional parties from competing in the 1990 parliamentary elections.

All stages of the escalatory process are apparent in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Discriminatory and eventually violent rhetoric, discriminatory laws and legal battles, the formation of non-state armed groups, and large-scale clashes all marked this conflict between its modern onset in 1989 and the peak of escalation in 1992. Whether a successful violent separatist movement was the final result would turn in large part in how the outside world dealt with the intensifying violence in the summer of 1992. In an example of how difficult it would be to prevent war, the Russian newspaper *Pravda* printed a saying widespread among Abkhazians later that year: “The Georgians can live here no longer; in Abkhazia they can only die”.<sup>472</sup>

*Analyzing and Explaining Escalation: Ajaria*

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid, 43. Chervonnaya quotes this line from the 19 December 1992 issue of *Pravda*.

If Abkhazia in many ways represents an “ideal case” of a high level of institutionalized identity-division, Ajaria in many ways represents the opposite. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, the low overall level of institutionalized identity division between Georgians and Ajarians at the end of the Soviet period, especially when compared to the often violent resistance shown by Ajarians toward their inclusion in Georgia in the 1918-1921 period, leads us to expect a lower level of mobilization and escalation here than occurred in Abkhazia. The analysis of Soviet policies according to the operationalized definition of institutionalized identity-division suggests that what mobilization Ajaria does experience will revolve around three issues: the composition of the Ajarian leadership, the economic differences between Ajaria and the rest of Georgia, and the institution of Ajarian autonomy. Since the latter two of these factors serve to construct the regional identity, we should expect the conflict between Georgia and Ajaria to have a high regional content.

Perhaps benefiting from hindsight, analyst after analyst characterizes the relationship between Ajaria and Georgia as stable in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period. Georgian scholar Zurab Davitashvili remarked that there was no separatist movement in Ajaria “because Ajarians are *now* Georgians (emphasis added)”; Davitashvili concludes that the power struggle between Batumi and Tbilisi is therefore best characterized as regionalism instead of separatism.<sup>473</sup> Former Georgian Ambassador to the U.S. Temuri Yakobashvili agrees with this characterization, describing Ajaria as a case of “regionalism or regional separatism”, which he implied was less dangerous than ethnic separatism.<sup>474</sup> Nodia says the conflict between Batumi and Tbilisi emerged gradually throughout the 1990s due to an “administrative” dispute over the

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<sup>473</sup> Davitashvili, interview with the author, 8 May 2012.

<sup>474</sup> Temuri Yakobashvili, former Georgian Minister for Reintegration and Ambassador to the US, interview with the author, 8 February 2012.

division of power and resources.<sup>475</sup> Finally, Anchabadze notes that Ajaria was one of several potential conflicts in Georgia, but it differed from the others in that the conflict was between elites in Batumi and Tbilisi, and was not a “people’s war” as the others were.

But there were attempts to rally people by several groups of elites in the critical juncture of the impending Soviet collapse. Among the first of these attempted to use religion as a foundation for mobilization and escalation. As he did with other minority groups in Georgia, Gamsakhurdia “did his best to inflame the situation, telling Ajarians provocatively that as Muslims they were not proper Georgians”.<sup>476</sup> Nodia says that the Georgian nationalist movement expressed concern over the role of Islam in Ajaria and pushed for an Orthodox religious revival there. Even among Georgian nationalists, however, the religious issue in Ajaria was perceived as “problematic” only in general terms, and not as a reaction to anything actually happening in Ajaria.<sup>477</sup> In response to the actions of Georgian nationalists, local and some foreign Islamic leaders attempted to rally the Ajarian population around their long-suppressed Islamic identity.

Rather than mobilizing around their religion, many Ajarians simply ignored these attempts at mobilization. Georgian scholars contend that the attempt to introduce political Islam in Ajaria and turn the region in a “Muslim direction” failed because the foundation for this turn was lacking within Ajarian society.<sup>478</sup> Indeed, Ajarian scholar Giorgi Masalkin argues that in the post-Soviet period Ajarians have striven to be “the best Georgians” and “the best Christians” because they do not want to be labeled “Turks”.<sup>479</sup> Pelkmans agrees, writing that “paradoxically, post-Soviet ‘religious freedom’ led to a further marginalization of Islam in Ajaria.

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<sup>475</sup> Nodia, interview with the author, 10 May 2012.

<sup>476</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 146.

<sup>477</sup> Nodia, interview with the author, 10 May 2012.

<sup>478</sup> Nodar Mgeladze, interview with the author, 30 June, 2012, Batumi, Georgia.

<sup>479</sup> Giorgi Masalkin, interview with the author, 30 June 2012, Batumi, Georgia.



Increased expectations for what being a Muslim entailed ran counter to increased demands for displaying loyalty to the Georgian nation".<sup>480</sup> This would help explain why conversion from Islam to Orthodoxy is accelerating in Ajaria, especially among the younger generation.<sup>481</sup> So the critical juncture of the Soviet collapse led to several attempts to mobilize Ajarians around their religious identity, but Ajarians showed little interest in being mobilized. This is an enormous change from only 70 years before, when the religious identity had been strong enough for Ajarians to kill and be killed by Georgians and Russians in an effort to prevent their inclusion in a Christian (and later atheist) state.

While the effort to mobilize Ajarians around their religion failed, efforts to mobilize around the regional Ajarian identity were somewhat more successful. Ajarians expressed their political and regional difference from the rest of Georgia as early as the October 1990 parliamentary elections. While Gamsakhurdia's Round Table-Free Georgia swept the parliament in Tbilisi, they were soundly defeated by the Communists, 56% to 24%, in the elections for the parliament of the Ajarian ASSR.<sup>482</sup> Gamsakhurdia responded by threatening to revoke Ajaria's autonomy, and in answer Ajarians took to the streets in protest, many carrying Soviet banners and singing Soviet anthems.<sup>483</sup> The next bout of unrest took place in April 1991, and it began with a feud between elites. First, a group of protestors from rural Ajaria occupied the Council of Ministers building in Batumi and attempted to unseat Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze for being too soft toward Tbilisi. Later that month, Gamsakhurdia ally Nodar Imnadze burst into the parliament building in Batumi, shooting and wounding Abashidze before being killed by Abashidze's bodyguards.<sup>484</sup> On 22 April protest spread among the general public, and pro-

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<sup>480</sup> Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 139.

<sup>481</sup> Sanikidze and Walker, p. 12.

<sup>482</sup> Zuercher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 202.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid*, 203.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid*, 203.

Abashidze protestors stormed the central administrative buildings in Batumi, demanding the immediate resignation of several officials seen as too close to Tbilisi.<sup>485</sup>

When Gamsakhurdia was deposed in January, Abashidze responded by closing Ajaria's borders with the rest of Georgia, establishing his own ruling party, taking control over the Customs Division, the Batumi Seaport and other strategic objects, creating his own semi-official units and taking control of the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade of Georgian Defense Ministry.<sup>486</sup> Nodia argues that these actions helped bolster Abashidze's legitimacy among Ajarians, since it effectively prevented groups like the *Mkhedrioni* from entering Ajaria and preying upon its population. Throughout this period, however, Abashidze was careful to stress that secession from Georgia was not an option for Ajaria, since "Ajaria is historically a part of Georgia, and there has never been any instance in history where Ajaria has created problems for its motherland".<sup>487</sup>

Ajaria, then, represents a case of low mobilization and only moderate escalation of conflict. Attempts to mobilize the population along religious grounds failed, because religion had been thoroughly delegitimized as an identity by 70 years of Soviet rule in Ajaria. Efforts to leverage Ajaria's regional identity were more successful, but since this identity-division did not overlap with ethno-linguistic and historical-symbolic divisions (in fact these cut across the regional division), mobilization of this division did not lead to significant escalation. What escalation there was resulted in conflict that usually remained confined within political institutions and played out among political elites. While there was discriminatory rhetoric, especially from the Georgian side, and while there were threats to revoke Ajaria's autonomy, the "war of laws" that occurred between Abkhazia and Georgia never happened in Ajaria. What violence there was occurred almost exclusively among elites, and even this was infrequent.

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<sup>485</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid, 206.

When the Georgian state essentially collapsed in early 1992, Abashidze responded not by taking the opportunity to separate from Georgia but by increasing his control over political and security institutions while proclaiming Ajaria's loyalty to Georgia. In his own words, "Just as one part of the body is connected to the rest, we are attached to Georgia and until it gets its problem solved, we are not going to be able to create what we want."<sup>488</sup> In an ironic twist, the only functioning Georgian state in the first several months of 1992 was centered in Batumi, not Tbilisi.

### *Moldova and Transnistria*

If Abkhazia and Ajaria in many ways represent ideal types of institutionalized identity division and the resulting processes of mobilization and escalation, Moldova and Estonia represent median cases: while both had the potential for mobilization around institutionalized identity divisions and escalation of conflict, there was greater room for agency and contingency in these cases than in the Georgian cases. This fact and the similarities between the Moldovan and Estonian cases discussed earlier promise that comparing these cases to one another has the potential for generating significant insights into the processes discussed in this dissertation. Recall from the beginning of this chapter that the analytical framework used here predicts a higher ethno-linguistic content in the conflict between Estonians and Russian-speakers than between Bessarabians and Transnistrians, but a higher historical-symbolic content in the conflict between Bessarabians and Transnistrians. Although the levels of division in regional identity are similar, we would expect to see a slightly higher level of mobilization of regional identities in the Moldovan case due to Transnistria's former autonomous status and the fact that Transnistria and Bessarabia did not share a history of being joined in a common state prior to 1940.

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<sup>488</sup> Mike Trickey, "A Republic by the Sea Remains Lone Peaceful Fiefdom", *The Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec), 10 March 1995, B1.

As in several other Soviet Union Republics at the time, the beginning of *glasnost'* and *perestroika* corresponded with the founding of a Popular Front in Moldova. This original Moldovan national organization was relatively moderate in character and had representation from the Russian, Bulgarian and Gagauz populations of the MSSR. In an indication of the attempt to maintain an inclusive atmosphere and downplay the ethnic and nationalist identities mobilized in this organization, its founders named it the "Popular Front of Moldova" rather than the "Moldovan Popular Front" when it was founded in May 1989. However, as the power of the Soviet center waned, the Front began espousing more radical objectives. Reflecting its changed character, the organization changed its name to the Moldovan Popular Front (MPF) and began calling for union with Romania.<sup>489</sup> The minority representatives who had been members of the Front left it and many joined the Slavic organization *Edintsvo* ("Unity"), set up with the assistance of the Soviet center to resist the newly nationalist MPF. How an initially moderate nationalist group - reflecting the moderate level of division in ethno-linguistic identities in Moldova - radicalized and thus helped set off an escalatory spiral of conflict in Moldova is a key subject in the remainder of this section of the chapter.

#### *Analyzing and Explaining Escalation*

As in the Georgian cases, this section of the chapter traces the process of escalation by using the five factors noted previously: the prevalence of discriminatory rhetoric in the public discourse; the existence of discriminatory laws or legal battles between groups; the prevalence of violent rhetoric in the public discourse; the existence of non-state armed groups; and violent clashes between groups. The decision of the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev to allow greater freedom of expression resulted - predictably, given the divided identities within Moldova at the time - in an increase in discriminatory and inflammatory rhetoric. On the

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<sup>489</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 128.

Moldovan side, this was especially pronounced within the ranks of the “cultural intelligentsia”, which had gradually Romanized itself in the late Soviet period. Poets, writers and other intellectuals began clamoring for the abandonment of the Cyrillic alphabet, the rejection of Soviet Moldovan state symbols, and even for unification of Moldova with Romania.<sup>490</sup> Rather than strongly ethnic content, much of the rhetoric in late Soviet Moldova revolved around the state’s geopolitical and historical identity, exhibiting a strong anti-Soviet character and a less obvious but still considerable anti-Russian character. In April 1991 *The Economist* noted that “Moldavia’s politicians are moving as fast as they can to divest themselves of all things Russian. The old Bessarabian part of Moldavia is fast becoming a de facto little Romania and Russian-speakers, the ‘uninvited guests’ as officials call them, are being shown the door”.<sup>491</sup> One Moldovan government official remarked that many of the leaders of the national movement were so “enthusiastic about escaping from the USSR” that they failed to think through the consequences of speaking publicly of unification with Romania.<sup>492</sup>

If the leaders of the Moldovan national movement concerned themselves largely with revisiting the historical injustices visited on Moldovans by the Soviet government such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, agitating for changing the symbols of the MSSR, and mooted unification with Romania, their followers were focused on more contemporary issues. In an example of the extent to which rhetoric about unification with Romania resonated solely among the intelligentsia, a survey taken in 1990 showed that only 3.9% of ethnic Moldovans favored unification with Romania.<sup>493</sup> Popular chauvinism against minorities, however, was more common. Although the leadership of the Popular Front, Moldova’s nascent nationalist

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<sup>490</sup> Nantoi, interview with the author, 9 July 2012.

<sup>491</sup> “The Bessarabians”, *The Economist*, 6 April 1991, 49. Quoted in Jeffrey Chinn, “The Politics of Language in Moldova”, *Demokratizatsiia* (1994): 309-315.

<sup>492</sup> Moldovan government official, name withheld by request, interview with the author, 9 July 2012.

<sup>493</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 147.

movement, attempted to moderate its rhetoric, its followers could often be seen with signs and banners directed at Moldova's Slavic population, reading "Suitcase-Train Station-Home".<sup>494</sup>

Other rhetoric blamed the economic woes of Moldova on minorities: "If there aren't enough apartments to go around, the Jews and Ukrainians should leave to make room for Moldovans; if you don't have a good job, once the Jews and Russians leave, you'll have a good job".<sup>495</sup>

While Moldovan political leaders did not create this groundswell of discriminatory rhetoric and opinion, which resulted instead from the divided identities that were a legacy of the Soviet period, they were willing to use it to further the achievement of their own objectives. Civil Society organizations such as the Mateevich Club, named after Moldovan poet Alexei Mateevich, and originally inclusive in their membership and moderate in their demands, began pushing for more radical objectives by early 1989. In February of that year activists from the Mateevich Club and the newly-renamed and more radical Moldovan Popular Front demonstrated for making Moldovan with the Latin alphabet the official language of the republic and imposing a limit on Russian immigration.<sup>496</sup> Transnistrian civic leader and former official of the *de facto* government Alexander Porzhan was an early member of the Mateevich Club, which at the time stood for what he called "genuine Moldovan" language, culture and traditions. By 1989 Porzhan says that the club had changed to a true nationalist movement with strong anti-Russian, anti-Ukrainian and anti-Jewish elements, prompting him to leave.<sup>497</sup>

In August of that year the rhetoric escalated once again, when the Front called a "Grand National Assembly" outside the Supreme Soviet (parliament) building in Chisinau. Here, some

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<sup>494</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 123.

<sup>495</sup> Alexander Porzhan, former Transnistrian representative to the Joint Control Commission, interview with the author, 12 July 2012.

<sup>496</sup> Steve Goldstein, "Soviet Nationalism Spreads to Moldavia", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 February 1989, internet resource at [http://articles.philly.com/1989-02-14/news/26153925\\_1\\_moldavian-popular-front-moldavian-language-moldavian-soviet-socialist-republic](http://articles.philly.com/1989-02-14/news/26153925_1_moldavian-popular-front-moldavian-language-moldavian-soviet-socialist-republic), accessed 29 April 2013.

<sup>497</sup> Porzhan, interview with the author, 12 July 2012.

500,000 people waved Romanian flags and placards in Latin script while speakers denounced the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and the decline in Moldovan culture. Speakers also pressed for full sovereignty and the withdrawal of Soviet troops, calling the Soviet annexation of Moldova illegal.<sup>498</sup> Ironically, this gathering saw one of a number of interactions between the national movement in Moldova and those in the Baltics: a speaker from Latvia gave perhaps the most memorable speech at the Assembly, beginning his address with an apology for speaking in Russian, “the language of the occupiers”.<sup>499</sup> This prompted the Chisinau correspondent for *Krasnaia Zvezda* (“Red Star”) newspaper to begin one of his reports by musing about whether Moldova was following “the Baltic scenario”.<sup>500</sup>

The combination of popular chauvinism among Moldovans and Pan-Romanian nationalism among the Moldovan cultural intelligentsia had a potent effect in Transnistria, steeped in Soviet ideology and scene of some of the worst atrocities of the Second World War Romanian occupation. Rhetoric from the Moldovan side was therefore matched by Transnistrians and their political leaders. Media in Transnistria and Russia repeated and amplified the nationalist and discriminatory rhetoric coming from Chisinau, creating fear of Romanization among Transnistria’s Slavic-majority population. King says of Transnistria, “The primary loyalty of individuals in the region was not to Russia – even though most spoke Russian and had ties to the Russian republic – but to the Soviet Union”.<sup>501</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union therefore was seen as an unmitigated disaster in Transnistria, since it signaled the end of the state that had created and defended their identity, and raised the specter of being involuntarily incorporated into a state they had been taught to hate and fear for some 65 years.

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<sup>498</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 130.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov played upon these fears and skillfully used the rhetoric of Soviet history, warning of the dangers of “Romanian nationalism and fascism”.<sup>502</sup> Still, the escalating conflict retained a greater degree of ideological and historical-symbolic content than pure ethnic enmity. In the words of Kaufman, “Moldovans and Russians did not hate each other; they only feared governments dominated by the other.”<sup>503</sup>

The trajectories of organizations such as the Mateevich Club and the Moldovan Popular Front offer excellent examples of how the more moderate Bessarabian identity was weakened by the increasing radicalism of the Pan-Romanian and Eurasianist identities. The initial goals of these civil society organizations revolved around redressing perceived inequities of Soviet rule, from increasing Moldovan-language educational opportunities and upward-mobility for Moldovan speakers, to addressing previously-forbidden themes in Bessarabian history.<sup>504</sup> Reflecting the moderation of these initial goals, both the Front and the Mateevich Club were originally multi-national in their membership. However, these and other civic organizations eventually pursued more exclusively nationalist agendas. At its second congress in June 1990 the MPF declared itself opposed to Mircea Snegur’s leadership, accusing him of moving too slowly in pulling Moldova out of the USSR and restoring order in Gagauzia and Transnistria. At its third congress in February 1992 it renamed itself the Christian Democratic Popular Front and overly advocated union with Romania in its statutes.<sup>505</sup> As these more radical expressions of identity took place within Moldovan society, civil society organizations split largely along ethnic and regional grounds. Transnistrian Russian-speakers began leaving to join organizations like *Edintsvo*, while Bessarabian Moldovan-speakers remained in the now more-radical MPF and

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<sup>502</sup> Moldovan government official, name withheld by request, interview with the author, 9 July 2102.

<sup>503</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 129.

<sup>504</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 124.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid*, 153.



Mateevich Club. *Edintsvo*, in turn, became more explicitly linked with the pro-Soviet Interfront movements in the Baltics and began to more openly oppose the Moldovan government, organizing strikes at factories in the Transnistrian cities of Tiraspol, Bender and Ribnitsa.<sup>506</sup>

Political and legal developments in Moldova soon escalated tensions between Chisinau and Tiraspol and fears of Romanization among Transnistria's Slavic majority. The years 1989 and 1990 saw increasingly nationalist politicians take control of the institutions of the government of the MSSR. In July 1989 the Moldovan Supreme Soviet elected as its chairman Mircea Snegur, a former Communist Party official "newly reborn as a moderate Moldovan nationalist"; in late 1989 the Moldovan Party Chief was replaced by the more nationalist Petru Lucinschi; and in May 1990 the extreme nationalist Mircea Druc was appointed Premier of the MSSR.<sup>507</sup> Ironically, during this same period Party ideologues worried about the influence that the nationalist example of the Soviet Baltic Republics was having in Moldova. Party ideology secretary Bondarcuic warned as early as June 1988 that that "certain elements within the Moldovan Writer's Union were under the influence of Estonian nationalists".<sup>508</sup>

It did not take long for the increasing nationalism within the Moldovan government to translate into laws seen as threatening to Transnistrians. The first blow came in August 1989 when the Supreme Soviet, under pressure from the "Grand National Assembly" gathered outside its windows, passed a law making Moldovan written in Latin script the sole state language and mandating that state employees pass a written language exam within five years. The same law broadened the functions of the Moldovan Supreme Soviet vis-à-vis the Soviet center,<sup>509</sup> inspiring fear among Transnistrians, who saw the Soviet government as their primary

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>509</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 123.

defense against Romanization. Other acts soon followed: in June 1990 Moldova declared state sovereignty, thus giving republican laws primacy over all-union laws; in September 1990 the Supreme Soviet elected Snegur to the new post of President of the Republic and changed Moldova's symbols to versions of the Romanian tricolor flag and state seal; and in May 1991 the Supreme Soviet changed the name of the state from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic to the Republic of Moldova.

None of these legal acts changed anything materially for Transnistrians; all were purely symbolic. Even the requirement for state employees to pass a written test in Moldovan, which could conceivably have threatened the state jobs of Russophones, contained a clause allowing local governments to make Russian the language of government and industry in their localities if they gained the approval of the Council of Ministers. The structure of the law offered Transnistrians a way to avoid conflict by requesting such an exemption from Chisinau. Rather than request this exemption, however, Transnistrians chose to perceive the series of new laws and highly discriminatory and threatening to their Soviet Moldovan identity. Kaufman says that although "the symbolic subordination of the Russian language was galling", such laws generally did not lead to conflict elsewhere in the collapsing Soviet Union.<sup>510</sup> However, on 1 September 1990 deputies from Transnistria walked out of the Moldovan Supreme Soviet in protest of the language law and the perception that they were being slighted in the parliamentary debates leading up to it. Kaufman says that the Supreme Soviet Chairman repeatedly "failed to notice" when Transnistrian deputies attempted to gain the floor and speak.<sup>511</sup>

After leaving the Moldovan Supreme Soviet, the Transnistrian deputies formed their own legislature and proclaimed the "Transnistrian Moldovan Republic" (TMR) as a separate

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<sup>510</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid, 143.

territorial unit of the USSR. A potential compromise involved Moldova awarding political autonomy to Transnistria and the latter acknowledging that it was a constituent of the Moldovan SSR. However, when a group of Transnistrian officials met to formulate a demand for autonomy, Moldovan leader Snegur responded by sending parliamentary chairman Victor Puscasu to them not with talking points but with a threat to arrest them. Later that month Snegur had the Moldovan Supreme Soviet declare a state of emergency and “presidential rule” to allow him to more effectively suppress Transnistria’s moves towards autonomy.<sup>512</sup> These moves only increased the determination of Transnistrians to seek protection in the Soviet center. In a final irony and testament to the depth and durability of the Soviet identity within Transnistria, local leader Smirnov arranged a referendum on 1 December 1991 proposing that Transnistria separate from Moldova and proclaim itself a sovereign subject of the USSR. Despite the fact that the USSR was formally scheduled to be dissolved on 25 December, the referendum passed overwhelmingly.<sup>513</sup>

Violent rhetoric was also part of the political and social landscape in late-Soviet and early post-Soviet Moldova. The largely Soviet-created division in identities combined with the waning of Soviet power and the rise in discriminatory rhetoric and laws inflamed passions on both sides. Alexander Porzhan, former chairman of the Executive Committee of the Transnistrian city of Dubosari, describes being invited to Chisinau for a session of the Moldovan Supreme Soviet and seeing a sign in front of the Supreme Soviet building reading “The only good Gagauz is a dead Gagauz”.<sup>514</sup> When he asked a Moldovan policeman guarding the parliament

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>514</sup> The Gagauz are a Turkish-speaking Christian minority in Moldova, concentrated in the south of the country. Ironically, the conflict between Moldova and Gagauzia was settled peacefully when the Moldovan parliament awarded the region autonomy on 23 December 1994, exactly the type of arrangement that Snegur had rejected with respect to Transnistria in 1990.

building why the sign had not been removed, the policemen responded, “That’s popular democracy”.<sup>515</sup> In April 1990, violent rhetoric turned to action when a crowd outside the Supreme Soviet building attacked and beat Russophone legislators.<sup>516</sup>

From this point the conflict between Chisinau and Tiraspol escalated rather steadily. The first large-scale violence occurred in November 1990. When the region inhabited by ethnic Gagauz in southern Moldova organized its own vote on autonomy, the MPF called for volunteers to travel to the region and prevent the vote from happening. Blocked by Soviet forces from reaching the Gagauz region, the detachments turned north to the Transnistria region instead, fighting a short battle against Transnistrian volunteers near the city of Bender on 2 November 1990. On the same day Moldovan Interior Ministry troops clashed with better-armed Transnistrian volunteers blockading a bridge across the Nistru near the city of Dubosari, leaving 6 dead.<sup>517</sup>

The next period of escalation occurred after the collapse of the coup attempt in Moscow in August of 1991 and the subsequent declaration of independence by Moldova on the 27<sup>th</sup> of that month. Demonstrating the depth of the division in historical-symbolic identities in the MSSR of the time, while the Moldovan government reacted to the coup attempt by condemning it and calling on citizens to resist the return to authoritarianism, Transnistrian leader Smirnov “praised the putschists as saviors of the Soviet state and promised military assistance to support the state of emergency”.<sup>518</sup> After the collapse of the Moscow coup attempt Transnistrian authorities began to establish police, security and military forces to defend their own claim to self-rule. The nascent police and armed forces of Moldova attempted

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<sup>515</sup> Porzhan, interviews with the author, 10 and 12 July 2012.

<sup>516</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 124.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid*, 144.

<sup>518</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 191.

to assert their control over key territories claimed by Transnistria, leading to a “steady escalation throughout 1991 of armed clashes between police and militias from Chisinau and Tiraspol”.<sup>519</sup> The dissolution of the Soviet Army in Moldova (and elsewhere) in December 1991 provided an additional means of escalation of the conflict. Transnistrian leaders

“formed their own armed forces with popular militias and recruits drawn from the massive Soviet Fourteenth Army stationed largely on Moldova’s left bank. The Transnistrian forces obtained arms, either with Russian consent or by stealing them, from Fourteenth Army arms depots”.<sup>520</sup>

By February-March 1992, the situation threatened to escalate out of the control of either side. Fighting between Moldovan forces and those of Transnistria escalated, detachments of “Cossack” volunteers from Russia and Ukraine began arriving to assist the Transnistrians, and Russian 14<sup>th</sup> Army units became involved for the first time, also fighting on the side of Tiraspol and against Chisinau.<sup>521</sup>

So the escalation of conflict in Moldova demonstrated all five factors under consideration here, from discriminatory rhetoric to violent clashes between armed groups. Moldova’s experience demonstrates that divisions in other identities can incite conflict even when the level of ethnic hostility is relatively low. In contrast to more ethnically-charged conflicts such as Abkhazia, where right to territory and the demographic balance are common themes, demands made in Transnistria generally ignored these themes, instead concentrating on historical-symbolic, ideological, regional and linguistic<sup>522</sup> issues. Transnistrian demands often

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<sup>519</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, 50.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>521</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 190.

<sup>522</sup> Although this dissertation and most approaches link ethnicity with language into a single “ethno-linguistic” identity, the Transnistrian conflict shows that linguistic identities can clash without inspiring ethnic hatred. While the competition between the Moldovan and Russian languages was highly contentious, the overall level of ethnic enmity between Moldovans and Russians was relatively low. One reason that ethnicity and language seem to be “de-linked” in this conflict is the large percentage of ethnic Ukrainians and other, smaller groups in Transnistria (and elsewhere in Moldova) who are Russian-speakers but not ethnically Russian.

combined two or more of these themes. An example of this is contained in a 1989 flyer announcing a strike, which demanded “allowing citizens to determine for themselves their language of communication, and the route of economic development of their region”.<sup>523</sup>

Almost all analysts of the Transnistria conflict agree that ethnic enmity was not a significant factor in its outbreak and played little role in how it was fought. Kolsto and his co-authors note that there was no clear ethnic divide among either fighters or leaders in the conflict. Members of all three major ethnic groups – Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians – participated on both sides. The police commissioner in Bendery, who remained loyal to Chisinau, was an ethnic Russian, while both the Defense Minister and Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Transnistria were ethnic Moldovans.<sup>524</sup> Hill observes that while ethnic appeals were made by both sides “the fighting in the Transnistrian Conflict was based more on territorial allegiance than ethnicity, and produced no ethnic or nationally-based slaughters”.<sup>525</sup> It also produced no ethnic cleansing on either side. Williams characterizes the cleavages between Moldova and Transnistria as “ideological, economic and, to a lesser extent, ethnic”.<sup>526</sup> Several analysts note the fear among Transnistrians of the potential for an independent Moldova to choose to unify with Romania, a fear which has predominantly ideological and historical foundations. Even Kaufman, the only analyst who argues that the conflict was “largely an ethnic conflict”,<sup>527</sup> concedes that “while feelings were running high” in the prelude to conflict, “ethnic hostility was relatively low”.<sup>528</sup> In the end, even Kaufman concedes that the war in Transnistria

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<sup>523</sup> This flyer and several others were given to me by Alexander Porzhan.

<sup>524</sup> Pal Kolsto, Andrei Edemsky and Natalya Kalashnikova, “The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 45:6, (1993), 975.

<sup>525</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, 53.

<sup>526</sup> Williams, “Conflict Resolution after the Cold War: the Case of Moldova”, 74.

<sup>527</sup> Stuart J. Kaufman, “Spiraling to Ethnic War: Elites, Masses and Moscow in Moldova’s Civil War”, *International Security* 21:2 (Autumn, 1996), 119.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid*, 124.

combined an ethno-nationalist conflict with a historical difference (past association with Romania vs. Russia) and an ideological divide (pro-communists vs. anti-communists).<sup>529</sup>

Moldovan and Transnistrian scholars and leaders also do not classify the conflict as ethnically-motivated. Numerous Moldovan officials with whom I met downplayed the role of ethnicity in the conflict, and noted that even today there are significantly more daily “cross-border” contacts between Moldovans and Transnistrians than there are between the sides in other post-Soviet conflicts, especially those in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. This view is largely shared by Transnistrians. Nina Shtanski, a scholar and current Foreign Minister of the *de facto* Transnistrian government, wrote in 2009 that “it is impossible to classify the identity formed in Transnistria as ethnic, and impossible to identify a conflict of two or more ethnic identities in the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict”.<sup>530</sup>

As we shall see, one of the key differences between Moldova and Estonia was the fact that in the former, the radicalization of the Popular Front and its capture of the legislature put minority groups in conflict with their government rather than simply with individual nationalist groups,<sup>531</sup> as was the case in Estonia. Another key difference is the fact that although the ethno-linguistic identity-division was higher in Estonia than in Moldova, the overall amount of escalation of the conflict was lower. How these differences emerged and what effects they had are explored in the next section of this chapter.

### *Estonia and its Russian-Speakers*

Vetik lists three major sources of conflict in late Soviet Estonia. The first is the language conflict between ethnic Estonians and the Russian-speaking minority, and this is the conflict that

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>530</sup> Nina Shtanski. Formation of a “new” post-soviet identity amidst ethnopolitical conflict: the case of Transdnistria”, in *Moldova-Transnistria: Working Together for a Prosperous Future: Social Aspects* (Chisinau, Moldova: Cu Drag Publishing House, 2009), 210.

<sup>531</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 147.

the analysis of the previous chapter predicted would dominate the conflict structure in Estonia due the high level of division in ethno-linguistic identities. The next two sources of conflict that Vetik lists can be attributed to the development of a division in regional identities, and these are the center-periphery conflict and the conflict over the development of a market economy.<sup>532</sup> As discussed, while the regional identity division is assessed as slightly higher in Moldova than in Estonia, this is primarily due to the legacy of Transnistria's autonomous status between 1924 and 1940. Otherwise, the level of regional identity-division in Moldova and Estonia is similarly high. Thus we should expect to see a high level of mobilization around ethnic identities and a moderately high level of mobilization around regional identities in Estonia.

The foundation for ethnic mobilization appeared strong in the late Soviet period. A July 1991 survey, for instance, showed that Estonia had the worst inter-ethnic relations of the three Baltic Soviet Republics. In Estonia, 37% of respondents said inter-ethnic relations were very poor or poor while 16% said very good or good (46% were uncommitted); corresponding figures in Latvia were 34% and 29% respectively, and in Lithuania they were 14% and 41% respectively.<sup>533</sup> This statistic is graphically illustrated by a conversation between Lieven and Tallinn resident Eugenie Loov in 1990, when the latter opined, "The greatest mistake of the leaders of our independence movement was not to make a substantial appeal to the Russians in Estonia at the very beginning. The reason they did not do this is because they hate them".<sup>534</sup> This echoes Lieven's observation of normally reserved Estonians "twitching and shaking with repressed physical hatred"<sup>535</sup> when discussing the Russians in their midst. Anecdotal evidence from former U.S. diplomat William Hill supports this view, as well: Hill remarked that he believes

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<sup>532</sup> Raivo Vetik, "Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation in Post-Communist Estonia, *Journal of Peace Research* 30:3 (1993), 274.

<sup>533</sup> Vetik, "Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation in Post-Communist Estonia, 272.

<sup>534</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Road to Independence*, 304.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid*, 185-186.



the anti-Russian feeling in Estonia from the 1970s until now is stronger than anywhere else in the former Soviet Union.<sup>536</sup>

### *Analyzing and Explaining Escalation*

The substantial amount of ethnic enmity in late-Soviet Estonia did not express itself in large-scale discriminatory and inflammatory rhetoric. This is curious, since both empirical evidence and the analytical framework used in this dissertation point to a higher level ethno-linguistic content and thus a greater danger of mobilization along this identity boundary in the Estonian-Russian conflict than in the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict. In other words, the conflict between Estonia and its Russian minority was more purely ethno-linguistic in nature than was the conflict between Moldova and Transnistria, which had higher levels of historical-symbolic and regional content. Nevertheless, while there was significant mobilization around the language issue in Estonia, this remained somewhat “de-coupled” from the ethnic issue and therefore did not result in a high level of conflict escalation. As with previous sections of this chapter, this section analyzes the level of conflict escalation by examining five factors: the prevalence of discriminatory rhetoric in the public discourse; the existence of discriminatory laws or legal battles between groups; the prevalence of violent rhetoric in the public discourse; the existence of non-state armed groups; and violent clashes between groups.

What rhetoric there was in Estonia tended to be focused on Russian imperialism and the illegitimate nature of the Soviet annexation of Estonia rather than directed personally at members of Estonia’s Russian minority. Estonian nationalist politicians, for example, characterized Russians as “inherently imperialist” and the Russian population in Estonia as a “colonist population” that was “effectively a military garrison in civilian clothes”,<sup>537</sup> but stopped

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<sup>536</sup> William H. Hill, former Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, interview with the author, 9 February 2012.

<sup>537</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Road to Independence*, 306.

short of advocating their outright expulsion from Estonia. When there was expulsionist rhetoric it tended to be veiled. Estonia's nationalist Fatherland Party adopted the slogan "cleaning house", represented by an election poster depicting a man with a broom. While Estonians took this symbolism as a reference to the corruption of the Soviet regime, Estonia's Russians tended to assume it referred to them.<sup>538</sup>

However, if the level of discriminatory rhetoric aimed at Estonia's Russian minority was relatively low, the level of discriminatory laws and policies was high. As in Moldova, laws in Estonia initially concerned the symbols of the state and the relationship of Estonia with the Soviet center: Estonia declared sovereignty on 16 November 1988, announcing that Estonian laws now took precedence over Soviet ones. In response, local councils in the Russian-dominated northeast announced that they would no longer observe Estonian laws that violated the Soviet constitution.<sup>539</sup> The next step came on 7 August 1990, when the Supreme Soviet re-adopted the traditional Estonian flag. It was not long before Estonian legislation directly threatened the legal status of the Soviet-era Russian immigrant population. On 28 June 1992 Estonian voters approved a new constitution based upon the constitution of 1922 and a new citizenship law withholding automatic Estonian citizenship from Russians who had immigrated during the Soviet period. The law also prohibited them from voting in national elections, thereby eliminating most pro-Russian deputies from the Estonian parliament.<sup>540</sup> These laws, condemned by Russian President Yeltsin as "ethnic cleansing", and criticized by Western states and international organizations, led the political leadership of the Russian population in Estonia to organize a series of referenda on territorial autonomy for the northeast in the summer of 1993. The Estonian government declared these referenda illegal on the grounds that Estonia

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<sup>538</sup> Ibid, 285.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid, 283.

was a unitary state, but local leaders pressed ahead with the referenda, setting the stage for a showdown.

What violent rhetoric there was in Estonia generally revolved around preparation for these referenda, which represented the time of greatest danger for the outbreak of violent separatism in Estonia. The Los Angeles Times described the situation in Narva this way:

“It is unclear whether a vote for autonomy will bring the rebellious city concessions from the Estonian government or move Narva closer to ethnic violence. In the capital, Tallinn, 120 miles west of Narva, the Estonian government has declared the referendum unconstitutional. In discussions in Parliament last week, lawmakers made it clear that they view the referendums... as proof that the ethnic Russian residents are not loyal to Estonia. ‘Riot police and maybe even regular army troops may be sent to Narva’ if the referendum is held, warned Tiit Made, head of the Parliament’s foreign relations committee”.<sup>541</sup>

Raivo Murd, the ethnic Estonian mayor of Narva at the time, describes the level of threat then as very high, including personal threats against him and his family. After phone calls threatening attacks on himself and his home, he installed police protection there.<sup>542</sup> There were also reports that armed groups of factory workers were being formed and that groups of volunteers or “Cossacks” from Russia were preparing to enter Estonia and defend its ethnic Russian population. Every official and former official to whom I spoke in northeastern Estonia – both Estonian and Russian – mentioned these groups and their potential to destabilize the situation. Despite the tension and occasional martial rhetoric from both sides, however, each was careful to stress that it would not initiate violence. Although Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar claimed that by going through with the referendum there, “the Narva city council has decided they want to have a war”, Laar declared that “we will not allow ourselves to be provoked”. Ethnic Russian

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<sup>541</sup> Sonni Efron, “Russia, Estonia Keep Eye on City’s Autonomy Vote”, *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1993, 4.

<sup>542</sup> Raivo Murd, former Mayor of the City of Narva, interview with the author, 19 July 2012.

leader Vladimir Chuikin responded that “It is very easy to get weapons if we need them. But we will never be the first to use those weapons.”<sup>543</sup>

In the event, armed groups never took action in Estonia, either because they weren’t as large and capable as thought or because Estonians and Russians managed to keep escalation below the threshold at which such groups resort to violence. When the organizers of the referenda in northeastern Estonia announced that 97% of voters had supported autonomy and that turnout was 53% in Narva and 61.4% in Sillamäe, the government in Tallinn accused local authorities of padding turnout figures, which it claimed were only 42%. Tallinn thus claimed that the results of the referenda were invalid (50% was the required turnout) and threw them out. Although reserving the right to appeal to the International Court in The Hague, the Russian leaders in the northeast abided by Tallinn’s decision to invalidate the referenda results.<sup>544</sup> Unlike in Georgia and Moldova, the war of laws in Estonia neither escalated nor spilled out of its institutional boundaries into the street.

While the question of whether or not there were significant groups of armed factory workers in late Soviet Estonia is an open one,<sup>545</sup> what is clear is that the Soviet government organized factory workers to resist Estonia’s drive for independence. The plan was to mobilize Russian-speaking workers in “All-Union” factories, and Communist officials were active on factory floors attempting to rouse workers. The United Council of Work Collectives (OSTK) was created to support this effort, with the objective being make the factories “Soviet-Russian

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<sup>543</sup> “Referendum Latest Sign of Estonia’s Rising Ethnic Tension”, *The Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec), 19 July 1993, A7.

<sup>544</sup> David Hearst, “Estonia Rejects Local Poll Result”, *The Guardian*, 19 July 1993, 8.

<sup>545</sup> I asked numerous people with experience in northeast Estonia, both Russians and Estonians, if these armed groups were a reality, and although many of them claimed to have heard rumors of their formation, none had actually seen them in action. The following are the names and positions of those with whom I discussed this subject: Ants Liimets, Narva City Secretary; Raivo Murd, former Narva Mayor; Eldar Efendijev, Estonian parliamentarian from Narva; Indrek Tarand, former Estonian government special representative to the northeast; and Vladimir Chiukin, former Chairman of the Narva City Council and political leader of the ethnic Russian minority.

fortress islands in the Estonian sea”.<sup>546</sup> Whether they were armed or not, these groups clearly had the potential to further destabilize an already tense situation in northeastern Estonia.

Part of the reason this did not happen might have as much to do with luck and timing as with anything else. Eldar Efendijev, former director of the Narva City Museum and currently a deputy to the Estonian parliament, says that many in the leadership of the Russian minority saw Transnistria as a model in early 1992 and hoped to create a similar situation in northeastern Estonia. However, when Transnistria exploded into violence that summer, the “workers combat units” were sent there to fight on the side of their ethnic kin, leaving Estonia’s Russian minority without armed groups to advance its interests.<sup>547</sup>

There were a small number of violent incidents in Estonia, but these did not escalate into large scale violence. On 15 May 1990 Soviet loyalist Mikhail Lysenko led a demonstration in front of the Estonian Supreme Soviet building. After the ethnic Russian police guarding the building allowed the crowd into the courtyard, the Estonian government appealed over the radio for Estonians to protect the building from the mainly-Russian demonstrators. When a large group of Estonians showed up, the outnumbered demonstrators dispersed.<sup>548</sup> Another incident occurred on 27 July 1992 and involved significantly more violence. When Estonian troops attempted to recover a former Soviet Navy building that had been sold by the Russian Navy to a “private company” called Fonin – largely believed to be a front for Russian military interests in Estonia – Russian marines drove the Estonian troops out.<sup>549</sup> These incidents,

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<sup>546</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Road to Independence*, 193.

<sup>547</sup> Eldar Efendijev, Representative from Narva to the Parliament of Estonia, interview with the author, 18 July 2012. There is a level of independent corroboration for this claim. The book *Dubosari 1992*, which chronicles the battle for that Transnistrian city during the war, lists two “Non-Local Defenders of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic” from Estonia who were killed in the fighting for Dubosari: Alexander Valentinovich Artemev of Narva, and Oleg Nikolaevich Dushenko of Tallinn (p. 398).

<sup>548</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Road to Independence*, 193.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid*, 197-198.

however, remained isolated and did not cause a spiral of violence, as similar incidents did in Moldova and other post-Soviet republics. As David Laitin has remarked, “In Estonia... there seems to be an implicit compact on both sides of the ethnic divide to define acts of violence as random or caused by factors other than ethnic ones”.<sup>550</sup>

In Estonia then, despite the intensity of the ethno-linguistic division in identity, there was a lower level of discriminatory rhetoric than in Moldova. However, the level of legal discrimination against the minority population was high, even to the point of denying citizenship to most of Estonia’s Russian-speaking population. While these laws were condemned by local Russian leaders, by the Russian government and by a number of Western states and international organizations, they did not lead to a spiral of violent rhetoric from either Estonian or Russian political leaders. Conflict culminated with the autonomy referenda in Narva and Sillamäe in July 1993, but never resulted in large scale violence. Whether armed non-state groups actually existed in Estonia is unclear; what is clear is that there was an effort by the Soviet central government to organize factory workers in the northeast to resist Estonia’s drive for independence, and that these organizations endured after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the event they did not resort to violence, either because the situation in Estonia was not seen as ripe for violence or because Estonia simply got lucky when the war in Transnistria drew many of the most violence-ready of these workers there to fight alongside their ethnic kin. Finally, what violent clashes there were in Estonia remained isolated and did not lead to a spiral of violence.

So while there was mobilization and escalation in Estonia, it was less than in Moldova, which had a similar level of institutionalized identity-division. A large part of the reason for the lower-than-predicted level of escalation of the conflict in Estonia, especially that mobilized

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<sup>550</sup> Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*, 180.

around ethno-linguistic identities, was the fact that Estonians had institutional outlets through which they could express nationalism in the late Soviet period,<sup>551</sup> in Georgia and Moldova, by contrast, such outlets were lacking. Here the Party was more hostile to the Popular Fronts, and this antagonism resulted in the Fronts becoming increasingly radical in their views and demands.

In the ESSR, even though Russians dominated the Communist Party, it nevertheless developed into a repository of mild and institutionally-based Estonian nationalism, as discussed in the previous chapter. This in turn allowed the Estonian Popular Front to develop from within the Communist Party, meaning it was inhabited mostly by liberal Communists and moderate nationalists. Indeed Beissinger notes that “popular front organizations in each of the Baltic republics received critical support from officials within their respective republican party apparatuses”, with almost half of the 106 members of the leadership of the Estonian Popular Front coming from the ranks of the Communist Party.<sup>552</sup> The Popular Front was founded in April 1988, and five of its seven founders were high-ranking members of the Estonian Communist Party. Lieven says that in the Baltic republics, “the leading role of such figures is a reminder that the Popular Fronts were essentially founded by the liberal wing of the Communist establishments”.<sup>553</sup> By 1990 the popularity of the Popular Front caused a split within the Communist Party. Control of the Party by reformist and covertly pro-independence leaders resulted in a backlash from local Russian Party members and hard-liners in Moscow.<sup>554</sup> Their solution to the increasingly liberal tack of the Estonian Party was the creation of the Interfront

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<sup>551</sup> Another part of the reason for the lower level of escalation in Estonia, which will be examined in the next chapter, is the reaction of external actors to the crisis there, which differed significantly from their reactions to the crises in Moldova and Georgia.

<sup>552</sup> Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, 98.

<sup>553</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 227.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

(later renamed Intermovement), an organization designed to represent loyalist and pro-Russian interests and to slow or reverse Estonia's drive toward independence.

With moderate Estonian nationalists ascendant within the Communist Party and the Popular Front gaining mainstream popularity, more radical Estonian nationalists found a home in the "Congress" – a sort of shadow parliament to the Supreme Soviet. Much of the membership of the Congress was made up of former Soviet dissidents, and it proved to be a font of radical nationalism, even going so far as to call the Supreme Soviet an "occupation body". Estonian SSR law required a 2/3 majority in the Supreme Soviet to enact changes to constitution, and in the event the Supreme Soviet failed to declare sovereignty after the 1990 elections, the Estonian Congress planned to declare independence on behalf of the country. Lieven says this "would obviously have had grave consequences, undermining the legitimacy of the independence process among local Russians, democrats in Russia, and Western governments".<sup>555</sup>

In the 1990 elections, the Popular Front won 70% of the seats in the Supreme Soviet, and thereafter declared Estonia's sovereignty, but Congress declared this declaration too cautious in its wording. The declaration merely cancelled the 1940 Soviet annexation of Estonia and declared that the country was in transition to full independence, instead of proclaiming Estonia's immediate independence, as declarations in some other Soviet republics, such as Lithuania, did.<sup>556</sup> Attacks by the Congress on the Supreme Soviet were soon undermined, as bloody Soviet crackdowns followed the more confrontational declarations in Lithuania and Latvia in the winter and spring of 1991, convincing many in Estonia that the non-confrontational path chosen by their Popular Front was the correct one. Professor Endel Lippmaa, chief

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid, 241-242.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid, 242.



Estonian negotiator with Moscow, said in April 1990: “We have in fact done what Lithuania did, but by a long series of such small steps that it was difficult for Moscow to tell when we got really nasty. What Lithuania did was take a big step, as if Moscow didn’t exist”.<sup>557</sup> Those Estonian parties dominated by extreme nationalists were marginalized and even ridiculed by mainstream Estonian parties. Lieven relates the following view of the radical Estonian National Independence Party (ESRP), expressed by a Deputy of the center-right Fatherland Party:

“Unlike these people, most Estonian conservatives are not exhibitionists, are not trying to be tragic heroes. We do not think that the best way of approaching a wall is to run against it with your head. In the ESRP there are many mentally unbalanced people.... They are obsessed with conspiracies, and see spies everywhere. They ask ‘Are you a real patriot? If so, why aren’t you in our party? Are you with us or against us?’”<sup>558</sup>

This more moderate and pragmatic approach extended to the way the Estonian government dealt with its Russian minority, as well. Despite the fact that the laws actually passed by the Estonian parliament were significantly more discriminatory to Estonia’s minority population – potentially depriving them of citizenship – than similar laws in Georgia and Moldova, Estonian politicians generally eschewed the inflammatory nationalist rhetoric that dominated public discourse in the other two republics. Local government officials were also willing to listen to the complaints of ethnic Russians and deal with them fairly, at least in their own retelling. Ants Liimets, Secretary of the Narva City Council, said that 90% of the complaints that he dealt with from local residents were complaints about their apartments and other “everyday” issues; political complaints, by contrast, were reserved for expression at demonstrations.<sup>559</sup>

Raivo Murd, mayor of Narva at the time of the referendum crisis of 1993, related two anecdotal examples of how his government dealt with the demands of the Russian minority.

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>559</sup> Ants Liimets, City Secretary (Executive) of Narva, interview with the author, 18 July 2012.

First, he and other Estonian local leaders addressed an assembly of Soviet military retirees in Narva, speaking to them “not as their political masters but as equals”. When the meeting ended, several officers said they would support them in principle because they understood they would do nothing illegal against them. In another case, the Estonian local government sought and received assistance from Tallinn to secure wages for workers at the military factory Baltiets in Estonia’s northeast. After the Soviet collapse, the factory could not afford to pay workers, so the Estonian state did so until the factory regained its solvency.<sup>560</sup>

Former and current leaders of the Russian minority generally agree that local government officials dealt fairly with the Russian population. Vladimir Chuikin, the last Chairman of the Narva City Soviet, remarked that although he and Estonian parliamentary deputy from Narva Eldar Efendijev are not friends and they disagree on most issues, they respect each other’s views and are both educated people. Chuikin also says that he has maintained cordial relations with Narva City Secretary Ants Liimets, although they are not friends.<sup>561</sup> Estonian leader Raivo Murd expresses the same opinion of Chuikin and other Russian leaders of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, remarking that the Russian leaders in Narva at that time were “normal people”, not rabble-rousers.<sup>562</sup>

Vadym Poleshchuk, representative of a human rights organization dedicated to defending the rights of Estonia’s Russian-speaking minority, points to several other factors that served to dampen enthusiasm for separatism in Estonia’s northeast. According to Poleshchuk, in the northeast many people’s only exposure to government is through local sub-governments. The fact that in Estonia these local sub-governments have significant powers and a large mandate meant that many issues that concern Russian speakers could be handled locally, and

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<sup>560</sup> Raivo Murd, former Mayor of Narva, interview with the author, 18 July 2012.

<sup>561</sup> Vladimir Chiukin, former Chairman of the Narva City Soviet, interview with the author, 19 July 2012.

<sup>562</sup> Murd, interview with the author, 18 July 2012.

thus did not lead automatically to confrontation with central authorities. Poleshchuk also points to the 1992 law that allows even non-citizens of Estonia to vote in local elections (although they cannot run) as a large factor in keeping the population of the northeast content. This law and the provision of citizenship to many Russian politicians without language tests – an exception to the law, granted to certain Russian “leaders” in Estonia - gave Russian-speakers in the northeast the chance to elect “their” people to local government positions. It also provided citizenship to many in the Russian-speaking political elite, thus solving the problem of how to meet their personal needs and removing some of their incentive to mobilize the population along ethnic lines.<sup>563</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion: Mobilization and Escalation in Georgia, Moldova and Estonia**

The table below depicts the overall level of mobilization and escalation in each case; it does so by analyzing this variable according to the criteria developed for its operationalization in Chapter 2. As predicted by the analysis of the levels of institutionalized identity-division, Abkhazia had the highest level of escalation and Ajaria had the lowest. The two middle cases, Moldova and Estonia, were both analyzed as having medium/high levels of institutionalized identity division, yet exhibited significantly different outcomes in terms of escalation of conflict. In Moldova there was a relatively high level of escalation, with only the less ethnically-charged tone of its rhetoric differentiating it from Abkhazia. In Estonia however, escalation was less than predicted, despite the imposition of a series of citizenship laws that severely discriminated against the Russian-speaking minority.

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<sup>563</sup> Vadym Poleshchuk, Legal Advisor and Analyst at the Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, Tallinn, Estonia, interview with the author, 20 July 2012.

Variable	Georgia-Abkhazia	Georgia-Ajaria	Moldova-Transnistria	Estonia-Russian Minority
Discriminatory Rhetoric	High	Medium	Medium/High	Low
Discriminatory Laws/Legal Battles	High	Low	High	High
Violent Rhetoric	High	Low	Medium	Low
Armed Groups	High	Low	High	Medium
Violent Clashes	High	Low	High	Low
<b>Overall level of escalation</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium/High</b>	<b>Low/Medium</b>

A key reason for the lower-than-predicted level of escalation in Estonia was the unique relationship between the Communist Party and the Popular Front in Estonia. In the ESSR, the Popular Front essentially sprang from the liberal wing of the Communist Party. Such liberal wings were lacking in Georgia and Moldova, meaning the Popular Fronts there were dominated not by progressive Communists but by radical nationalists of the cultural intelligentsia. In Georgia, the Communist Party leadership of the late 1980s, although dominated by ethnic Georgians, was hostile to the creation of organizations independent of its authority, whether moderate or radical.<sup>564</sup> After the bloodshed of April 1989 in Tbilisi and the replacement of Georgian First Secretary Jumber Patiashvili with Givi Gumbaridze, the Party attempted to regain legitimacy by accommodating Georgian nationalist groups, especially those of a more radical bent.<sup>565</sup> But the authority and legitimacy of the Party had been hopelessly compromised after April, and this would be made clear when it was soundly defeated by Gamsakhurdia's radical nationalist group in the 1990 elections.

In Moldova the Communist Party was staffed largely by Transnistrians, with Bessarabians mostly left out of key posts. Thus, the core of the national movement in Moldova was made up largely of dissident intellectuals and did not have its roots in the Communist Party.

<sup>564</sup> Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*, 197.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid*, 197.

It was also associated with a larger nationality, Romanians, which had been vilified in Soviet histories, making it very threatening to Transnistrians. The fear inspired in Transnistria by the rise of Moldovan nationalism and the laws associated with it was not fear of the loss of power, wealth or status – none of those were significantly threatened. What was threatened was the unique Moldovan Soviet identity that had taken hold in Transnistria. Once the radicalized Moldovan Popular front captured the Supreme Soviet in 1990, Moldova's post-Soviet path implied at a minimum rapprochement with Romania and an embracing of the Romanian aspects of Moldovan heritage, and at a maximum unification of the Moldovan and Romanian states.<sup>566</sup> This threatened to drown the separate Transnistrian identity in a "Romanian sea", since the combined populations of Romania and Moldova outside of Transnistria at the end of the Soviet period was some 27 million, against a total Transnistrian population of slightly over 500,000.

In Estonia, the development of a moderately nationalist wing *within* the Estonian Communist Party, and the fact that the Estonian Popular Front emerged from this wing and came to dominate the Supreme Soviet after the spring of 1990 had two important effects. First, it allowed the Popular Front to occupy the political middle ground between pro-Soviet Intermovement and the radically nationalist Congress, giving it legitimacy and giving the Estonian people a choice between continued submission to Soviet power and chauvinistic nationalism. Second, it meant that the first freely-elected Estonian government was dominated by more moderate nationalists than those in Moldova and Georgia.

These facts led to a more pragmatic approach by the Estonian government toward both pursuing independence from the Soviet Union and dealing with its Russian minority. Despite the fact that the laws passed by the Estonian center in Tallinn were actually more discriminatory

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<sup>566</sup> Although unification was never explicitly advocated by the Moldovan government, it was discussed among the nationalist intelligentsia, which had become romanized during the late Soviet period.

than those passed in Tbilisi and Chisinau, mainstream Estonian politicians and private citizens eschewed the discriminatory rhetoric common in Georgia and Moldova. Changes in the law that allowed Estonia's Russians to vote in local elections, even if they lacked Estonian citizenship, also gave them some representation and served to blunt the impact of the revocation of their citizenship. A final reason for the lower amount of overall escalation of conflict in Estonia is the reaction of international actors to the brewing crisis there. It is to this factor that we now turn.

## CHAPTER 5 – GEOPOLITICAL AFFILIATION AND INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

### **I. Introduction**

This chapter, the final of the empirical chapters in this dissertation, examines the role of international actors in response to the level of conflict escalation present in each case. The analytical framework presented in this dissertation sees a successful violent separatist movement as the result of an escalating internal conflict, which is itself the result of previously institutionalized identity-divisions in the context of a political transition, combined with escalatory intervention by outside forces. Although this analytical framework depicts a strictly sequential process from the construction of institutionalized identity divisions to the outbreak of violent separatism, as with all such frameworks, this obscures the fact that some of its steps are interdependent. Such is the case with the steps of conflict escalation and international intervention. It is usually true that absent significant escalation international actors will not involve themselves in the internal affairs of other states; it is also true that with the outbreak of significant escalation external actors will find it hard not to involve themselves.<sup>567</sup>

However, the level of escalation itself depends at least in part on the expectation or promise of external support for potential separatist groups, and the promise of external support depends largely upon the geopolitical affiliation of the target state. Those states perceived as Western – and thus fully legitimate - by external actors will be targeted for intervention designed to arrest the escalation toward conflict, often headed by friendly foreign governments and international institutions. Those states perceived as non-Western (in this case, “post-Soviet”) will be perceived as not fully legitimate; conflict escalation in these states will be used

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<sup>567</sup> The second point is confirmed by Alexis Heraclides in her study of intervention: Alexis Heraclides, “Secessionist Minorities and External Involvement”, *International Organization*, 44:3 (Summer, 1990), 341-378.

by international actors to pursue their own interests, which often involve escalating a conflict already underway. So the processes of escalation and intervention are best seen as mutually constituting, with the geopolitical affiliation of the state in question the best predictor of the type of intervention undertaken.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, it briefly reviews the level of escalation experienced in each case and the predicted international reaction. Next, it reviews the operationalized definitions of geopolitical affiliation and international intervention, using the factors of analysis presented in Chapter 2. Third, it examines each case in terms of the level of international intervention and shows how the geopolitical affiliation of the target state is the variable that determines the type of intervention experienced. Finally, it summarizes the findings of the dissertation in terms of the level of violent separatism experienced in each case.

The level of international intervention in the four cases presented here can be summarized as follows. In Abkhazia, a high level of conflict escalation in a “non-Western” state led to military intervention by an outside actor, since the actor in question determined that this type of intervention served its interests. In Ajaria, a low level of escalation in a “non-Western” state led international actors to basically ignore the situation there. While the Georgian state had little capacity to resist intervention, the low level of conflict escalation provided no pretext for outside actors to pursue their own interests. This case shows that even in states perceived as “non-Western”, there is a minimum level of respect for internal sovereignty accorded by outside actors. In Moldova, medium-high level of conflict escalation in a “non-Western” state led to escalatory intervention by an outside actor. As in Abkhazia, this actor escalated the situation in Moldova because it determined that escalation served its geopolitical interests by giving it leverage and influence there. Moldova, like Georgia, was not seen as a fully legitimate state, and was therefore not accorded the level of respect for its sovereignty and territorial



integrity that states seen as fully legitimate enjoyed. Finally, in Estonia, a low-medium level of escalation in a “Western” state led to de-escalatory intervention by outside actors, mostly Western states and international institutions.

Estonia is in many ways the most intriguing case of the four, and the one that best supports the contention that it is the geopolitical affiliation of the target state that determines the type of intervention it receives. This is because the level of escalation in Estonia was high enough to attract the attention of outside actors and cause them to intervene, but this intervention was strictly focused on de-escalation of the conflict there. Had Russia desired, it would have been a relatively simple thing to escalate the conflict in Estonia, and indeed as we shall see, many outside observers predicted it would do exactly that. However, Russia showed considerable restraint toward the situation in Estonia, and when it did raise concerns or complaints, it almost always did so through international institutions. This is in sharp contrast to Georgia and Moldova, where Russia consistently sought to sideline international institutions. In the end, doing so proved relatively simple, since no international institutions or Western states showed any significant interest in what was happening in these states.

The level of international intervention in each case will be examined according to the operationalized definition of this term developed in Chapter 2. There are two types of possible intervention: military intervention and institutional intervention. Military intervention was only pursued in non-Western states and sought to achieve the goals of the intervening state, which always involved escalating the conflicts in the cases examined here. The level of military intervention is assessed using five criteria: the provision of small arms to non-state groups in the target state; the provision of heavy weapons to non-state groups in the target state; the provision of vehicles and/or aircraft to non-state groups in the target state; the intervention of volunteer or “Cossack” forces, moving from the territory of the intervening state to the territory

of the target state; and finally, direct military intervention by the armed forces of the intervening state. The level of institutional intervention is assessed using four criteria: assistance in conflict mitigation by local embassies of outside states; direct assistance by foreign governments, often through the appointment of a special envoy or similar figure; assistance in conflict prevention and mitigation from an international institution; and finally, the establishment of a resident conflict prevention mission in the target state by an international institution.

Before examining the level and type of international intervention experienced in each case, the chapter analyzes the geopolitical affiliation of the target state and shows that this is the factor that determined the level and type of intervention experienced. There are three quantifiable factors that serve as proxies for geopolitical affiliation. These are the date that diplomatic relations were established by the U.S. with the target state,<sup>568</sup> the lag time from the date of the establishment of diplomatic relations until the opening of the U.S. embassy in the target state – with a longer period of lag time implying that the target state was not a diplomatic priority for the U.S. and the West, and whether or not the U.S. recognized the inclusion of the target state in the Soviet Union. Other than these indicators, there are a number of diplomatic statements and press reports that mention each target state. Since the language of these statements and reports often clearly articulates how the West perceives the target state, these will be examined as well.

## **II. Russia and the West, 1992-1994**

Before embarking on the analysis of intervention in each of the four cases presented here, an examination of Russia and its role in the world is in order. The period of maximum

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<sup>568</sup> The US serves as a proxy for the broader West here. This is appropriate since most other Western states established diplomatic relations with the three states under examination here at roughly the same time as the US did.

escalation in each case that resulted in intervention encompasses from early 1992 until early 1994. In this period Russia's view of its position in the world and its role in the former Soviet Union remained relatively consistent. One theme that resonated on both of these levels for this period was Russia's self-definition as a Great Power. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political, social and economic turmoil gripping Russia during this period, it consistently defined itself as a Great Power at the level of the international system and in its dealings with the other newly-independent states of the former Soviet Union.

Russia also saw itself as a Western or European power in the early part of this period. Yeltsin's foreign policy advisor Gennady Burbulis declared that a revival of Russia was "impossible outside the renewed Europe" and that the renewed Europe could only realize its potential by taking "Russia into consideration".<sup>569</sup> Russian foreign and economic policy in the early post-Soviet period was initially linked with the adoption of the International Monetary Fund's program of economic reform in January 1992, and the desire of Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev for Russia to become a "normal" country and join the "civilized" world. As Slater and Wilson argue, this period marked the most "westernist" period of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy.

The period of Russia's westernization was to be rather short-lived. Ted Hopf argues that by the fall of 1992, Russia's disillusionment with its own transition and its prospects for quick integration with the West had largely ended this honeymoon period, and that Russia began to search for another Great Power identity that did not imply membership in the West. Hopf argues that there were three main competitors for Russian identity in early 1990s – the liberal, conservative and centrist. While each understood Russia as a Great Power, they had different

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<sup>569</sup> Hannes Adomeit, "Russia as a 'Great Power' in World Affairs: Images and Reality", *International Affairs* 71:1 (January 1995), 35-68.

conceptions of what constituted legitimate actions by a Great Power. In Hopf's words, "Different discourses of Russian identity imply different interests, foreign policy choices, and views of legitimate conduct in world affairs".<sup>570</sup> While the liberal identity subscribed to Western view of military intervention in pursuit of geopolitical gain as illegitimate<sup>571</sup> and the conservative identity rejected Western norms and yearned to recreate the Soviet Union, the centrist identity accepted cooperation with the West but held that as a Great Power Russia should have certain special rights in the former Soviet Union.

Several analysts have argued that an analysis of foreign policy-making responsibilities within the Russian government reveals how post-Soviet Russia perceived the prerogatives of a Great Power. Nodia observes that "a de facto division of labor was established in which the Foreign Ministry dealt with the 'real' abroad, while relations with the countries of the former Soviet Union were taken care of primarily by the Ministry of Defense".<sup>572</sup> Slater and Wilson echo this observation, writing that "it was not the Foreign Ministry but the Ministry of Defence, however, which was taking the lead in issues related to the FSU".<sup>573</sup> Indeed, Foreign Minister Kozyrev was often criticized by officials from the Ministry of Defense for neglecting Russia's interests and abandoning Russian-speaking populations in the "near abroad" while concentrating on building relations with the West. Kozyrev responded to these critiques by complaining that "the armed forces have a foreign policy of their own" within the former Soviet Union.

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<sup>570</sup> Hopf, "Identity, Legitimacy and the Use of Military Force: Russia's Great Power Identities and Military Intervention in Abkhazia", 238.

<sup>571</sup> As Kosovo was to demonstrate in 1998-1999, Western norms did allow military intervention in pursuit of humanitarian objectives. Kosovo represents an early case of the emerging Western norm of "Responsibility to Protect", which advocates intervention if a sovereign government cannot or will not protect its own people from significant harm.

<sup>572</sup> Nodia, "Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia", 41.

<sup>573</sup> Wendy Slater and Andrew Wilson, *The Legacy of the Soviet Union*, (New York, NY: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2004), 236-237.

While it is undoubtedly true that the Ministry of Defense often functioned as the lead ministry for Russian foreign policy-making in the former Soviet republics, this characterization misses an important nuance: within the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia the imprint of the Russian Defense Ministry on policy-making was all but absent. Instead, the Baltic republics, despite sharing the same *de jure* status as all other former Soviet republics, were essentially assigned to the Europe portfolio within the Russian government. This point and its implications will be developed in the subsequent section of this chapter. Here it will suffice to say that, using Hopf's categorization, the triumph of the centrist foreign policy identity meant that Russia perceived intervention in Georgia and Moldova as the legitimate prerogative of a Great Power, but perceived intervention in the Baltics as illegitimate.

Russian intervention in Moldova culminated with the military defeat of Moldovan forces in June 1992; in Abkhazia Russian intervention, which had been escalating since at least the fall of 1992, was critical to the defeat of Georgian forces in September 1993. Sandwiched between these events was the referendum crisis in Estonia in July 1993. In this crisis, despite the fact that Estonia refused to bow to Russian demands about the treatment of the Russian minority and the fact that Russia had a significant military presence inside Estonia, there were no Russian attempts to escalate the situation. Hopf is correct to argue that the dominant Russian foreign policy identity from mid-1992 onward was less Western and more centrist in nature and that this had significant consequences for how Russia dealt with issues in the former Soviet Union. What the analysis presented in the rest of this chapter intends to do is explain why it was that the Baltics were seen as so different from the rest of the former Soviet Union by both Russia and the West, and what the implications of this difference were for the foreign policies of both.

### **III. Analyzing and Explaining International Intervention in Georgia, Moldova and Estonia**

#### **Georgia: Abkhazia and Ajaria**

This dissertation argues that both Russia and the West assigned Georgia a non-Western geopolitical affiliation throughout the period examined. The escalation of conflict in Georgia was thus largely ignored in the West, while Russia used the conflict as a venue for the pursuit of its own geopolitical interests. The measurable indicators of geopolitical affiliation all point to Georgia being perceived as non-Western. Although Georgia declared independence on 9 April 1991, it was not recognized by the U.S. until 25 December 1991, the date of the formal end of the Soviet Union as a state. Georgia was the last state in the former Soviet Union with which the U.S. established diplomatic relations, on 24 March, 1992, and the first U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi did not open until 23 April 1992. This lag time of over eight months between declaration of independence and recognition by the US was by far the longest of the countries included here, as was the lag time of four months between recognition and the opening of the first U.S. Embassy. Georgia was also the last state in the former Soviet Union to be admitted to the CSCE (later OSCE), on 31 July 1992. While Georgia's lag time in being recognized had much to do with its own instability, this dissertation argues that this instability itself was in part caused by Georgia's exclusion from the West. This exclusion meant that Georgia was never included in the group of former Soviet republics that might be offered membership in the EU or other Western institutions in the future. In turn, this meant that the EU and other Western institutions had no leverage over Georgian behavior toward its minorities, which was one of the key causes of Georgia's instability. In Estonia, as we shall see, this leverage was present and was used to good effect.

Less measurable, more anecdotal indicators also confirm that Georgia was perceived as non-Western by both the West and Russia. As Estonian parliamentarian Mart Nutt remarked about Georgia and Moldova, nobody in the West "believed that those countries were able to

function independently”<sup>574</sup> so few Western actors paid attention to the fact that both were sliding toward civil war in the early post-Soviet period. Alexandros Petersen, in his retrospective on the war in Abkhazia, remarked that many in the West viewed the war “as an issue to be discussed only in the context of the ‘Russian orbit’”.<sup>575</sup> A final, poignantly ironic testament to the place Georgia occupied in Western thinking is illustrated by the recollection of British television cameraman Jon Steele, who was in the besieged Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi in September 1993, trying to secure an interview with Georgian President Shevardnadze, who was there in a last-ditch effort to secure a cease-fire with Abkhazian forces. While Shevardnadze was well-known and generally popular in the West, the fate of the country he led was of minor concern. Steele recalls a voice from London telling him to be sure he got out of Sukhumi as soon as he completed the interview: “Remember, we are only interested in Shevardnadze. It’s a war nobody cares about”.<sup>576</sup>

Russia also did not recognize Georgia as a member of the West, and this shaped the way Moscow defined its interests in terms of the escalating separatist conflict in Abkhazia. Despite the obvious parallels between Abkhazia and Chechnya, Nodia argues that “because the Russian political elite did not take the Georgian state seriously, they found it difficult to put the Abkhaz and Chechen problems at the same level”.<sup>577</sup> So Georgia was perceived by both the West and Russia as a non-Western state in the period from December 1991, when the Soviet Union formally ended, until September 1993, when the war in Abkhazia ended with the defeat of Georgian forces and the expulsion of some 200,000-250,000 ethnic Georgians. This geopolitical affiliation led Western states and international institutions to largely ignore the intensifying war

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<sup>574</sup> Mart Nutt, Member of Parliament of the Republic of Estonia, interview with the author, 16 July 2012.

<sup>575</sup> Alexandros Petersen, “The 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia War: A Forgotten Conflict”, *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, 2:4 (Autumn 2008), 187-199.

<sup>576</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 159.

<sup>577</sup> Nodia, “Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia”, 42.

of separatism there and allowed Russia to pursue its own geopolitical interests, which it defined as enabling the establishment of a *de facto* independent state in Abkhazia while maintaining rhetorical support for Georgia's *de jure* territorial integrity. In Ajaria, the lack of significant escalation provided no pretext for Russia or any other outside actor to pursue its own interests, despite the lack of legitimacy accorded to the Georgian state at the time and the profound weakness of the Georgian government.

*Analyzing and Explaining Intervention Decisions in Abkhazia*

The start of the war for separatism in Abkhazia is generally dated to 14 August 1992, the day that the Georgian National Guard under Tengiz Kitovani crossed the Inguri River with orders from President Shevardnadze to secure the railroad in Abkhazia and free the Georgian government officials being held there by supporters of deposed President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Georgian scholar Ghia Nodia says Shevardnadze did not want war but was in a desperate situation due to the low-level insurgency being waged in Mingrelia (Western Georgia) by Gamsakhurdia's supporters, who also enjoyed sanctuary among the largely Mingrelian Georgian population in southern Abkhazia. Shevardnadze thus agreed to the operation, "probably after receiving a promise from the military that it would not be involved in direct hostilities with Ardzinba and his forces".<sup>578</sup> In the end this promise was not kept. Meeting unexpected resistance from Abkhaz irregular forces, in response Kitovani's troops drove to the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi, looting and pillaging along the way.

Many Georgians claim that Kitovani's agenda was personal, not ethnic – the first villages he robbed and pillaged were inhabited by ethnic Georgians in the southwestern Gali District of Abkhazia.<sup>579</sup> But in a context where ethnicity was seen as the only relevant identity and in an

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<sup>578</sup> Nodia, "Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia", 37.

<sup>579</sup> Archil Gegeshidze, interview with the author, 4 May 2012, Tbilisi, Georgia.



environment charged by 70 years of officially sanctioned Abkhazian narratives of grievance against Georgians, combined with the crisis of the Soviet collapse (from the Abkhazian perspective), the assumption that Kitovani's rampage was ethnically motivated is perfectly understandable. The Abkhazian leadership, driven from Sukhumi, took refuge around the Russian military base in the northern city of Gudauta. From there, it appealed for help from Russia and from its ethnic kin in the North Caucasus. Meanwhile, Shevardnadze, still hoping to limit the escalation of the conflict, had regained control of the operation and managed to prevent Kitovani and his troops from attacking Gudauta.<sup>580</sup>

While 14 August represents the beginning of open warfare between Georgians and Abkhazians, military escalation of the conflict had in fact been underway for some time, and this escalation was aided by intervention from forces outside Georgia's borders. The demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991 left thousands of former-Soviet troops and a huge cache of equipment "stranded" in newly-independent states, Georgia among them. In line with policy in other former Soviet republics outside the Baltics, some of this equipment was transferred to the Ministries of Defense of the newly-independent states. In July 1992, Georgia received much of the equipment of the Transcaucasus Military District, which had been headquartered in Tbilisi.<sup>581</sup> This included much of the armor and artillery of the 10<sup>th</sup> Soviet Division ("Akhaltzikhe Division"). While this transfer of equipment was standard practice, it certainly enabled escalation of the conflict by significantly increasing Georgia's military capability.

But weapons and other equipment were also transferred to the Abkhazian side, in a move that was relatively rare in the former Soviet Union. Abkhazia's status as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in the Georgian SSR meant that it had its own police force, and this

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<sup>580</sup> Nodia, "Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia", 37.

<sup>581</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 153.

force inherited much of the equipment of Soviet Interior Ministry troops stationed in Abkhazia. Abkhazians were also able to take possession of other Soviet military equipment. De Waal notes that Abkhazian troops managed to gain possession of a significant number of weapons from the Russian base at Gudauta.<sup>582</sup> Theft and illicit sale of weapons and equipment was also a massive contributor to escalation of the conflict: in the first three months of 1992 alone, a staggering 1,118 railroad cars, each carrying 20 tons of ammunition, were reported missing in the Transcaucasus Military District.<sup>583</sup> Siroky and Aprasidze remark that, “Russian detachments were often leaderless, disorganized and willing to sell arms to the highest bidder” and that “the supply of heavy weaponry was a key force multiplier” for Abkhazian military capabilities.<sup>584</sup>

In addition to the provision of weapons to both sides in the conflict, escalation was also aided by an influx of volunteer fighters from Russia’s North Caucasus. Many of these fighters belonged to the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus, an unofficial organization created in 1989 to advocate, among other things, a united state for the peoples of the North Caucasian ethno-linguistic group, of which the Abkhazians were one. The Confederation declared Sukhumi its capital, and as tensions between Abkhazians and Georgians rose, armed groups from the republics of the Russian North Caucasus began moving into Abkhazia. These forces complemented the Abkhazian National Guard, recently formed by Abkhazian leader Ardzinba, as well as other informal Abkhazian volunteer groups. Among these was the organization of “Abkhazian Cossacks”, which was formed in June 1992 under the auspices of the Russian cultural organization in Abkhazia, “Slav Home”. By the eve of the conflict, the “Abkhazian Cossacks” had some 300 fighters under arms.<sup>585</sup> Other ethnic groups in

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<sup>582</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>583</sup> Author not given, “The Transcaucasus: Fiery Food, Fiery Tempers”, *The Economist*, 24 July 1993, 55.

<sup>584</sup> David S. Siroky and David Aprasidze, “Guns, Roses and Democratization: Huntington’s Secret Admirer in the Caucasus”, *Democratization* 18:6 (2011), 8-9.

<sup>585</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus*, 82.

Abkhazia, most notably its large Armenian minority, also formed their own militias. The Armenian community in Georgia formed the “Bagramyan Battalion” which later engaged in several bloody battles with Georgian forces.<sup>586</sup>

But it was the Confederation of Mountain Peoples that provided the bulk of the volunteer forces that fought in Abkhazia. Giorgi Anchabadze, the Georgian-Abkhazian scholar who was present at the founding conference of the Confederation and remained engaged with it throughout its existence, says that it played a very important role in the military conflict.<sup>587</sup> While the rough terrain of the Georgian-Russian border in Abkhazia and the disorder reigning within the Russian state in 1992-1993 would have made it difficult for Russia to prevent its citizens from entering Abkhazia to fight there even had it desired to do so, some analysts claim that the Russian government actively supported their involvement in the war. Giorgi Derluguian writes that,

“Despite the romantic stories of Chechen and Kabardin volunteers valiantly crossing the mountains on foot to help their Abkhaz brethren, the majority of North Caucasus and Cossack volunteers were openly recruited on Russian territory, transported to the Abkhaz border by bus, trained and armed by Russian officers”.<sup>588</sup>

Once the war began volunteer units from the North Caucasus were a significant factor in prolonging and escalating it. On numerous occasions the Georgian and Abkhazian sides, often with Russian mediation, agreed to cease fires, only to see them broken – on most occasions fighters from the North Caucasus were at least partly responsible. The continued influx of North Caucasus fighters over the course of the war also served to provide fresh manpower to the Abkhazian side and exhaust the Georgians, who were also still attempting to quell the rebellion by Gamsakhurdia supporters in Western Georgia.

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<sup>586</sup> Interview with former senior Georgian government official, name withheld by request, 7 May 2012.

<sup>587</sup> Anchabadze, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.

<sup>588</sup> Jenkins and Gottlieb, *Identity Conflicts: Can Violence be Regulated?*, 178.

There was also direct military intervention from the Russian Armed Forces in behalf of the Abkhazian forces. While Russian President Yeltsin regularly proclaimed his support for Georgia's territorial integrity and engaged personally in attempts to mediate the conflict, at least some elements of his government were working at cross-purposes to his professed goals. As noted, Russia failed to halt the flow of fighters from its territory into Abkhazia, and eventually the Russian Armed Forces themselves joined the fight. As early as October 1992, only two months into the war, Georgia claimed that a Russian fighter shot down a Georgian helicopter in Abkhazia. Expressing frustration with Russia's role in the conflict, the Georgian government accused Russia of supporting the separatists and reiterated an 18-month old decision to take control of all former Soviet arms and equipment in the country, which Russia warned "may provoke an armed clash with Russian armed forces and military units".<sup>589</sup>

By early 1993 Russian military intervention had become more overt and consequential. In March the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* reported that Abkhazian forces had received a large shipment of weapons, including 72 tanks and artillery manned by Russian crews, from the Russian military base in Gudauta, Abkhazia.<sup>590</sup> That same month Georgia shot down a Russian Su-27 fighter over Abkhazia, killing the pilot and recovering his body, in an event that the *Los Angeles Times* described as drawing Russia "deeper into an ethnic conflict beyond its southern border".<sup>591</sup> In May, the same paper described the effect of Russian assistance to Abkhazia in these words: "With the help of occasional air strikes by Russian pilots determined to keep

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<sup>589</sup> No author given, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "Copter hit by Missile in Abkhazia", 6 October 1992, 8A.

<sup>590</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 160.

<sup>591</sup> Richard Boudreaux, "Georgia Shoots Down Russian Warplane Over Abkhazia", *Los Angeles Times*, 20 March 1993, A4.

strategic Black Sea air bases in Abkhazia, the insurgents have formed a 10,000-man army and fought the more numerous Georgians to a standstill".<sup>592</sup>

The increase in Abkhazian military capability provided by the influx of North Caucasus volunteers and Russian military support convinced Georgia that there was no military solution to the conflict. On 27 July, with Russian mediation, Georgian President Shevardnadze accepted a cease fire, the terms of which obligated both sides to remove their heavy weaponry from Sukhumi and its environs. While Yeltsin might have sincerely believed that the preservation of Georgia's territorial integrity was the objective, others in his government had different goals. De Waal says that Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, who was a key player in the cease fire negotiations, "overtly used the conflict to seek to insert a Russian military presence in both Abkhazia and Georgia as a whole".<sup>593</sup> As expected in a state with a non-Western geopolitical affiliation then, at least some elements of the government of Russia saw Georgia not as a subject in its own right, but as an object, a theater that could be used for the furtherance of Russia's own geopolitical interests.

The cease fire held for under two months, and when it finally broke down, Russian intervention was a critical factor in sealing Georgia's defeat. As noted, the cease fire agreement required both the Georgians and Abkhazians to remove their heavy weaponry from in and around Sukhumi. Abkhazian forces withdrew and turned most of their heavy equipment over to the Russian military, while the Georgian heavy equipment was largely evacuated using Russian Navy vessels. By 13 September the Russian Navy had moved the last of the Georgian heavy weaponry from Abkhazia and 80% of all Georgian forces had withdrawn.<sup>594</sup> On 16 September,

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<sup>592</sup> Richard Boudreaux, "Russia, Georgia in Accord, Urge Abkhazia Truce", *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May 1993, 1.

<sup>593</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 162.

<sup>594</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus*, 166.

after having their heavy weaponry returned to them, Abkhazian forces broke the cease fire, attacking Sukhumi and the key port city of Ochamchire. With their heavy weaponry still under Russian control, the remaining contingent of Georgian troops in Abkhazia were hopelessly outgunned. As the *Washington Post* put it, after the cease fire was signed, “the (Georgian) government then began moving some of its heaviest weapons out of Sukhumi. When the Abkhazians attacked Sept. 16, breaking the truce, they had a considerable advantage in firepower”.<sup>595</sup> Even the United Nations, normally reluctant to take definitive stands on controversial issues, noted that the cease fire in Abkhazia broke down when “Abkhaz forces, with armed support from outside Abkhazia, launched attacks on Sukhumi and Ochamchire”.<sup>596</sup>

Georgian President Shevardnadze went to the Abkhazian capital in a last-ditch effort to negotiate a cease fire, but soon found himself with nothing to do but help organize the city’s defenses, as the overwhelming military superiority of the Abkhazians and their allies left them uninterested in negotiating. By 27 September the situation was hopeless, and Shevardnadze “fled the Black sea port of Sukhumi...just ahead of triumphant Abkhazian rebels, who seized the city and routed its Georgian defenders after a ferocious 11-day siege”.<sup>597</sup> Other members of the Georgian government who remained behind were not as lucky as Shevardnadze – Abkhazian and allied fighters killed most of those who remained behind in Sukhumi’s parliament building.<sup>598</sup> Nodia claims that Shevardnadze’s belief that the scale of Russian intervention meant that the outcome of the war could only be determined in Moscow led him to deceive himself by signing Russian-brokered deals that were disastrous for Georgia:

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<sup>595</sup> Lee Hockstader, “Georgian Leader Flees From Rebels; Shevardnadze Blames Russia for Abkhazia War”, *The Washington Post*, 28 September 1993, A1.

<sup>596</sup> “Georgia-UNOMIG-Background”, on the website of the United Nations, internet resource at: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unomig/background.html>, accessed 14 May 2013.

<sup>597</sup> Lee Hockstader, “Georgian Leader Flees From Rebels; Shevardnadze Blames Russia for Abkhazia War”, *The Washington Post*, 28 September 1993, A1.

<sup>598</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 163.

“With all due respect to the heroic efforts of the Abkhaz militia and its supporters, the two most important military successes of the Abkhaz (the seizure of Gagra and Sukhumi) only occurred after Shevardnadze trusted Russian guarantees and ordered the withdrawal of most Georgian forces from those cities”.<sup>599</sup>

With the seizures of Sukhumi and Ochamchire, the Abkhazian side now controlled most of the key points of Abkhazia, since it had earlier taken Gagra and had never lost Gudauta. Abkhazian forces soon moved south into the district of Gali, where the majority of Abkhazia’s ethnic Georgians lived. By early October some 200,000 Georgians, the vast majority of the ethnic Georgian population there, had been expelled. The defeat of Georgian forces in Abkhazia re-energized Gamsakhurdia’s supporters, who again began attacking Georgian forces that had withdrawn from Abkhazia into Western Georgia. On 8 October, in exchange for Russian assistance in defeating the rebels loyal to Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze agreed that Georgia would join the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The outcome of the separatist conflict in Abkhazia served the interests of the Russian military and also contributed to larger Russian geopolitical objectives. De Waal summarizes the results of the Abkhazian war this way:

“A Commonwealth of Independent States peacekeeping force, which was in fact basically a Russian contingent, was sent to the ceasefire zone area on either side of the Inguri River. A UN mission (the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia) was established, providing just over one hundred unarmed monitors. The weak international commitment to the peace process – in marked comparison to the Balkans – basically made the ceasefire settlement a Pax Russica designed and implemented in Moscow”.<sup>600</sup>

The extent to which Yeltsin personally approved of the actions of his government is unclear and will probably never be known. His personal relationship with Shevardnadze was good<sup>601</sup> and he consistently gave rhetorical support to Georgia’s territorial integrity. However, Russian actions

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<sup>599</sup> Nodia, “Causes and Visions of the Conflict in Abkhazia”, 38.

<sup>600</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 164.

<sup>601</sup> Interview with former senior Georgian government official, name withheld by request, 7 May 2012.

“on the ground” in both the North Caucasus –the point of origin for thousands of pro-Abkhazian fighters – and in Abkhazia itself demonstrated strong support for Abkhazian separatism.

As discussed, several analysts have noted that the Russian military and security services seemed to be pursuing their own policy in Abkhazia, a policy at odds with that propagated by the presidential administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Francis argues that while Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Kozyrev were somewhat sympathetic to Georgia’s plight, most members of the Russian Duma as well as the Ministry of Defense “saw the conflict as a way of safeguarding Russia’s interests in Georgia and its position in the region”.<sup>602</sup> Anatol Lieven is even more direct in his assessment of Russian policy, writing of the Russian bases in Georgia:

“General Pavel Grachev, the Russian defence minister, has said that Moscow must always keep hold of these bases. The Russian military is now, in effect, making its own policy in Georgia, while the foreign ministry looks on helplessly. President Yeltsin’s dependence on the military for support in his own political struggle means that he could not intervene even if he wanted to.”<sup>603</sup>

The point is this: the high level of conflict escalation combined with Georgia’s geopolitical affiliation as a non-Western state meant that it was ignored by Western states and institutions and objectified by Russia. Rather than being seen as a sovereign state in its own right, it was seen in Russia as an arena for the pursuit of Great Power interests and part of Russia’s sphere of influence. While Yeltsin and the Foreign Ministry might still have clung to what was left of the largely-discredited liberal foreign policy identity in Russia, the rest of the government and presumably the majority of the Russian people<sup>604</sup> saw intervention in Georgia as Russia’s legitimate prerogative.

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<sup>602</sup> Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*, 88.

<sup>603</sup> Anatol Lieven, “How Moscow Military Aided Collapse of Georgia”, *The Times of London*, 28 September 1993, Overseas News Section.

<sup>604</sup> Since the Duma, as the body representing the Russian public within the government, supported intervention, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of the public did as well.



While Georgia commanded significant attention within the Russian government, it was largely absent in the calculations of Western governments and international institutions. In a visit to the White House in March 1994, Georgian leader Shevardnadze pleaded for U.S. support for peacekeeping efforts in Abkhazia. While offering general support for a U.N.-backed peacekeeping force there, U.S. President Clinton made it clear that no U.S. forces would be committed to this force.<sup>605</sup> In August 1994 *The Economist* observed:

“For the first six months of this year, Eduard Shevardnadze, the Georgian president, appealed for international peacekeepers to be deployed in Abkhazia. No dice. Then, at the end of June, he was forced to eat Kremlin-cooked humble pie by accepting 3,000 Russian troops to monitor the border between Abkhazia and Georgia—by the by, enabling Abkhazia, with its useful stretch of Black Sea coastline, to become virtually a Russian client”.<sup>606</sup>

Unlike in the Baltics, where international organizations deployed conflict prevention missions, In Georgia (and Moldova) missions were only deployed after the conflicts had been essentially decided. Among international institutions, the United Nations (UN) took the lead role in the Abkhazian conflict while the OSCE concerned itself with Georgia’s other separatist conflict in South Ossetia. The UN opened its first office in Tbilisi in November 1992, some three months after the start of the war, and appointed a Special Envoy for Georgia in May 1993. The United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was established in August 1993 to verify compliance with the ceasefire signed on 27 July. An advance team of 10 observers arrived in Sukhumi on 8 August 1993, and on 24 August 1993 a UN Security Council resolution authorized up to 88 observers to verify cease fire compliance. However, the resumption of the Abkhazian

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<sup>605</sup> Transcript; “The President’s News Conference With Chairman Eduard Shevardnadze of the Republic of Georgia”, in *Administration of William J. Clinton*, 445-452, U.S. Government Printing Office, internet resource at: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/WCPD-1994-03-14/pdf/WCPD-1994-03-14-Pg445-2.pdf>.

<sup>606</sup> No author given, “Russia’s Caucasian Cauldron”, *The Economist*, 6 August 1994, 39-40

offensive on 16 September delayed the arrival of these observers, and when they did arrive the war was over.<sup>607</sup>

Other international institutions were similarly passive with respect to the escalating conflict in Georgia. The first CSCE (OSCE) delegation to visit Georgia in an attempt to mitigate the Abkhazian crisis arrived in Tbilisi in March 1993, seven months after the start of the war.<sup>608</sup> The European Community, even after being formalized as the European Union in 1993, also kept its distance: the first EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus was only appointed in 2003, and as late as the eve of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, the Union “had neither a coherent policy, nor sufficient presence on the ground to influence events”.<sup>609</sup> This lack of Western attention to Georgia is explained by its geopolitical affiliation as a non-Western state. Seen as “remote and beyond”<sup>610</sup> from European and North American capitals, Georgia, if it merited attention at all, was usually seen as a legitimate part of Russian sphere of influence, and Russia was seen as a partner who could keep post-Soviet conflicts under control.<sup>611</sup> Given these facts, Hopf’s admonition that “the intense European involvement in the Baltics should have been replicated in the Caucasus, Moldova and Central Asia”,<sup>612</sup> while accurate, is somewhat idealistic.

*Analyzing and Explaining Intervention Decisions in Ajaria*

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<sup>607</sup> “Georgia-UNOMIG-Background”, on the website of the United Nations, internet resource at: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unomig/background.html>, accessed 14 May 2013.

<sup>608</sup> Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus*, 164.

<sup>609</sup> Marco Siddi and Barbara Gaweda, “Bystander in its Neighborhood: The European Union’s Involvement in Protracted Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space”, *IEP Policy Papers on Eastern Europe and Central Asia*, No. 1 (2012), 17.

<sup>610</sup> Blauvelt, interview with the author, 5 May 2012.

<sup>611</sup> David Matsaberidze, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Tbilisi State University, Georgia, interview with the author, 8 May 2012.

<sup>612</sup> Hopf, “Identity, Legitimacy and the Use of Military Force: Russia’s Great Power Identities and Military Intervention in Abkhazia”, 239.

A 1995 newspaper article on Ajaria entitled “A Republic by the Sea Remains Lone Peaceful Fiefdom” reported that,

“Palm trees and citrus orchards line the route into the capital, while tea grows on the mountainsides of what was once a favored holiday spot of the Soviet elite. Adding to the appeal is its social tranquility, a rarity in today’s volatile Trans-Caucasus, which has been torn apart by wars of separatism or nationalism or by roving bands of armed thugs terrorizing the public”.<sup>613</sup>

Peace and stability were maintained in Ajaria, despite the presence of Russian troops and bases, despite the fact that both Tbilisi and Moscow were wary of Turkish influence there after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and despite the fact that the Georgian state was utterly incapable of preventing Ajaria from breaking away had it chosen to do so. In contrast to Abkhazia and Transnistria, where they played a role in escalating conflict, the Russian troops in Ajaria assisted in preserving stability. Giorgi Derluguian “grants the Russian military contingent in Ajaria the role of peacekeepers, which (Ajarian leader) Abashidze flattered on a yearly basis by sending flowers to the wives of Russian officers stationed in Ajaria on International Women’s Day”.<sup>614</sup> The Montreal Gazette agreed about the stabilizing role of the Russian military, writing that “social stability has been maintained through a deal between Abashidze and the commander of the Russian Army garrison based on the territory.”<sup>615</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, concern was high in both Tbilisi and Moscow that Turkey would attempt to reinstate itself as the chief foreign patron of Ajaria. Within the Russian government, despite the rift between Yeltsin and Kozyrev on one side and the Defense Ministry and Duma on the other, both sides agreed on the need to prevent Turkey from gaining ground in the South Caucasus.<sup>616</sup> The Georgian government obviously had the

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<sup>613</sup> Mike Trickey, “A Republic by the Sea Remains Lone Peaceful Fiefdom”, *The Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec), 10 March 1995, B1.

<sup>614</sup> Zuercher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 207.

<sup>615</sup> Trickey, “A Republic by the Sea Remains Lone Peaceful Fiefdom”, B1.

<sup>616</sup> Francis, *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*, 88.

same objective. In contrast to Abkhazia, Ajaria was a case where Georgian and Russian interests aligned, which at least in part explains the stabilizing role played by the Russian military there. It is important to note, however, that concepts such as the preservation of Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty were not the main factors behind Russian policy. Georgia's geopolitical affiliation as a non-Western state meant that the main determinant of Russian policy in Ajaria was the interest of the Russian state – norms such as sovereignty and territorial integrity were routinely subordinated to this interest elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. In this case however, the desire by both Russia and Georgia to limit Turkish influence in Ajaria induced Russia to support the status quo.

A second reason that Ajaria remained peaceful was Turkish policy there. Ankara remained very careful in its dealings with Batumi, providing no pretext for Russia or Georgia to accuse it of intervention. Rather than fomenting separatism or attempting to establish direct relations with Ajaria, the Turkish government consistently worked through the Georgian central government, even when the latter was in shambles and at war with itself.<sup>617</sup> This correctness in dealing with Georgia was not a historical pattern for Turkey. De Waal says that Georgian-Turkish relations were historically much worse than Georgian-Russian relations. Noe Zhordania, independent Georgia's first leader, said in 1918 he was only declaring independence from Russia because the latter couldn't protect Georgia from the Turks: "At the present moment the Georgian people says it is ready to accept the dominion of anyone rather than fall under the dominion of Turkey".<sup>618</sup> Recognizing the delicacy of Ajaria's relationship with Turkey and the suspicions in Moscow and Tbilisi, Ajarian leader Abashidze was careful to avoid the appearance that he sought patronage from Turkey. "We are a part of Georgia, always have been and

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<sup>617</sup> Engin Arıkan, Turkish Consul General to Batumi, Georgia, interview with the author, 2 July 2012.

<sup>618</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 147.

always will be,' said Abashidze as he denied stories in various Georgian and Russian newspapers that the republic has been receiving money from Turkey".<sup>619</sup>

The main reason that outside powers avoided intervention in Ajaria was simple: the lack of conflict escalation there provided no basis for it. What conflict there was between Tbilisi and Batumi was exactly that: political conflict between the national capital and a provincial capital. The low level of institutionalized identity-division between elites and publics in Ajaria and those in the rest of Georgia meant that this conflict remained confined to the relevant political institutions instead of spilling out into the public sphere and turning violent. This situation provided no pretext for intervention in Ajaria by external states. Thus, as Abkhazia and South Ossetia broke away from Georgia with Russian help, and as the Georgian government split into two warring factions, Russian troops in Ajaria worked with the Ajarian government to maintain stability, Turkish policy in Ajaria remained cautious and prudent, and Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze never missed an opportunity to express his Georgian patriotism and reassure Tbilisi that his people felt the same way.

The major point about external intervention illustrated by the Ajarian case is that even states whose sovereignty and legitimacy are held in low regard by the international community are accorded minimum threshold values of these norms. Sovereignty and international legitimacy may be continuous – not dichotomous – variables, but there are levels below which they will not sink. Absent an escalation of internal conflict, even external states that see themselves as traditional Great Powers with privileged interests in a certain region will refrain from overt attempts to foment unrest as a subterfuge for the pursuit of their own interests.

### *Moldova and Transnistria*

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<sup>619</sup> Trickey, "A Republic by the Sea Remains Lone Peaceful Fiefdom", B1.

Like Georgia, Moldova was perceived by both Russia and the West as a non-Western state. The escalation of conflict in Moldova was thus largely ignored in the West, while in Russia it was used as a pretext for the pursuit of Russian geopolitical interests. The measurable indicators of Western perceptions of Moldova show the lack of Western interest, despite Moldova's solidly European geographical location. Like Georgia, Moldova was recognized by the U.S. on 25 December 1991, the date of the formal termination of the Soviet Union. Moldova had declared independence on 27 August 1991, immediately after the collapse of the putsch attempt against Gorbachev. At four months, the lag between Moldova's declaration of independence and its recognition by the US was significantly shorter than the eight months Georgia waited for recognition. However, this is due to the fact that Georgia declared independence earlier than Moldova did. The first U.S. embassy opened in Chisinau in March 1992, a month earlier than the U.S. Embassy in Georgia. Finally, Moldova was admitted to the CSCE (later OSCE) on 31 January 1992. While Moldova fares slightly better than does Georgia in these categories, it fares significantly worse than Estonia, as we shall see. Unlike the Baltic States, which received strong support from their Nordic neighbors, Moldova (and Georgia) had no Western patrons who saw their success as important. For Moldova, Romania was closest to such a patron, but was itself undergoing considerable political, social and economic upheaval and was in no position to help.<sup>620</sup>

Qualitative indicators from both the West and Russia support the contention that Moldova did not have a Western geopolitical affiliation. Numerous policy-makers and scholars support Williams' argument that the West seems unable to move past the Cold War conceptualization of Europe, which leaves large parts of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet

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<sup>620</sup> Moldovan government official, name withheld by request, interview with the author, 9 July 2012.

Union on the outside, looking in.<sup>621</sup> William Hill, former head of the OSCE mission to Moldova, remarks that since its independence, Moldova has been seen as “too small, too quiet and too obscure” to attract the attention of the West. In Moscow, on the other hand, Hill argues that Moldova is seen as a country where “Russian influence ought to be unchallenged”.<sup>622</sup> Moldova’s lack of importance to the West provides one of the few points of convergence of opinions between officials in Chisinau and Tiraspol. A Moldovan government official remarked to me that although there were some tentative attempts by the West to prevent conflict in Moldova, these lacked vigor, since Moldova was seen from European and North American capitals as the “back yard” of the Russian Federation.<sup>623</sup> Alexander Porzhan, a former official of the Transnistrian *de facto* government, noted that whereas the Baltic States had a serious basis for statehood in that the West had always supported them, in Moldova the West provided no counterweight to Russia.<sup>624</sup>

For Russia, Transnistria’s importance was significant, and its foundations were more ideational than material. Williams says that Transnistria played a key role in allowing Russia to define its attitudes and policies toward the Russian diaspora populations in the former Soviet Union, and Socor argues that it served as “a custodian of Soviet values and of Russian great-power interests”.<sup>625</sup> Even the military connection to Transnistria had more affective than instrumental elements. Hill writes,

“The Fourteenth Army included many ethnic Russian troops who came from families resident in Moldova, having moved to the MSSR from the Russian Republic. Many of these ethnic Russian troops were legally registered as citizens of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, and thus circumvented the usual Soviet practice that soldiers stationed domestically not serve in their home republic. In any event, the vast

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<sup>621</sup> Williams, “Conflict Resolution after the Cold War: the Case of Moldova”, 77.

<sup>622</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, 7.

<sup>623</sup> Moldovan government official, name withheld by request, interview with the author, 9 July 2012.

<sup>624</sup> Alexander Porzhan, former Transnistrian representative to the Joint Control Commission, interview with the author, 12 July 2012.

<sup>625</sup> Williams, “Conflict Resolution after the Cold War: the Case of Moldova”, 76.

majority of Fourteenth Army troops in Moldova, officers and enlisted men alike, were decidedly sympathetic to the separatist leaders”.<sup>626</sup>

Some Russian officials placed so much value on Transnistria’s role that they seemed to forget that Moldova, like Russia, as one of the fifteen successor states to the Soviet Union, was fully sovereign under international law. Russian Parliamentarian Nikolai Travkin opined that Transnistria had legitimate grievances, and he criticized parliamentarians who supported Moldova’s territorial integrity, attacking their concern over “which of the states separating themselves from the Soviet Union should be given what additional land”. Kaufman and Bowers respond, “The idea that the Transnistrian region was ‘additional’ land which Russia was somehow empowered to ‘give’ to Moldova – or to withhold – rather than being an integral part of Moldova’s territory, quickly became popular and, eventually, the consensus view in Russia”.<sup>627</sup> The lack of Moldova’s importance to the West and the high level of Russian attention to Transnistria explains why “Russia was able to nurture the notion that it had the lead, if not the exclusive right, in international efforts to resolve these conflicts that broke out in the aftermath of the Soviet dissolution”.<sup>628</sup> The silence of the West on Moscow’s interference in Moldova also influenced the decision-making of the Moldovan leadership, which ultimately bowed to Russian pressure and joined the Commonwealth of Independent States.<sup>629</sup> Like Georgia, Moldova joined not out of any desire to integrate itself into the post-Soviet space, but due to its calculation that this would pacify Russia and allow Moldova to retain at least a modicum of sovereignty.

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<sup>626</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, 51.

<sup>627</sup> Stuart Kaufman and Stephen R. Bowers, “Transnational Dimensions of the Transnistria Conflict”, *Nationalities Papers* 26:1 (1998), 131.

<sup>628</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, 4.

<sup>629</sup> Lukic, Reneo and Lynch, Allen, *Europe from the Balkans to the Urals* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), 238.



Other than the West and Russia, there are two other external actors that merit mention with respect to the Transnistria issue: Romania and Ukraine. As noted earlier, Romania had a historical and ethno-linguistic connection with Moldova, but had itself recently undergone a convulsive and violent political transition and was still struggling with massive economic and social dislocation as Moldova slid toward war. It was therefore in no position to play the role of mediator or make the case for Western attention to Moldova's problems. Ukraine was essentially neutral in the Transnistria crisis. Despite the fact that Ukrainians formed the largest minority group in Moldova,<sup>630</sup> they were the least politically mobilized minority group.<sup>631</sup> Like Russians, Moldova's Ukrainians were rather dispersed geographically: only about 170,000 of the over 600,000 Ukrainians in Moldova lived in Transnistria. King says that there was little evidence that Kyiv was overly concerned about collective rights of Ukrainians in Moldova, and "successive Kyiv governments praised Moldova's record on inter-ethnic relations".<sup>632</sup> The Ukrainian Ambassador to Chisinau spoke of a marked improvement in Ukrainian cultural opportunities in independent Moldova, and reminded Ukrainians of the need to be good Moldovan citizens in addition to being guardians of Ukrainian national culture. "There was no evidence that Ukraine sought to mobilize ethnic Ukrainians in Moldova or to raise the ethnic issue as a part of the Transnistrian problem".<sup>633</sup>

There are two major reasons that Ukraine pursued such a careful policy toward Moldova. The first was the Ukrainian concern that supporting its ethnic kin in Moldova could serve as a precedent for Russia to do the same in the Ukrainian autonomous republic of Crimea, where ethnic Russians comprised some 67% of the population in the 1989 Soviet census.

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<sup>630</sup> Moldova's Ukrainians, at some 13.8% of the total Moldovan population in 1989, formed the largest relative Ukrainian minority in the entire USSR.

<sup>631</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 171.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

Crimea, like Transnistria, also had a large Soviet and later Russian military presence that would have facilitated intervention. Indeed, in early 2014, after Ukrainians toppled the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich and a pro-Western government took its place, Russia did intervene in Crimea, in effect separating it from the rest of Ukraine.

The next reason for Ukraine's cautious policy in Moldova had to do with the different identities prevailing in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine. As discussed, Russia consistently defined itself as a Great Power and acted in accordance with what it considered the prerogatives of a Great Power; as the post-imperial power in the former Soviet Union, Russia also considered itself to have a unique set of rights and responsibilities there. Ukraine had neither of these characteristics: it did not generally define itself as a Great Power and it did not see itself as having a special role in the former Soviet Union. So while the West was generally uninterested in events in Moldova, Russia paid significant attention, especially where the status of Transnistria was involved. Other regional powers, for varying reasons, played no significant role as Moldova's separatist conflict with Transnistria escalated to outright war.

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Although there had been previous violence between Moldovan and Transnistrian forces, the outbreak of war between them is generally dated to early March, 1992. After intervention by the Russian 14<sup>th</sup> Army proved decisive in securing victory for the Transnistrian side, a cease fire was signed in July 1992. As in the Abkhazian conflict, external military intervention preceded the outbreak of war in Moldova and actually helped contribute to it. As early as 1990, the local Soviet civil defense organization and DOSAAF, a Soviet paramilitary organization, began supplying weapons to the Transnistrian side.<sup>634</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> Army also proved an important source of weapons for Transnistria, providing some 20,000 firearms to paramilitary forces there prior to

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<sup>634</sup> Kaufman, "Spiraling to Ethnic War: Elites, Masses and Moscow in Moldova's Civil War", 130.

the outbreak of conflict.<sup>635</sup> After the August 1991 Soviet coup attempt, military support for Transnistria became more overt. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army Commander, General Gennadii Yakovlev, was apparently bribed into turning some of his unit's heavy weapons over to the Transnistrian "Republic Guard", and his open support for Transnistria separatism – he even briefly accepted the post of Transnistrian "Defense Minister" – was a key factor in convincing Transnistrian leader Smirnov that his course of confrontation with Chisinau was safe.<sup>636</sup>

After the Soviet collapse and a further intensification of the conflict in Moldova, entire units of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army went over to the Transnistrian side. The bulk of an engineer regiment, a motorized rifle battalion and several smaller air defense units all offered their services to the Transnistrian armed forces. Units that remained with the now-Russian (formerly Soviet) 14<sup>th</sup> Army provided instructors to help train the troops of the newly-formed Transnistrian "Republic Guard".<sup>637</sup> In the meantime, 14<sup>th</sup> Army officials attempted to explain the large-scale transfer of weapons to Transnistrian forces by claiming they had been stolen. After Moldovan President Mircea Snegur sent a cable to Russian President Yeltsin warning of the risk of "an intense interstate conflict with the direct and decisive participation of the Russian 14<sup>th</sup> Army", spokesmen for the Russian unit affirmed its neutrality in the escalating conflict, but acknowledged that heavy weapons had "fallen into the hands of Russian and Ukrainian secessionists".<sup>638</sup> Several days later a 14<sup>th</sup> Army official acknowledged that militants had "seized tanks and other weaponry to fight the Moldovans".<sup>639</sup>

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<sup>635</sup> Tkach, "Moldova and Transdnistria: Painful Past, Deadlocked Present, Uncertain Future", 150.

<sup>636</sup> Kaufman, "Spiraling to Ethnic War: Elites, Masses and Moscow in Moldova's Civil War", 131.

<sup>637</sup> Aurel Fondos, Senior Consultant at the Bureau for Reintegration of the Republic of Moldova and former commander of the Moldovan peacekeeping force contingent in Transnistria, interview with the author, 12 July 2012.

<sup>638</sup> Michael Dobbs, "Moldova, Commonwealth Warn Against Aggression", *The Washington Post*, 21 May 1992, a35.

<sup>639</sup> No author given, "Moldova Mobilizes Reserves to Combat Russian Army", *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, 25 May 1992.

In addition to weapons and military vehicles, Transnistrian forces also received a significant amount of manpower from Russia. This support took two forms: 14<sup>th</sup> Army troops who fought full-time or part-time for Transnistria, and volunteers or “Cossacks” who arrived from Russia. The wholesale defection of some 14<sup>th</sup> Army units has already been noted. Kolsto, Edemsky and Kalashnikova discuss another source of manpower: the “revolving door” whereby officers from the 14<sup>th</sup> Army temporarily donned the uniform of the Transnistrian Republic Guard to fight, thereafter returning to their 14<sup>th</sup> Army unit. One reason that so many members of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army proved willing to fight for Transnistria is that many of them called it home. In contrast to normal Soviet military policy, which required soldiers to serve outside their home republics, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was largely recruited locally. In 1994 60% of the officer corps and some 80-90% of the soldiers were permanent residents of Moldova.<sup>640</sup> Volunteers from outside of Moldova also provided an important source of manpower. Although Cossack groups began arriving as early as 1990, they arrived in force in the spring of 1992, immediately prior to the escalation of the conflict to outright war.<sup>641</sup>

The extensive Russian support to Transnistria left Moldovan forces outmanned and outgunned from the start. Although the 1992 Tashkent Agreement held that non-nuclear forces stationed in Soviet republics other than Russia would be turned over to the Ministry of Defense of the republic in which they were located, this did not happen in Moldova. Since the bulk of the combat forces of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army were located in Transnistria and in Ukraine, the Moldovan Ministry of Defense received very little in the way of serious military equipment from Soviet stocks.<sup>642</sup> The only Soviet forces located in Chisinau at the end of 1991 were the headquarters of the Southwestern Command of Soviet Forces, which had communications and engineer units,

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<sup>640</sup> Tkach, “Moldova and Transdnistria: Painful Past, Deadlocked Present, Uncertain Future”, 149.

<sup>641</sup> Kolsto, Edemsky and Kalashnikova, “The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism”, 987.

<sup>642</sup> Tkach, “Moldova and Transdnistria: Painful Past, Deadlocked Present, Uncertain Future”, 152.

but no combat forces. Romania did make some contributions to the Moldovan Ministry of Defense, but these were limited to some 20 armored personnel carriers, a small amount of pontoon bridging equipment, light weapons and some ammunition. It did not do more for three reasons: the fear of provoking an even more robust Russian intervention, ambivalence from Moldova itself, since the latter feared being seen as dependent on Romania, and the complete economic disarray in Romania.<sup>643</sup> As conflict between Moldova and Transnistria escalated in the spring of 1992 then, intervention from Russia had given Transnistria a decided military edge.

Russian intervention in Moldova took its definitive form in the direct participation of 14<sup>th</sup> Army units in the fighting. As early as September 1991, 14<sup>th</sup> Army officers were expressing their “readiness....to come to the defense of the...Transnistrian Republic” and denouncing the idea of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army’s withdrawal as “unacceptable”.<sup>644</sup> The escalation of the conflict that ultimately culminated with the 14<sup>th</sup> Army’s intervention began in early 1992, when Transnistrian leader Smirnov launched an effort to forcefully remove those Moldovan police forces still working inside the boundaries of the self-declared Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR). By April 1992 the fighting had stalled into a series of inconclusive positional battles, with Moldovan forces attempting to hold the villages in which they still had a presence and Transnistrian forces trying to drive them out.<sup>645</sup> At this point the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, although it had armed and largely manned the Transnistrian forces, attempted to avoid directly entering the fighting. Its commander, General Yuri Netkachev, professed the neutrality of his forces, but received little support in maintaining it, either from Moscow or from the troops themselves. During an April 1992 visit to Tiraspol, Russian Vice President Alexander Rutskoi opined that “Russia should protect Russians no matter where they live” and should use “tough measures” to do so. He also

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<sup>643</sup> Ibid, 152-153.

<sup>644</sup> Kaufman and Bowers, “Transnational Dimensions of the Transnistria Conflict”, 132.

<sup>645</sup> Kaufman, “Spiraling to Ethnic War”, 129.

proclaimed his support for Transnistria, declaring that it “has existed, exists and will continue to exist”.<sup>646</sup> Upon his return to Moscow, he argued for Russia’s recognition of Transnistria. This left President Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Kozyrev, who was described as “running after (Rutskoi) with a fire extinguisher”, as essentially the lone voices inside the Russian government supporting Moldova’s territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, the soldiers and officers of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army became increasingly involved in the fighting, “with the ostensible goal of pacifying the conflict but more often than not openly assisting the Transnistrians”.<sup>647</sup> By mid-May, Netkachev seemed to accept the inevitable and admitted that his forces had entered the conflict. After Moldovan President Mircea Snegur complained publicly that the 14<sup>th</sup> Army had “deployed tanks, artillery and armored vehicles” in support of Transnistrian forces, Netkachev responded that he had “ordered armored units to defend the towns of Dubosari, Koshnitse and Dubovskoye, which had been shelled by Moldovan militias”.<sup>648</sup> The intervention of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, and the conflict itself, culminated in mid-June. On 19 June, Transnistrian forces stormed the last remaining Moldovan police station in the town of Bender, which was symbolically and strategically important to both sides. Although located on the right (Bessarabian) bank of the Nistru River, Bender had a large Russian-Ukrainian population that sympathized with the TMR; it also possessed important road and rail links and an arms warehouse. Responding to the attack on the police station, Moldovan forces launched a coordinated counter-attack, and by 20 June controlled most of the city.

Later that day the 14<sup>th</sup> Army intervened and seized most of Bender, driving Moldovan forces to its outskirts. On 23 June, Russian General Alexander Lebed arrived on the scene with orders to assess the situation and stop the fighting. He relieved Netkachev of his duties and

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<sup>646</sup> Kolsto, Edemsky and Kalashnikova, “The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism”, 993.

<sup>647</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 193.

<sup>648</sup> Dobbs, “Moldova, Commonwealth Warn Against Aggression”, A35.

assumed command of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. Soon thereafter Lebed ordered a massive artillery strike on Moldovan forces, followed by an armored thrust by the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, driving Moldovan forces from their positions around Bender and effectively ending the military phase of the conflict. Snegur accused Russia of waging an “undeclared war” against Moldova;<sup>649</sup> Lebed responded that the city of Bender was an inalienable part of the TMR, and the TMR itself was “a small part of Russia”.<sup>650</sup> The formal end of hostilities came when Yeltsin and Snegur signed a cease fire agreement in Moscow on 21 July 1992. Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov was present at the ceremony but was not included as a signatory.

The intervention of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army plays a significant role in Transnistrian historical treatments of the conflict, and Lebed occupies a special role as a protector and liberator of Transnistrians. Hill recalls that Lebed threatened to march on Chisinau if the Moldovan forces did not agree to a cease fire.<sup>651</sup> Transnistrians have an even more dramatic view of his role. While I was touring a museum dedicated to the conflict in the Transnistrian capital of Tiraspol, the guide told me that during the battle for Bender, Transnistrian forces were armed only with metal clubs and were being slaughtered by the better-armed Moldovan forces. When I asked her how Transnistria managed to win the conflict nevertheless, she responded by pointing to a picture of Lebed and saying, “He saved us; he showed up and said tomorrow I’ll be in Chisinau and the next day I’ll be in Bucharest”, which was enough to convince the Moldovans to end the war.<sup>652</sup> Scholarly sources echo this theme, although in less dramatic fashion. Hill confirms that

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<sup>649</sup> Margaret Shapiro, “Moldova Accuses Russia of Waging ‘Undeclared War’”, *The Washington Post*, 23 June 1992, A1

<sup>650</sup> Kolsto, Edemsky and Kalashnikova, “The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism”, 998.

<sup>651</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, 52.

<sup>652</sup> This vignette speaks not only to Lebed’s stature among Transnistrians, but also to the themes of victimization and fear of Romanization common among Transnistrians. It is of course not true that the Transnistrians were armed only with clubs – as noted, in most cases they were better-armed than their Moldovan adversaries. The statement that Lebed threatened to march on Bucharest, which I have not seen made in any official or scholarly sources, is interesting in that it speaks to the assumption among Transnistrians that Romania was assisting Moldova in the same way that Russia was assisting Transnistria.

Lebed threatened to march on Chisinau (but says nothing of a threat to attack Bucharest),<sup>653</sup> and Kaufman concludes his analysis of the conflict by stating, “without Russian support, the Dniestrans probably could not have launched their secessionist war, let alone have won it”.<sup>654</sup> Charles King agrees, writing, “had it not been for Russia’s active support for PMR separatists, it is unlikely that the dispute would have escalated to full-scale war in 1992”.<sup>655</sup>

As Russia intervened in Moldova, enabling Transnistria to launch and win a violent separatist conflict, Western states and international institutions paid little attention. As noted, the two states other than Russia that had historical links to Transnistria and Moldova were, respectively, Ukraine and Romania. Both of these were former socialist states, neither were considered members of the West, and Ukraine, like Moldova, had recently gained its independence from the Soviet Union. Both were also consumed with internal problems and were wary that their involvement in the Transnistrian conflict would simply provoke Russia to intervene more directly and vigorously.

The U.S. also avoided any serious engagement in Moldova, despite the fact that it had opened an embassy in Chisinau by the time the conflict escalated to outright war. American involvement was generally limited to calls for both sides to pursue a peaceful solution. As the conflict reached its culmination on 23 June 1992, State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutwiler said,

“We believe that the Moldovan and Transnistrian authorities should seek a negotiated peaceful solution within the framework of an independent and sovereign Moldova which ensures that the rights of ethnic minorities are protected in practice as well as law”.<sup>656</sup>

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It also points to fear of Romanization – or loss of the distinct Transnistrian identity – as the driving force behind Transnistria’s bid for independence.

<sup>653</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, 52.

<sup>654</sup> Kaufman, “Spiraling to Ethnic War”, 138.

<sup>655</sup> Charles King, “Eurasia Letter: Moldova with a Russian Face”, *Foreign Policy* 97 (Winter 1994), 106.

<sup>656</sup> Don Oberdorfer, “End Fighting in Moldova, U.S. Urges; Bush, Baker Unable to Halt Escalation”, *The Washington Post*, 23 June 1992, A18.



But the U.S. government, perhaps realizing that the war in Moldova attracted little attention among American voters and U.S. allies, was quite forthright in admitting that assistance from the West in ending it was not to be expected. A *Washington Post* story from that day concluded,

“State Department officials conceded there is little the United States can do at this stage other than counsel patience and caution. Western European nations have not been extensively involved, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has set down rules for avoiding ethnic fighting, has yet to take a strong stand on the Moldovan situation”.<sup>657</sup>

Evidence of how little Moldova figured in U.S. geopolitical calculations can be found in many sources, but appears perhaps most strikingly in David Halberstam’s *War in a Time of Peace*. Halberstam paints a picture of a U.S. government preoccupied in the summer of 1992 with events in Somalia and Bosnia, but completely disengaged from the escalating conflict in Moldova. In fact, in the entire book of 560 pages, Moldova appears not at all.

The failure of the CSCE to take a stand on the conflict in Transnistria was not due to lack of attempts by the Moldovan government to gain the attention of international institutions and enlist their help. Vlada Tkach notes that Moldova “from very early on” tried to internationalize the conflict by involving the CSCE.<sup>658</sup> William Hill observes that “the Moldovan authorities in Chisinau appealed for support and assistance to the United Nations, the OSCE, and a variety of European and North American states. The only response came from Russia.”<sup>659</sup> Indeed, the first CSCE mission in Moldova was not authorized until February 1993, and did not arrive in Chisinau until 25 April – more than a year after the escalation of the conflict and nine months after its end.

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid, A18.

<sup>658</sup> Tkach, “Moldova and Transdnistria: Painful Past, Deadlocked Present, Uncertain Future”, 153.

<sup>659</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, xi.

The CSCE/OSCE was not alone among international institutions in failing to attempt to stop the escalation in Moldova. While the CSCE's reluctance to act can at least in part be attributed to Russia's status as a member state, the same cannot be said of the European Union (EU). The birth of the EU as an actor on the international stage is often pegged to the Maastricht Treaty, which was signed on 7 February 1992 and came into force on 1 November 1993. Despite the fact that the newly-formalized EU aspired to a more influential position in international politics, it played essentially no role in the first decade after the outbreak of conflict in Transnistria.<sup>660</sup> It only became involved in the conflict resolution process in Moldova in 2002, and it appointed its first Special Representative for Moldova in March 2005.<sup>661</sup>

Before it ended, the conflict in Transnistria killed some 1000 people and produced approximately 130,000 refugees and internally-displaced people.<sup>662</sup> While the escalating clash between Chisinau and Tiraspol produced little alarm or even interest in the West, it resonated deeply in Russia, where Transnistrians had long been portrayed in the Duma and the press as "an embattled Russian minority fighting against chauvinistic Moldovan nationalism".<sup>663</sup> Transnistria also functioned in the Russian political identity as "a custodian of Soviet values and of Russian great-power interests".<sup>664</sup> Transnistrians embraced this role, portraying Moldovans as engaged in an attempt to obliterate the unique Soviet Moldovan identity and portraying their quest for independence as an attempt to hold fast to the values of the Soviet Union. Transnistrian histories of the war with Moldova reflect these themes, and are rich in Soviet

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<sup>660</sup> Bruno Coppetiers, Michael Emerson, Michael Huysseune, Tamara Kovziridze, Gergana Noutcheva, Nathalie Tocci and Marius Vahl, *Europeanization and Conflict Resolution – Case Studies from the European Periphery* (Gent, Belgium: Academia Press, 2004), 155.

<sup>661</sup> Siddi and Gaweda, "Bystander in its Neighborhood: The European Union's Involvement in Protracted Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space", 14.

<sup>662</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 178.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid*, 195.

<sup>664</sup> Williams, "Conflict Resolution after the Cold War: the Case of Moldova", 76.

symbolism and comparisons with the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany, as this account of the Battle of Bender illustrates:

The traitorous, barbaric and unprovoked invasion of Bender had a single goal: to frighten and bring to their knees the inhabitants of the Dniestr Republic, to make them shudder with terror.... The defense of Bender against the overwhelming forces of the enemy closed a heroic page in the history of our young republic".<sup>665</sup>

This section of the chapter concludes with two important points. First, Moscow's intervention in Moldova cannot be attributed to any special strategic significance of Transnistria. Indeed, as we shall see, the Baltic Republics were usually considered to be of far greater military and economic importance to Russia than Moldova was. Next, Russian intervention cannot be simply ascribed to Moldovan military weakness opportunistically exploited by Russia. Estonia was at least as militarily weak as Moldova in the early post-Soviet period, yet Russian policy there demonstrated a high level of patience and restraint. Instead, Russian intervention in Moldova can be explained by the combination of three factors: the legacy of Soviet policies that produced an institutionalized identity-division, the resulting high level of conflict escalation, and Moldova's non-Western geopolitical affiliation.

#### Estonia and its Russian-Speakers

The lower level of conflict escalation in Estonia was not an insurmountable barrier to Russian military intervention. Had elements within the Russian state decided that such intervention was warranted, it would have been a relatively simple matter for them to provoke a situation justifying it. As noted, the level of conflict escalation itself cannot be seen completely in isolation from the prospects for intervention. Kaufman's observation that absent Russian support Transnistria could neither have launched nor won its conflict with Moldova is accurate, and the same applies to the Abkhazian separatist movement. The point is this: had

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<sup>665</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 197.

Russian support been seen as likely by Estonia's Russian-speaking minority, this would likely have emboldened its leadership to make more extreme demands, which likely would have prompted a more reactionary policy from the Estonian center, setting off a spiral of escalation. Indeed, this is what many expected in July 1993, when "international journalists hovered over Narva like ravens, positioning themselves to catch the early battles in what was perhaps to be the next Transdniestra".<sup>666</sup>

But Russian policy in Estonia, despite threats and periods of heightened rhetoric, was on balance remarkably restrained. This restraint was due neither to Estonia's power nor its lack of strategic significance to Russia. If anything, the Estonian military was weaker, if better organized, than its Georgian and Moldovan counterparts. Part of the reason for this was the fact that Estonia was not a party to the 1992 Tashkent Agreement, and so inherited no former Soviet military equipment. Estonian Army officer Eero Rebo recall that the first major shipment of weapons Estonia received were sold and delivered to it by Israel, but those weapons did not arrive until late 1993, meaning that in the period leading up to the autonomy referenda in July 1993 the Estonian Armed Forces were very lightly armed.<sup>667</sup>

Estonia was seen as strategically very significant to the Russian Ministry of Defense. Lieven describes Estonia and Latvia as "the continuous object of Russian strategic ambitions since the fifteenth century" and remarks that "older officers still see them as strategically vital".<sup>668</sup> Together, the three Baltic republics cover by far the greatest part of the former Soviet Baltic coastline and have three key naval bases in Paldiski, Estonia; Liepaja, Latvia and Klaipeda, Lithuania as well as radar station at Skrunda, Latvia. They also hosted other radar stations and air defense sites that extended the Soviet air defense network into the Baltic Sea, providing

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<sup>666</sup> Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, 182.

<sup>667</sup> Eero Rebo, Lieutenant Colonel, Estonian Army, interview with the author, 22 May 2013.

<sup>668</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 203.

critical early warning in case of an attack on Russia.<sup>669</sup> The combination of strategic military assets and a large number of Soviet military retirees meant that the Soviet military community in the Baltic republics was “probably the most hardline and imperialist of the entire Union”.<sup>670</sup>

Estonia’s importance to Russia was not limited to its military significance. It also played a significant role in Russia’s identities as a Great Power and as a member of Europe, both of which were extremely important to Moscow at the time. The Baltic Republics provided Russia with a “window to the West” - a historic Russian concern since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. A June 1992 editorial from *Pravda* neatly combines the historical and military significance of Estonia and concludes somewhat ominously that Russia has “no choice” but to maintain its presence in there:

“Withdrawal of Russia from the Baltic states would mean not just closing our window on the West, which had already been done, but also boarding it up, which is going on at present. Russia simply cannot exist without Baltic ports.....Therefore Estonian politicians will have to consider the renewal and development of links with Russia....the Russian nation, which once saved Estonia from Nazi genocide, has no choice but to re-open its European window”.<sup>671</sup>

Despite the fact that Estonia was militarily weak and was of strategic significance to Russia, the latter did not attempt to escalate the situation there and use this escalation as a pretext for intervention. The major reason for this was Estonia’s geopolitical affiliation – in the minds of both Russians and Westerners – as a member of the West. Despite Estonia’s long history in the Russian Empire and some 50 years as a member of the Soviet Union, both of which were Russian-dominated states, there is a latent sense of inequality in the Estonian-Russian relationship that runs opposite the expected direction. Instead of Russians perceiving themselves as superior to Estonians, they often exhibit a sense of inferiority.

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<sup>669</sup> Carl Bildt, “The Baltic Litmus Test”, *Foreign Affairs* 73:5 (September-October 1994), 74.

<sup>670</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 202.

<sup>671</sup> *Ibid*, 180.

Laitin identifies three modes of peripheral incorporation into the Russian state. In places such as Ukraine, newly incorporated elites were permitted to join high society at the political center at the same rank and standing they had in their own territories – Laitin calls this the “Most Favored Lord” model. In places such as Kazakhstan, the traditional colonial model applied: elite ambitions could only be fulfilled as subalterns under Russian surveillance within the titular republic and the ladder of ambition could only realistically be climbed within the republic, and even there at significant cost. Finally, in Estonia and the other Baltic republics, the mode of incorporation was “integralist”. Local elites there had little need for Russia, as their rates of literacy and education were significantly higher than in Russia itself; few titulars wanted to move to Moscow, bureaucratic business was largely conducted in the titular languages, and Russian rulers of the Baltic periphery adapted to peripheral culture rather than the other way around.<sup>672</sup> So while Russians saw Ukrainians as junior partners and Kazakhs as indigenous people among whom Russia had a “civilizing mission”, they saw Estonians as in most ways culturally superior. Lieven echoes this theme, noting that,

“A large proportion of Baltic Russians have been prepared to acknowledge that the Balts have a superior civic culture, are cleaner, more orderly and harder working. They may qualify this by saying that Russian life is ‘friendlier’, or ‘more humane’, but this is the *exact* reverse of the usual colonizer: colonized self-images”.<sup>673</sup>

This sense that Estonia belonged culturally and politically to the West, and not to the post-Soviet space, was shared by Western states and international institutions. Even while the Baltic Republics were still legally part of the Soviet Union,<sup>674</sup> Western governments treated them

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<sup>672</sup> Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, 60-67.

<sup>673</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 178. Emphasis in original.

<sup>674</sup> There are those who will argue that the Baltics were never legally part of the Soviet Union, since they were annexed as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1940. This argument has its merits, but was largely undermined by the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which gave international legal recognition to the interstate boundaries existing at the time, according to which the Baltics were Union Republics of the USSR.

differently. Almost immediately after the annexation of the Baltic Republics by the Soviet Union in 1940, the U.S. government issued the Welles Declaration, which declared that the US would not recognize the incorporation of these states into the Soviet Union. Throughout the Second World War, when the U.S. and Soviet Union were allies, and the Cold War, when they were adversaries, the U.S. continued to adhere to this policy. The history of U.S.-Estonian diplomatic relations as described by the U.S. State Department reflects the constancy of American policy regarding Estonia's status:

The United States has maintained continuous official diplomatic relations with the Republic of Estonia since July 28, 1922... Following the restoration of Estonia's rightful independence on August 21, 1991, the United States announced its readiness to re-establish full relations with the Republic of Estonia on September 2, 1991. The Embassy of the United States of America began official operations on Wednesday, October 2, 1991, at twelve o'clock, in temporary chancery offices located at the Palace Hotel.<sup>675</sup>

This statement contains several important points that serve to illustrate the importance the U.S. attached to its relationship with Estonia. First, the U.S. recognized Estonia's independence, along with that of Latvia and Lithuania, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet coup attempt in August 1991, while it waited until the formal end of the Soviet Union to recognize the independence of Georgia and Moldova, despite the fact that they had declared independence much earlier. In other words, the U.S. formally recognized Estonia's independence and set up an embassy in its capital while the Soviet Union still existed.<sup>676</sup> Next, whereas it waited three months after the recognition of independence to set up an embassy in Chisinau and over four months in Tbilisi, the U.S. Embassy in Tallinn was operating within a month of the US recognition of Estonia's independence. International institutions also extended

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<sup>675</sup> Website of the Embassy of the United States in Tallinn, Estonia. Internet resource at: <http://estonia.usembassy.gov/history2.html>, accessed 22 May 2013.

<sup>676</sup> The Soviet Union also eventually recognized Estonia's independence while it was still in existence, on 6 September 1991. But the fact that the U.S. and most other Western states recognized Estonia before the Soviet Union had officially withdrawn a claim to sovereignty over it is unusual.

early recognition to the three Baltic republics: all were admitted to the CSCE while the Soviet Union still existed, in September 1991. Estonian scholar Klara Hallik argues that one reason the West was so early to establish relations in 1991 is that in the legal sense Estonia was re-establishing the independence that it had lost illegally in 1940, and many Western governments had never formally recognized Soviet rule there.<sup>677</sup>

Even before Western states had established diplomatic relations with the Baltic Republics, and long before they left the Soviet Union, violence there by Soviet authorities met strong condemnation in the West. Hill remarks that the Soviet crackdowns in Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991, which killed some 19 people total, drew widespread international condemnation.<sup>678</sup> An article in *The Christian Science Monitor* noted that Moscow was “taken aback by unexpectedly strong indignation” over the violence.<sup>679</sup> The article went on to advocate continuing to pressure the Soviet government by raising the issue in international institutions. Adding to the international reaction, *The New York Times* noted on 17 January 1991 that “the European Community today renewed its warning that aid to the Soviet Union would be halted if repression continued in the Baltic States.”<sup>680</sup> By comparison, the violence by Soviet forces that killed 20 people in Tbilisi some 19 months earlier drew a much more muted response from the West. U.S. reaction was limited to expressing sadness at the loss of life and calling on Soviet authorities to use restraint in dealing with “those wishing to express their right to peaceful political expression”.<sup>681</sup>

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<sup>677</sup> Klara Hallik, former professor at the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute and former consultant to the Estonian State Council, interview with the author, 20 July 2012.

<sup>678</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*, 30.

<sup>679</sup> “Raise Baltics issue in world forums”. (1991, Mar 06). *The Christian Science Monitor (Pre-1997 Fulltext)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/291180387?accountid=4444>.

<sup>680</sup> Bill Keller, “Soviet Crackdown: Lithuania; Soviets Insist They Won’t Use Force to Unseat Lithuanians”, *The New York Times*, 18 January 1991, A6. The article noted that after the violence the previous weekend, the 12-nation group warned Moscow that a \$500 million technical cooperation accord was threatened; today it said a \$1 billion food aid package might also be suspended.

<sup>681</sup> Masha Hamilton, “Gorbachev Sends Aide to Calm Soviet Georgia”, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 April 1989.



So Estonia clearly occupied different position in the minds and policies of both Russian and Western policy-makers than did Georgia or Moldova. Whereas the latter were largely ignored by Western states and international institutions as their internal conflicts escalated, Estonia enjoyed significant attention from the West. For Russia, its own predilections as well as its cognizance of Western opinions led it to consider intervention in Georgia and Moldova as within its rights as a Great Power, while intervention in Estonia was viewed as illegitimate and dangerous to Russia's relationship with the West.

*Analyzing and Explaining Intervention Decisions in Estonia*

The five indicators of military intervention that this dissertation examines are the provision of small arms to non-state groups by external actors, the provision of heavy weapons, the provision of military vehicles and/or aircraft, the intervention of volunteer fighters or Cossacks, and finally, direct military intervention by the armed forces of an external state. In sharp contrast to what happened in Georgia and Moldova, there is no evidence that the Soviet/Russian Army in Estonia was a source of weapons, much less vehicles or aircraft, to non-state groups. In fact, both sides in Estonia were lightly-armed. There are three reasons for this. First, since it had refused to take over Soviet military stocks located in the Estonian SSR, the Estonian Armed Forces had few heavy weapons and armored vehicles after the Soviet collapse. Second, Soviet/Russian military garrisons in Estonia tended to be manned by Navy, Air Force and other "technical" troops instead of the large combat formations found in Georgia and Moldova. The more technical nature of these garrisons meant that they had fewer troops overall and fewer of the types of weapons – rifles, machine guns, hand grenades and rocket-propelled grenades – conducive to mounting an insurgency than did Soviet garrisons in Georgia and Moldova.

The third factor was the location of Soviet/Russian garrisons in Estonia. Despite the concentration of a large group of Soviet military retirees in northeast Estonia, the presence of active duty troops there was even lighter than in the rest of Estonia. Soviet military presence in the northeast was limited to a small KGB detachment, Border Guard units and military construction units.<sup>682</sup> What Soviet/Russian combat troops there were in Estonia were located in the west of the country and around the capital of Tallinn. Indrek Tarand, the former Estonian government representative in the northeast, remarked that the “Soviet Army considered the eastern part of Estonia so irrelevant that all the troops were on the islands or on the coast, and nothing but... logistics was there (in Narva).” Tarand concluded that had there been “let’s say, two or three battalions, troops, there” things might have turned out differently.<sup>683</sup> So the overall level of armament present in Estonia was significantly lower than in Georgia and Moldova, and the type and location of Soviet/Russian military garrisons in the country also hindered the transfer of arms to non-state groups.

Despite these limiting factors to the mounting of a violent separatist movement, there were widespread and persistent rumors about armed groups of factory workers in the cities of the northeast, and the potential intervention of volunteer fighters from Russia. Tensions, and the prospects for large-scale violence, were highest in the lead-up to the July 1993 autonomy referenda in Narva and Sillamäe. The Estonian government had declared the referenda illegal and there were rumors circulating in the northeast that the government would use force to prevent polling from happening. In response to these rumors were circulating persistent reports that groups of “armed thugs or Cossacks” were waiting on the Russian side of the Narva River

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<sup>682</sup> Eldar Efendijev, Representative from Narva to the Parliament of Estonia, interview with the author, 18 July 2012. This is confirmed by other Estonians I interviewed, including Klara Hallik and Imre Lipping.

<sup>683</sup> Indrek Tarand, current Member of the European Parliament from Estonia, and former Estonian government special representative to the northeast. Interview with the author, 17 July 2012.

and were prepared to intervene forcefully if the Estonian authorities attempted to close polling places.<sup>684</sup> Some representatives of the Russian community in Estonia were openly attempting to stoke passions. The leader of the pro-Russian Intermovement group apparently made a statement on a Russian television station in St. Petersburg urging people to “go vote in the referendum, defend Soviet power in Estonia so that Narva becomes independent from Estonia.”<sup>685</sup>

Vladimir Chuikin, former Chairman of the Narva City Soviet and a political leader among Estonia’s ethnic Russians, claims that he was approached by Russians who had volunteered in the Abkhazia and Transnistria conflicts – “those who managed to restore Soviet power”, as Chuikin put it – with an offer to help do the same in Estonia. Chuikin claims that dozens of armed men who had fought in Abkhazia and Transnistria had congregated in the Russian region of Kingisepp (St. Petersburg Oblast’) and were preparing to move into Estonia. Some of these Russian would-be volunteers were claiming that the Estonian government was planning to call in tanks to repress the voting. Noting that the Estonian government had no tanks at the time, Chuikin says he agreed that within 24 hours of a violent repression of the referenda the volunteers would be welcome. Immediately prior to the referenda, Chuikin claims he approached Vladimir Putin, then the mayor of St. Petersburg, with a request for the government of St. Petersburg to ensure that armed groups in that region were not allowed to cross the border into Estonia.<sup>686</sup>

In the end, neither armed groups of factory workers nor volunteer fighters from Russia engaged in large-scale violence after the referenda, despite the fact that the Estonian government declared the results invalid and refused to entertain the prospect of autonomy for

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<sup>684</sup> Vladimir Chiukin, former Chairman of the Narva City Soviet, interview with the author, 19 July 2012.

<sup>685</sup> Ibid.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid.

Narva and Sillamäe. The scarcity of weapons and the efforts of both local Russian leaders and Russian government officials to prevent the intervention of volunteers from Russia certainly played a role in this outcome. But chance or luck may have been on Estonia's side as well. As discussed, the outbreak of conflict in Transnistria in the spring and summer of 1992 seems to have drawn away from northeast Estonia and the Russian regions bordering it some of those most ready to do violence. There is conclusive evidence that at least some Russians from Estonia fought in Transnistria: among those non-locals listed as killed in the war against Moldova are Alexander Valentinovich Artemev of Narva, and Oleg Nikolaevich Dushenko of Tallinn.<sup>687</sup>

The Russian military was also extremely restrained in Estonia, and especially so in the northeast. While there were clashes between Estonian and Russian troops in other regions of Estonia, there were none in Narva or other towns with large Russian populations.<sup>688</sup> Estonian Army Lieutenant Colonel Eero Rebo, who was then an enlisted machine-gunner, remarked that Russian units often displayed a high level of restraint, while the Estonian troops and officers tended to be younger and more confrontational.<sup>689</sup> Rebo says that although there were violent incidents between Estonian and Russian troops, these were always resolved without the violence escalating. This description echoes Laitin's description of violence between Estonian and Russian civilians, in which there was a "self-fulfilling prediction that acts of violence between persons of different nationalities do not constitute internationality violence, and therefore do not call for ethnic retaliation".<sup>690</sup>

So military intervention in Estonia was essentially negligible. There were no reports of weapons, to say nothing of vehicles and aircraft, being provided to non-state groups. The

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<sup>687</sup> Viktor Diukarev, *Dubosari 1991-1992*, (Tiraspol: Uprpolygrafizdat' PMR, 2000), 398.

<sup>688</sup> Indrek Tarand, current Member of the European Parliament from Estonia, and former Estonian government special representative to the northeast. Interview with the author, 17 July 2012.

<sup>689</sup> Eero Rebo, Lieutenant Colonel, Estonian Army, interview with the author, 22 May 2013.

<sup>690</sup> Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, 184.

persistent rumors that armed factory workers and Russian volunteers were prepared to intervene violently proved unfounded, and the Russian military forces still stationed in Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union showed significant restraint. That this was the case is even more surprising given the fact that the outcome of the referenda in northeast Estonia and the status of Estonia's Russian minority were highly unsatisfactory to the Russian minority itself and the Russian government in Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev, by then one of the few remaining pro-Western figures in the Russian government, wrote an editorial in the *New York Times* after the referendum crisis in which he urged the West to "heed a Russian cry of despair in Estonia", characterized Estonian treatment of ethnic Russians as "policies reminiscent of ethnic cleansing" and warned that "Russia cannot be indifferent to the fate of ethnic Russians in Estonia".<sup>691</sup>

Statements like this led *The Washington Post* to write, "When leaders in Moscow warn of post-Soviet ethnic conflicts engulfing Europe, they most often mention Narva as the match that could light the fire." Russian President Yeltsin warned that Estonia should not forget "certain geopolitical and demographic realities" since "the Russian side has means at its disposal to remind Estonia about these".<sup>692</sup> By April 1995 Kozyrev was openly warning that Russia might have to resort to force to protect the rights of ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics.<sup>693</sup> But in the event, Russia unilaterally degraded its ability to do just that. Despite having publicly linked the withdrawal of Russian troops in Estonia to a successful resolution of the minority issue,<sup>694</sup> Russia completed that withdrawal in August 1994. In effect, this act gave up the major source of Russian leverage over Estonia despite the fact that the condition Russia laid out had

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<sup>691</sup> Andrei V. Kozyrev, "Heed a Russian 'Cry of Despair' in Estonia", *The New York Times*, 14 August 1993.

<sup>692</sup> Fred Hiatt, "Narva, Estonia: Spark in an Ethnic Tinderbox", *The Washington Post*, 9 October 1993, A21.

<sup>693</sup> Slater and Wilson, *The Legacy of the Soviet Union*, 239.

<sup>694</sup> Adomeit, "Russia as a 'Great Power' in World Affairs: Images and Reality", 47.

not been satisfied. The attention paid to the issue of Russian troops in Estonia by the West, and especially the U.S., doubtless played a role in Russian calculations. When negotiations between Estonia and Russia on the troop withdrawal stalled, the U.S. Senate passed resolution threatening to cut off all aid to Russia unless the withdrawal was completed on schedule.<sup>695</sup> With veto-proof majorities in Congress supporting the Estonian position and threatening to withhold aid to Russia, the Kremlin felt it had no choice but to complete the withdrawal on schedule.

The lack of military intervention in Estonia contrasts sharply with the high level of intervention there by Western states and international institutions. This dissertation examines the following factors as indicators of institutional intervention: assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by foreign embassy; direct assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by foreign government, through the naming of a special envoy or other representative; assistance in conflict prevention or mitigation by international institution; the deployment of a resident conflict prevention mission by an international institution. The early and active involvement of Western states and international institutions in Estonia stands in sharp contrast to events in Georgia and Moldova.

Eldar Efendijev, representative from Narva to the Estonian parliament, recalls that the CSCE was active before the referendum, and that staff from Western embassies in Tallinn came often to the northeast in efforts to prevent conflict there.<sup>696</sup> Klara Hallik maintains that international institutions and Western embassies played a very large role in preventing conflict, with the latter agreeing on a division of labor among themselves in their assistance to Estonia.

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<sup>695</sup> Wendy Sloan, "Russia-Estonia Summit Seeks Troops Solution," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 27, 1994. Internet resource at <http://www.csmonitor.com/1994/0727/27041.html>, accessed 1 September 2013.

<sup>696</sup> Eldar Efendijev, Representative from Narva to the Parliament of Estonia, interview with the author, 18 July 2012.

The U.S. worked on the political process, Canada worked on language politics and other states assisted in the development of the justice system.<sup>697</sup> Scandinavian states and their embassies were especially active in Estonia. Estonian-American Imre Lipping, former Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Tallinn, noted that Sweden and Finland were particularly interested in maintaining peace in Estonia. The former was home to a large Estonian minority and the latter had strong ethnic and historical ties to Estonia.<sup>698</sup> As tensions between Tallinn and the northeast escalated, the U.S. became more deeply involved as well. A diplomat from another Western state noted that attitudes toward the issue underwent a “sea change” between August and October of 1992. The U.S. increased its activity in the CSCE and increased aid, including cotton credits to Kreenholm mill in Narva, “deliberately intended to help avert a crisis in this Russian-speaking area”.<sup>699</sup>

When Russia raised the issue of Estonia’s Russian-speaking population, it most often did so through international institutions. Again, this stands in contrast to Georgia and Moldova, where Russia intervened directly in pursuit of its interests and held international bodies at bay. On 29 October 1992 Yeltsin complained in the United Nations of a “massive violation of the human rights of ethnic Russians in Latvia and Estonia”.<sup>700</sup> In fact, complaints of this sort were the catalyst for one of the most effective *ad hoc* coordinating bodies to deal with this issue. Following these complaints by Russia, Sweden and Britain jointly launched an initiative whereby

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<sup>697</sup> Klara Hallik, former professor at the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute and former consultant to the Estonian State Council, interview with the author, 20 July 2012.

<sup>698</sup> Imre Lipping, former Deputy Chief of Mission of the US Embassy in Tallinn, Estonia. Interview with the author, 20 July 2012.

<sup>699</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 379.

<sup>700</sup> Steven Erlanger, “In the Baltics, There May Be No Home for Russians”, *The New York Times*, 22 November 1992, A1.

Western diplomats began meeting regularly in Stockholm after August 1992 to discuss questions relating to the Baltics and coordinate their assistance efforts there.<sup>701</sup>

Russian complaints were also a key factor in the endeavors of international institutions to prevent conflict. After Russia raised the issue in the CSCE, the body agreed to deploy a conflict prevention mission to Estonia; this mission was established on 13 December 1992 and began work on 15 February 1993, some five months before the culmination of the crisis in the form of the referenda. Ironically, this intervention was initially resisted by the Estonian government. Former Estonian official Indrek Tarand recalls that the government was trying to do everything it could to avoid the deployment of a CSCE conflict prevention mission there, primarily out of concern with being put “on the level of Bosnia” and other troubled European states. In the end, Tarand concludes that the CSCE mission was helpful in preventing conflict, because it gave the Russian population “a trusted agent to go to for arbitration”.<sup>702</sup> Lieven agrees with this characterization of the role of the CSCE mission, writing that it “had the very important effect of giving local Russian leaders a voice in the West, and of reassuring them they had not been forgotten”.<sup>703</sup>

The intervention of international institutions also served to moderate Estonian behavior. The Council of Europe, for example, recommended changes to Estonia’s Law on Aliens – the most threatening of the new laws to the rights of the Russian minority – and Estonian President Lennart Meri insisted that parliament makes those changes before he signed the bill.<sup>704</sup> Only after the revised law was passed was Estonia admitted to the Council.<sup>705</sup>

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<sup>701</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 378.

<sup>702</sup> Indrek Tarand, current Member of the European Parliament from Estonia, and former Estonian government special representative to the northeast. Interview with the author, 17 July 2012.

<sup>703</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 378.

<sup>704</sup> Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, 182.

<sup>705</sup> Slater and Wilson, *The Legacy of the Soviet Union*, 243.



Another important Estonian law, the one that allows non-citizens to vote in local elections, was also the result of strong pressure from international institutions. Indrek Tarand recalls that the Estonian government was against the idea, because of a fear that it would cause Tallinn to lose control in the cities of the northeast and result in ethnic enclaves inside Estonia. In the end, Tarand says the government decided to accept the idea because it concluded that “otherwise we will be outcasts in the international arena and we can stop dreaming about the EU and things like that”.<sup>706</sup> The pressure on Estonia by international institutions also had the effect of reassuring Moscow. Foreign Minister Kozyrev wrote in August 1993,

“Recently there have been some encouraging signs of the readiness of the Estonian government to mitigate the most odious discrimination measures, taking into account some of the recommendations of Max van der Stoep, the CSCE high commissioner for national minorities”.<sup>707</sup>

An irony here is that while Moldova requested a CSCE conflict prevention mission prior to the outbreak of the war in Transnistria and was ignored, Estonia received such a mission even though the government in the beginning resisted the idea.

So in Estonia, while Russia exercised a considerable amount of restraint, Western states and international institutions intervened early and actively to prevent conflict. These intervention efforts often involved convincing Estonia to make what it considered painful and potentially dangerous changes to its laws. This combination of actions by the Estonian government and international actors had the effect of allowing all sides to negotiate an extremely perilous period without the eruption of large-scale violence. Kaufman concludes that “Western pressure helped avert more serious ethnic conflict, both by encouraging reassurance policies on the Estonian side, and by deterring intervention by Russia”.<sup>708</sup> Lieven echoes this

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<sup>706</sup> Indrek Tarand, current Member of the European Parliament from Estonia, and former Estonian government special representative to the northeast. Interview with the author, 17 July 2012.

<sup>707</sup> Kozyrev, “Heed a Russian Cry of Despair in Estonia”, 2.

<sup>708</sup> Kaufman, “Spiraling the Ethnic War”, 138.

theme, writing, “Thanks to the moral and emotional commitment of the West, and the assiduous efforts of Baltic lobbyists, ethnic conflict in the Baltic States would almost certainly lead to a major crisis in relations between the West and Russia”.<sup>709</sup>

The commitment of the West to Estonia was known to all sides and was a key factor in preventing conflict there. Estonia’s geopolitical affiliation meant that not only was it clear to Russia that intervention there would have significantly higher consequences than in other places, but that it was clear to Estonians that if they complied with the wishes of their Western partners, they stood an excellent chance of being admitted to Western institutions such as the EU and NATO. Membership in these organizations, from very early on, represented the Holy Grail of Estonian foreign and security policy objectives. In Georgia and Moldova, the widespread and accurate belief that membership in such institutions was unattainable in the foreseeable future had two major effects. First, it meant that suggestions of such institutions for moderating the behavior of the Georgian and Moldovan governments lacked authority and credibility, since there was no “carrot” to be offered in exchange for making such concessions. Second, it signaled clearly to Russia that in terms of respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity, Moldova and Estonia belonged to an entirely different category than did Estonia.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Geopolitical Affiliation and Intervention in Georgia, Moldova and Estonia**

This chapter has tested the assertion that the geopolitical affiliation of a state undergoing an escalating internal crisis is a more reliable predictor of the type of intervention likely to occur than other factors, such as its economic or military importance, its ability to militarily resist intervention, or ethno-national affinities. The table below depicts the level and type of intervention experienced in each case, along with the level and type of intervention predicted by the theory proposed in this dissertation.

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<sup>709</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 381.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Georgia-Abkhazia</b>	<b>Georgia-Ajaria</b>	<b>Moldova-Transnistria</b>	<b>Estonia-Russian Minority</b>
<b>Geopolitical Affiliation</b>	<b>Non-Western</b>	<b>Non-Western</b>	<b>Non-Western</b>	<b>Western</b>
<b>Overall level of escalation</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium/High</b>	<b>Low/Medium</b>
<b>Predicted Intervention Outcome</b>	<b>Military Intervention</b>	<b>No Intervention</b>	<b>Military Intervention</b>	<b>Institutional Intervention</b>
<b>Indicators of Military Intervention</b>				
Provision of small arms to non-state groups	Yes	No	Yes	Possibly
Provision of heavy weapons	Yes	No	Yes	No
Provision of military vehicles and/or aircraft	Yes	No	Yes	No
Intervention of volunteer fighters or Cossacks	Yes	No	Yes	No
Direct military intervention	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Indicators of Institutional Intervention</b>				
Conflict prevention or mitigation assistance by foreign embassy.	No	No	No	Yes
Direct assistance by special envoy or other representative.	No	No	No	Yes
Conflict prevention or mitigation assistance by international institution.	No	No	No	Yes
International institution deploys resident conflict prevention mission.	No	No	No	Yes

In Abkhazia, a high level of conflict escalation in a non-Western state led to military intervention by Russia in pursuit of its own interests, while Western states and international institutions prevaricated or ignored the situation outright. In Moldova the outcome was similar. Despite repeated appeals for assistance from Chisinau and Tbilisi in de-escalating conflict and internationalizing the conflict-management effort, the only response to either set of appeals came from Russia, which determined that a resolution of the conflict in favor of the separatist regimes was in its interest. In Estonia, Western states and international institutions were

engaged early on and were very active in attempting to de-escalate the conflict between the Estonian government and the Russian minority. For its part, when Russia chose to express its considerable frustration with the situation there, it did so most often through international institutions. Even when it threatened to use the leverage of its troops in Estonia – is it did several times when it slowed the process of their withdrawal – these threats turned out to be empty. Despite the fact that Estonian citizenship laws, though softened from their original form largely due to Western pressure, were still unacceptable to Moscow, Russian troops were withdrawn from Estonia on schedule in August 1994.

The variable that best explains the intervention decisions of external actors is the geopolitical affiliation of the target state. The strategic (economic and military) importance of the target state fails to adequately explain the outcomes observed. The two most strategically important states among these cases are Georgia and Estonia. Georgia's importance stems from its historical role as the linchpin of the South Caucasus and from the Russian perception – largely validated by history – that control of the South Caucasus is critical to maintaining peace in the North Caucasus. Estonia's strategic importance comes from its role as a "window to Europe" in the political and economic sense and from its role as a platform for the extension of Russian naval and air defense capabilities into the Baltic Sea. Moldova had little strategic importance for post-Soviet Russia, yet Russia intervened there and in Georgia while exercising restraint in Estonia. Ethno-national affinities also do not explain the outcomes observed. The ethno-national affinities between Russians and the minority groups in Moldova and Estonia – both of which were Slavic – were higher than those between Russians and Abkhazians. Yet Russia intervened on behalf of the Abkhazians and the mixed Russian-Ukrainian minority in Moldova while failing to intervene on behalf of the almost-exclusively Russian minority in Estonia.

In concluding this chapter, it is important to note that its objective has not been to criticize either the West for ignoring Georgia and Moldova or Russia for intervening there, but simply to show that it was the geopolitical affiliation of the states involved that determined how they were treated by other members of the international system. When weighing intervention in an internal crisis, external governments and international institutions are making decisions of major import, often under temporal pressure, in situations that are volatile, complex and uncertain. In circumstances such as these, the geopolitical affiliation of the target state can often act as a heuristic, allowing external actors to define their interests there without detailed knowledge of the situation “on the ground”. Since no state or international institution has unlimited power or resources, all must draw lines somewhere that delineate the boundaries of the membership in their groups of states. In the modern world this boundary has most often separated those states deemed to belong to the group called “the West” from those deemed outside it. To use Wendt’s terminology, those states deemed as members of the West exist in a situation approaching Kantian anarchy, where other states are seen as friends, disputes are settled without war, and “other help” is more the rule than the exception. Those states not deemed members of the West exist in a situation approaching Wendt’s Lockean culture of anarchy, where other states are seen as rivals and violence in pursuit of state objectives is seen as a legitimate (if limited) tool of state policy.

This chapter also does not intend to imply that Georgia and Moldova were purely victims of their geopolitical affiliation, and that Estonia was simply lucky. The former two made often egregious errors that Estonia was largely able to avoid. This was due in large part due to the moderation and restraint exercised by Estonian post-Soviet leaders, qualities that were in short supply in both Georgia and Moldova. But the legacies of Soviet ethno-federal policies meant that the room for error provided to Georgia and Moldova was much less than that

enjoyed by Estonia, and the structural conditions that followed Soviet policies, in terms of the level of institutionalized identity division and its potential for escalating conflict, made such errors harder to avoid.

## CHAPTER 6 –CONCLUSIONS

### **I. Introduction**

In the late evening of 7 August 2008 Georgian Army forces launched an artillery attack on South Ossetian forces in and around the city of Tskhinvali, followed by a ground assault designed to seize the city and the key road intersections around it. This action followed a months-long period of escalating tensions between Georgia on one side and the *de facto* authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, assisted by Russia, on the other side. Within five days, Russia had evicted Georgian forces from South Ossetia, had landed forces in Abkhazia, and had expanded the war from those regions by driving deep into undisputed Georgian territory. The conflict of August 2008 is commonly known as the Russo-Georgian War; this moniker, while it accurately portrays the international dimensions of the conflict, also somewhat inaccurately implies that it represented a conflict separate and distinct from those that erupted in Georgia in the early 1990s.

In reality the conflict of 2008 represented a continuation of those conflicts. The fact that the fighting in both wars ended in separatist victories enabled by Russian military intervention - resulting in *de facto* states in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while preserving Georgia's *de jure* territorial integrity – set the stage for the resumption of conflict in 2008. The long period of *de facto* independence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia allowed the separatist authorities there to strengthen the identity-divisions between their people and Georgians, laying the foundation for the continuation of conflict. The Georgian government, effectively shut off from any contact with the people of the separatist areas, responded with an aggressive effort to join the West. Georgia engaged in intensive efforts to meet the entry requirements for NATO and the EU, on the assumption that once it was a member of these institutions – and its

Western geopolitical affiliation was thus ratified – its European and American partners would be able to mitigate Russia’s exclusive role in the management of Georgia’s separatist conflicts.

In order to make itself attractive to the West, especially after the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia engaged in rapid political, military and economic reform efforts. While a number of European states remained skeptical of Georgia’s ability to conform to Western standards of governance and behavior, others, including the U.S., the UK and many states of Central and Eastern Europe, championed Georgia’s inclusion. Georgia’s drive for Western integration culminated at the April 2008 NATO Summit, where the existing NATO members declared that Georgia (along with Ukraine, which was also pursuing NATO membership at the time) “will become members of NATO”.<sup>710</sup> Reflecting the division among NATO members on the advisability of accepting Georgia, however, NATO declined to issue Georgia a Membership Action Plan at the summit. For Russia, NATO’s action represented both a threat and an opportunity. The threat was the eventual removal of Georgia from Russia’s geopolitical orbit. The opportunity lay in the fact that, by declining to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan, NATO signaled that for the time being at least, it was not willing to risk confrontation with Russia over Georgia.

So despite their “frozen” appearance, Georgia’s conflicts were very much in flux by 2008. Internally, the long period of de facto independence had served to strengthen the identity-divisions between Georgians and the publics of the separatist regions. Externally, Georgia’s geopolitical affiliation was the subject of a tug-of-war, with a growing number of Western states willing to admit Georgia to their ranks, and Russia resisting Georgia’s escape from its orbit. In August 2008 these two factors combined to once again produce war in

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<sup>710</sup> “Bucharest Summit Declaration”, 3 April 2008, on the NATO website at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm), accessed 5 June 2013.



Georgia. Although the war began internally with an escalation of conflict between Georgians and Ossetians, this escalation was enabled and intensified by a series of Russian actions designed to force a crisis on the question of Georgia's geopolitical affiliation. As in the 1990s, internal and external causes combined to produce violent separatist conflict in Georgia.

Moldova and Estonia were able to avoid Georgia's fate. The former did so by being much more circumspect in its relations with the West. Although an intensification of institutionalized identity divisions between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova has taken place, Moldova has been content to move more slowly in its attempts to integrate with the West. Therefore, although the potential for the resumption of internal conflict exists – and Russia periodically reminds Moldova of the leverage it enjoys, through actions such as the 2006 embargo on Moldovan wine – Russia has not felt the need to “unfreeze” the Transnistrian conflict. Estonia's Western geopolitical affiliation was ratified in its 2004 entry in NATO and the EU. Since then, although tensions between Estonia and Russia have risen at times, the latter has been careful not to provoke a crisis in relations. The 2007 cyber-attacks on Estonia, which occurred after internal unrest revolving around the relocation of a Soviet-era war memorial, represented the largest spike in tension between Tallinn and Moscow since the end of the 1993 referendum crisis. While almost universally thought to have emanated from Russia, the nature of these attacks allowed the Russian state to deny any involvement in them. Despite Russia's denial of involvement, the EU and NATO acted quickly and resolutely to condemn the attacks and take steps to protect Estonia from future cyber threats from Russia. In May 2008, NATO opened its Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence in Tallinn, a clear sign of its commitment to the cyber-defense of Estonia.

This dissertation began by asking why apparently dormant conflicts suddenly reignite, why some minority groups rebel while others in the same state remain quiescent, and why

external actors intervene in internal conflicts. These questions are empirically and theoretically important, and finding supportable answers to them has the potential to significantly assist in the decision-making process for policy-makers. This dissertation also sought to address several shortcomings in the political science literature on violent separatism and internal war more generally. One of these is the lack of focus on the role of external factors in shaping the outcomes of internal conflicts. Most of the political science literature prefers to focus on purely internal factors such as ethnic entrepreneurs, poverty, rough terrain, large populations and the presence of “lootable” natural resources. Aside from being purely internally-focused, these approaches do not fare well empirically in the post-Soviet cases. Identity-based approaches fare better empirically in the former Soviet Union, but they too are limited in that they tend to overemphasize ethnicity as a driver of conflict, leaving little explanatory room for other identities or combinations of ethnicity with other identities. Finally, aside from Darden and Lieberman/Singh, identity-based approaches in political science have little to say about the role of the state in constructing identities.<sup>711</sup>

In this dissertation I sought to answer the questions asked and address the gaps in the literature identified in the previous paragraph. I did so by articulating and testing a theory arguing that where state policies construct and institutionalize an identity-division within society, the onset of political transition will cause mobilization around this identity-division and the escalation of conflict between societal groups. Where the level of escalation is high enough, external actors will be drawn into the escalating conflict, with the type of intervention undertaken being a function of the geopolitical affiliation of the target state. The next section of

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<sup>711</sup> Approaches grounded in sociology and history are better in this regard, but tend to be seen in political science as lacking in analytical rigor.

this chapter analyzes how successful this dissertation has been in answering the questions it set out to answer, and in doing so addressing the identified gaps in the literature.

## **II. Findings**

In order to determine the level of empirical support the case studies of this dissertation have provided for the theoretical claims it makes, this section presents findings for each of the four hypotheses presented in Chapter 2. In the course of this section, certain questions will be raised regarding apparent anomalies in the findings – these will then be dealt with in greater detail in a subsequent section of this chapter. Hypothesis 1 states that if state policies promote a given facet of identity, this facet of identity enjoys increased salience among the people of that state. This hypothesis is supported, but the level of support for it varies slightly among cases.

It receives strong support from the Ajarian case, where state promotion of an ethno-linguistic definition of identity and suppression of a religious definition of identity were of great significance in eliminating the substantial identity-division between Ajarians and Georgians that existed at the beginning of the Soviet period. Soviet policies were so successful that most contemporary Georgians are perplexed that the potential for conflict between Ajarians and Georgians could be the subject of academic study, since, in their words, “Ajarians are Georgians”. In other words, contemporary Georgians are so deeply conditioned to assume that nationality and citizenship are defined ethnically that it does not occur to them that it might not always have been so (and might not be so everywhere). This hypothesis also receives support from the Abkhazian case, although the relatively high levels of identity-division between Ajarians and Georgians in the pre-Soviet period makes it difficult to point to Soviet policies as the sole cause of the post-Soviet Abkhazian violent separatist movement. While Soviet policies

cannot be said to have created the Abkhazian-Georgian identity-division, they certainly deepened and institutionalized it.

The Moldovan case also provides support for the first hypothesis, in that the Soviet emphasis on and strengthening of the historical-symbolic and regional divisions between Bessarabia and Transnistria not only laid the foundation for conflict between them but also influenced the character of that conflict. In contrast to the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict, the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict had a lower level of ethnic content, which supports the contention in the first hypothesis that those identities that state policies support become particularly salient in times of political transition. One question raised by the Moldovan case is why the Bessarabist identity, the strongest numerically and the most conducive to compromise in late-Soviet Moldova, was undermined and eventually pulled apart by the more extreme Pan-Romanian and Eurasianist identities.

Finally, Estonia also provides support for the first hypothesis, although closer examination of the processes that allowed a moderate nationalist wing to develop in the Estonian Communist Party is needed. Understanding why the Soviet Union allowed this phenomenon to develop in Estonia but not in Moldova or Georgia is important in understanding whether there was a divergence between official policy, which treated each union republic comparably, and policy as instituted, which might have tolerated higher levels of independence in certain republics.

Hypothesis 2 states that if state policies result in a high level of institutionalized identity division, a political transition process will be accompanied by a high level of mobilization along this identity division and a high level of escalation of conflict between groups. Alternatively, if state policies result in a low level of institutionalized identity division, a political transition

process will be accompanied by a low level of mobilization along this identity division and a low level of escalation of conflict between groups.

This hypothesis receives strong support from the two Georgian cases and the Moldovan case; in all three, mobilization occurred around the identity made most salient by state policies, and the level of escalation closely tracked the level of institutionalized identity-division. The Estonian case provides only moderate support for this hypothesis, in that mobilization and the levels of escalation observed are lower than predicted by the level of institutionalized identity-division. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon. First, as mentioned, the fact that the Soviet government allowed the Estonian Communist Party to develop into a repository of moderate Estonian nationalism gave the Party greater legitimacy in the late Soviet period than its counterparts in Georgia and Moldova enjoyed. The Estonian Popular Front thus emerged from within the nationalist wing of the Party, rather than from the dissident intelligentsia, which was much more radically inclined. The second reason for the lower-than-expected level of escalation in Estonia was Estonia's Western geopolitical affiliation, which exerted a chilling effect on the mobilization of the Russian minority, since it had little confidence that it could expect support from forces in Russia. These factors set Estonia apart from Georgia and Moldova.

Hypothesis 3 states that high levels of mobilization and escalation along an institutionalized identity division within a state will result in external intervention, while low levels of mobilization and escalation will not result in external intervention. This hypothesis receives strong support from all cases, with Estonia once again demonstrating a moderate exception to the rule. This is because in Estonia the level of actual mobilization and escalation was not necessarily high enough to generate the significant amount of external attention Estonia received. However, the *potential* (and predicted) level of mobilization and escalation

there were very high,<sup>712</sup> and this is most likely what caused the higher-than-predicted level of external intervention there.

In Ajaria, the level of escalation was not sufficient to cause escalatory intervention despite the fact that there were multiple factors that would seem to have invited intervention. Among these are Ajaria's historical connection to Turkey, the presence of Russian troops, the fact that as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic Ajaria had the trappings of statehood, and the fact that the Georgian state was in no position to prevent separatism. In Abkhazia and Transnistria the level of escalation was sufficient to generate intervention, and the non-Western geopolitical affiliation of those states meant that intervention took military form and was designed to achieve the goals of the intervener.

This brings us to Hypothesis 4, which states that in states perceived as Western, external intervention will take the form of efforts to de-escalate and eventually resolve the conflict; in states not perceived as Western, intervention is more likely to be military in nature and to escalate the conflict. This hypothesis receives strong support from all cases, with no qualifications or exceptions.

Estonia, perceived as Western, received significant Western assistance designed to de-escalate the conflict between the Estonian government and the Russian minority. Even when it did not request international assistance and was wary of the changes to its laws recommended by Western institutions, the realization in the Estonian government that it had a high chance of being admitted to Western institutions if it complied significantly raised the benefit for

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<sup>712</sup> Newspaper articles from 1993 point to a high level of predicted conflict escalation. Among these are the article from the *Los Angeles Times* that states "It is unclear whether a vote for autonomy will bring the rebellious city concessions from the Estonian government or move Narva closer to ethnic violence" (Sonni Efron, "Russia, Estonia Keep Eye of City's Autonomy Vote, *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1993, 4), and the article from the *Washington Post* that reads, "When leaders in Moscow warn of post-Soviet ethnic conflicts engulfing Europe, they most often mention Narva as the match that could light the fire" (Fred Hiatt, "Narva, Estonia: Spark in an Ethnic Tinderbox", *The Washington Post*, 9 October 1993, A21).

compliance and the opportunity cost of non-compliance. This phenomenon is especially clear in the cases of the deployment of the CSCE mission and the changes to the citizenship law recommended by the Council of Europe, both of which were initially resisted but ultimately adopted by Estonia. In the end, the combination of these modifications to Estonian laws and the prospect of being admitted to Western structures was enough to keep Estonia's Russian minority quiescent. Estonia's Western affiliation and the knowledge that the West was engaged in Estonia and forcing changes to the laws and policies most offensive to Russia contributed to Russia's decision to stay out of the situation. Intervention in Georgia and Moldova, on the other hand, came only from Russia and took primarily military form because Russia decided this was in its interest. The two states were seen by Russia not as fully sovereign states, but rather as theaters or venues where geopolitical struggles could be waged. Despite the fact that both Georgia and Moldova requested international assistance in managing their spiraling separatist crises, none was forthcoming due to their non-Western geopolitical affiliation.

### **III. Implications of Findings, Scope and Boundary Conditions of Findings**

Having summarized the findings of this dissertation, I will now discuss their implications, beginning with the implications of findings in specific cases, then moving to a discussion of the implications of findings arrived at by comparing cases, and concluding with the implications of my findings in general. This last sub-section will be divided according to findings relevant to comparative politics, those relevant to international relations, and those relevant to both.

#### *Implications of Case-Specific Findings*

Among the four cases in this dissertation, the findings specific to the Ajarian and Transnistrian cases stand out for their broader implications. Ajaria provides the clearest example of the power of the state in constructing identities and confirms the enduring nature of those identities. The Ajarian case also disconfirms the often-repeated argument that Soviet

ethno-federal policies can be boiled down to power politics and the logic of “divide and rule”.

While this logic was doubtless present in some cases, Ajaria shows that Soviet policies could also serve to unite previously divided peoples.

The Transnistrian case shows that ethnicity is probably overused, both as a label applied to various types of conflicts, and also as an imputed cause of conflict. The case of Transnistria shows that conflict can erupt even when there is little overt ethnic enmity between groups. It also serves to highlight the fact that language can be divorced from ethnicity as an identity and a foundation for mobilization. In the Moldovan-Transnistrian Conflict, although language was a significant issue, there was very little ethnic enmity, as evidenced by the lack of ethnic cleansing and the fact that Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians remained relatively dispersed even after the conflict rather than concentrating themselves into defensible ethnic enclaves.

*Implications of Findings Arrived at Through Comparison of Cases*

Comparing the Abkhazian and Transnistrian cases shows that a single facet of identity does not always dominate in separatist conflicts. In Abkhazia a historical affinity (or at least a history of accommodation) existed between Georgia and Abkhazia. Abkhazia had usually been united with Georgia in its history – sometimes as a subject of the Georgian state and sometimes in a confederal arrangement – and even when the two were not united, strong ties between Georgian and Abkhazian elites had been maintained.<sup>713</sup> In the post-Soviet period, this historical connection was overcome by the strong ethnic enmity that developed between Georgians and Abkhazians, at least in part due to the legacies of Soviet ethno-federal policies.

In Moldova, a tradition of ethnic peace among Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians was shattered by a historical-symbolic and regional rift that developed between Bessarabia and Transnistria in the Soviet period. Soviet policies that vilified “Romanian fascism” and created a

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<sup>713</sup> Nodia, “Causes and Visions of the Conflict in Abkhazia”, 20.



separate economic sphere in Transnistria, when combined with the flirtation with Romania by the Moldovan national movement in the late Soviet period, resulted in a high level of fear of Romanization and the opening of old historical wounds among Transnistrians. The comparison of these cases serves to make the point that overly-broad generalizations about causes of conflict are limited because they fail to capture the important nuances present in each case.

*Implications of General Findings Relevant to Comparative Politics*

Among the general implications of the findings in this dissertation, there are three that are especially relevant to the field of comparative politics. The first of these is that the identity-content of a conflict influences its character. Wars that result from more stark identity divisions, and those with higher levels of ethnic content, can be expected to be bloodier and more violent.<sup>714</sup> De Waal says of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, which had a very high level of ethnic content, “there are more accounts of atrocities, including hideous stories of mutilation, torture and rape, from the war in Abkhazia than from South Ossetia or Karabakh”.<sup>715</sup> The next implication for comparative politics relates to the origins and nature of social identities. The case studies in this dissertation support the contention that identities are not primordial or perennial, but are instead constructed. However, this does not mean that identities are largely artificial and are therefore devoid of emotional content for those who subscribe to them. Instead, once constructed, social identities turn out to have significant “content value” for elites and publics alike. Rather than being used instrumentally, or donned and doffed at will, constructed identities are often deemed worth of fighting and dying for by both the elites who articulate them and the publics that rally around them. Finally, while malleable over the long-

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<sup>714</sup> Although, as I argued earlier, ethnicity is often overused as a label for many types of conflict and as an imputed cause of conflict, where ethnicity **is** present as a cause and where the level of ethnic hostility is particularly high, we should expect an especially bloody and violent conflict. This implies that ethnicity may have a level of emotional content that is not present in other forms of social identity.

<sup>715</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, 162.

term – and thus capable of being constructed – in crises, social identities tend to become both more salient and more “fixed”.

*Implications of General Findings Relevant to International Relations*

There are four major implications of the findings of this dissertation that have particular relevance for the study of international relations. First, there is not a single, uniform international system, but several systems, each with its own rules of conduct. Wendt’s concept of the three cultures of anarchy (Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian) is the best way of conceptualizing this concept. Next, the geopolitical affiliation of a state is a better predictor of intervention decisions by outside powers than are the power or strategic significance of that state. The boundary condition applied to this statement is that Great Powers do not appear to be considered as legitimate subjects for intervention; the material power of a state therefore does play some role in whether or not it is considered for intervention by outside actors. The third implication for international relations is closely related to the second, and it is that sovereignty is a continuous variable, not a dichotomous variable. Krasner<sup>716</sup> is therefore correct to argue that sovereignty is not absolute; where his argument proves limited is in its contention that the power of a state is the main determinant of the level of sovereignty it enjoys. Instead, outside of the small group of Great Powers, it is a state’s geopolitical affiliation that is the primary determinant of the level of sovereignty it is afforded. As discussed, Georgia was in most ways more militarily powerful than Estonia was in 1992, but it was subjected to Russian military intervention while Estonia was not.

The final implication relevant to international relations is that Russia is not the only state that perceives sovereignty as a variable and military intervention in non-Western states as

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<sup>716</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, “Compromising Westphalia”, *International Security* 20:3 (Winter 1995-1996), 115-151.

justifiable. While Russia may come in for greater international criticism due to its tendency for intervening militarily in pursuit of what are seen as narrow military or security interests, Western states have also shown a strong penchant for military intervention in non-Western states recently. When conflict has escalated in states such as Serbia (Kosovo) and Libya, the West has used this escalation to justify intervention under the emerging norm of “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P). While the West sees Russian intervention in Georgia and Moldova as fundamentally different from Western intervention in Kosovo and Libya, Russians are convinced they are perfectly comparable and that humanitarian concerns are simply a fig leaf used by the West to justify intervention that is actually designed to serve Western geopolitical interests.

*Implications of General Findings Relevant to Both*

There is one implication of the findings that applies to both comparative politics and international relations. This is that separatism in particular and internal war in general cannot be fully understood by focusing on only internal factors. Instead, approaches that draw insights from both disciplines are more likely to arrive at the most complete explanations for the phenomenon of internal war. This implication supports Hanlon’s contention that since internal war is complex and multifaceted, explanations for it must incorporate factors at all three images and the interrelationships among them.<sup>717</sup> It also correlates with the argument of Brubaker and Laitin that ethnic and nationalist violence should be studied through a disaggregated and heterogeneous research strategy, since “there is no reason to believe that these heterogeneous components of large scale ethnic violence can be understood or explained through a single theoretical lens”.<sup>718</sup>

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<sup>717</sup> Hanlon, *The Three Images of Ethnic War*, 2.

<sup>718</sup> Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin, “Ethnic and Nationalist Violence”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (August 1998), 447.

Quantitative data also supports the contention that internal wars cannot be fully understood focusing only on internal causes. The latest listing of ongoing armed conflicts in the Uppsala Armed Conflict database shows 27 intrastate conflicts, a single inter-state conflict, and 9 internationalized conflicts.<sup>719</sup> Uppsala defines internationalized conflicts as “an armed conflict between a government and a non-government party where the government side, the opposing side, or both sides, receive troop support from other governments that actively participate in the conflict.”<sup>720</sup> These statistics contain two significant points. First, at least 25% of internal wars involve external actors, and so cannot be seen as purely internal in nature. Second, Uppsala’s definition for internationalized war sets a very high bar for external involvement (active participation by foreign troops in a conflict), meaning that at least some of the wars classified as purely internal involve external intervention that falls short of the active participation of the troops of an external power. Syria provides a current example of this point: although Russia and several of the Gulf Arab states have actively aided one or the other side in the conflict, it is still classified as internal according to the Uppsala definition.

*Scope and Boundary Conditions, External Validity*

This brings us to the final portion of this section of Chapter 6 – the scope and boundary conditions of my findings, as well as a discussion of their external validity. The findings obtained by testing the theory proposed in this dissertation imply that the theory works best when applied to a set of cases that have two characteristics. First, the cases should consist of states with histories of imperial or colonial rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This does not significantly limit the applications of my theory, since this group of states encompasses the former Yugoslavia along with most of Africa, Latin America and Asia. The reason the applicability of my theory should be

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<sup>719</sup> “Ongoing Armed Conflicts”, Uppsala Conflict Data Program, internet resource at: [http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/charts\\_and\\_graphs/#map](http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/charts_and_graphs/#map), accessed 11 June 2013.

<sup>720</sup> Ibid.

limited to this group of states is that they were all subjected to control by an external actor that inhibited the native state-building process and that crafted policies on citizenship and membership in the polity that did not necessarily take local conditions into account. Finally, they all experienced the rapid political transition that comes with independence and the challenge of building states in the modern era, when most of the coercive state-building practices common to previous eras are normatively proscribed.

The second characteristic required for the theory proposed in this dissertation to work most effectively is that the cases under examination should belong to a defined geographical region. This does not imply that my theory or findings have no relevance if applied to cases in geographically disparate regions, only that the precise mechanisms at work in the theory are best understood and compared when applied to cases similar in temporal and geographical context. This allows the theory to take advantage of the concept of “diffusion” – when political phenomena move rapidly from state to state in defined geographical regions, but usually remain confined to that region. The concept of diffusion, seen most recently in the post-Communist “color revolutions” and the “Arab Spring”, implies that the states affected by the phenomenon in question must share some set of common political, economic, historical or cultural conditions that cause it to “jump” rapidly from one state to the next, yet remain confined to a specific region.

As far as the external validity of the theory proposed here, two recent cases come to mind. In Libya, the non-Western geopolitical affiliation of a state in which identities were divided along tribal and regional lines resulted in a high level of military intervention in an internal conflict, and this intervention ultimately determined its outcome. It is significant to note that this intervention was Western-led and was undertaken under the auspices of “Responsibility to Protect”, supporting the point that Western democracies do intervene

militarily in escalating separatist conflicts. In Syria, the non-Western geopolitical affiliation of a state in which identities were divided primarily along religious sectarian lines led to a high level of military intervention, and this intervention served to undermine efforts by international institutions to resolve the escalating conflict. What is interesting about Syria is that military intervention was undertaken by two different external actors with opposing aims. Russia, anxious to preserve its major strategic partner in the Middle East, and determined to avoid another Western-led regime change, has given significant military aid to the Assad regime. On the other side, several of the Gulf Arab states, eager to overturn what they see as an illegitimate Shia-dominated government ruling a majority Sunni people, and hoping to undermine Iran's interests, have given substantial aid to rebel forces.

The common elements in these cases are three: an identity-division institutionalized by the organs of the state; a rapid political transition brought on by diffusion in the context of the Arab Spring, and a non-Western geopolitical affiliation, which allowed external actors to perceive Libya and Syria as venues for pursuit of their own interests, however defined, rather than fully sovereign states in need of assistance in resolving escalating separatist conflicts. If Turkey were to experience similar political unrest, it might provide an interesting opportunity for comparison with Syria and Libya if this unrest escalates to violence. As perhaps the only Muslim state that can be considered a member of the West, Turkey, according to the theory advanced here, should be offered external assistance from Western states and international institutions rather than being targeted for external military intervention.

#### **IV. Unanswered Questions and Avenues for Further Research**

At times, this dissertation seems to have raised more questions than it has answered. In this final section of my dissertation, I will list the questions my research has raised but not conclusively answered, and propose avenues for research that will answer these questions and

further advance our knowledge of the phenomenon of violent separatism. As with the previous section, I will approach this one by first focusing on those issues relevant to comparative politics, then on those relevant to international relations, and finally on those relevant to both.

*Unanswered Questions and Further Research in Comparative Politics*

A recurring theme in this dissertation has been universities and their role in incubating the crypto-nationalists of the Soviet cultural intelligentsia. Specifically, what was it about the Soviet system of higher education that allowed relatively radical nationalist movements to develop inside the humanities-based scholarly communities of the Soviet Union? Further research is needed to analyze whether this phenomenon was a key causal variable in mobilization and escalation of conflict in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period. Further research is also needed to determine whether the role of the cultural intelligentsia in fomenting conflict through chauvinistic, exclusionary definitions of ethnic/national identity was unique to the Soviet Union, or whether there exist or existed other university systems in the world that harbor(ed) "crypto-nationalists"? If so, research should focus on what can be done to liberalize the curricula of these university systems to produce a more liberalized scholarly community in these countries.

A second unanswered question relevant to comparative politics concerns the disposition of the Soviet Army at the time of the Soviet collapse. It is clear that in Georgia and Moldovan the availability of weapons was a factor in allowing conflict to escalate. Soviet Army garrisons provided the opportunity to pursue violence, which combined with the motive for separatism provided by institutionalized identity-divisions. Further research should examine the disposition of Soviet units by type and strength to determine to what extent this correlated with the outbreak of violence. It should also attempt to determine whether there were factors other than purely military efficacy that determined the placement of Army units and how they were

manned. In other words, did the identity of the titular groups or other groups in each union republic play a role in determining what type of units were stationed there, or was it purely a question of what made the most military sense? In pursuing this research, scholars should not fall victim to the temptation to argue that outcomes were simply of function of opportunity provided by the availability of weaponry. After all, weapons were readily available in Ajaria and were not used because the motive for separatism was lacking.

This brings us to the third unanswered question, which revolves around Ajaria and the role of ethnicity as compared to other identities in fomenting conflict. What is clear is that in Ajaria the Soviet Union delegitimized a religious identity-division and legitimized (and strengthened) an ethno-linguistic affinity between Ajarians and Georgians. This policy was partially enabled by the more general shift from religious to national identities in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> Century, but Soviet policies were clearly the prime factor in the outcome. The question for further research is whether ethnicity, since it has “objective”, physical characteristics that are more enduring than religious or ideological attributes, provides more fecund grounds for the construction of identities. Further research should look for cases where a common ethnic group was divided on the basis of religion (Bosnia, perhaps) to see if that division proved enduring. It should also look for cases where distinct ethnic groups were united on the basis of religion to determine if that united identity proved enduring.

The final unanswered question relevant to comparative politics concerns the efficacy of the Soviet system of classifying and labeling nations under Moscow’s control. In addition to labeling groups by name, the Soviet government also classified them as either “old” or “Western” nations or as “new” or “backward” nations. The unanswered question is whether this classification had at its foundation some objective criteria that made the old nations more developed than the others, or whether the fact that the Soviets treated them as more



developed became a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is interesting and significant that all of the post-Soviet wars (Georgia-Abkhazia, Georgia-South Ossetia, Armenia-Azerbaijan, Russia-Chechnya, Moldova-Transnistria) occurred between “old” and “new” nations. As a rule, when the Soviet Union collapsed, old nations did not fight one another and neither did new nations. Although there were sometimes tensions between nations of the same “type”, these did not escalate. Georgia’s Armenians and Estonia’s Russians are examples of old nation tensions that did not escalate, while Moldova-Gagauzia and the various Central Asian ethnic minorities provide examples of new nation tensions that failed to escalate. What is needed is a longitudinal examination of Soviet nationalities policy over the entire Soviet period (Smith, Hirsch and Martin have done excellent analyses of the early period) to determine if Soviet policies treated “old” or “Western” nations differently from “new” or “backward” nations and ethnic groups. If so, we need to determine whether it was those policies that caused strife between groups or some other factor, perhaps a historical factor preceding the Soviet Union that was exacerbated by Soviet policies.

#### *Unanswered Questions and Further Research in International Relations*

There are two closely-related, unanswered questions raised by this dissertation that are relevant to international relations. The first is whether the geopolitical affiliation of a state affects not only the type of intervention but also the threshold for intervention. Related to this is the question of whether geopolitical affiliation should be seen as a dichotomous or continuous variable. In other words, will a state seen as “more” Western be offered external assistance sooner than one seen as “less” Western, and will a state seen as “more” non-Western be targeted for military intervention at a lower threshold of conflict than one seen as “less” non-Western? If either of these is true, this argues for geopolitical affiliation being more continuous than dichotomous. As noted in a previous section of this chapter, Turkey might provide a

fruitful research venue for answering this question, since it has membership in a number of Western geopolitical organizations, yet is an Islamic nation with considerable ties to the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

*General Unanswered Questions and Avenues for Further Research*

The first general avenue for further research might be entitled “Estonia and endogeneity”. Endogeneity occurs when a variable posited to be external to a theoretical model is actually determined internally. In this case, the question is whether Estonia’s Western geopolitical affiliation, seen in the model advanced here as only relevant to external intervention decisions, actually also determined how Estonia was treated while a member of the Soviet Union. The research of this dissertation makes clear that in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period both Russia and the West both treated Estonia differently than they treated Georgia and Moldova. The question thus has to be asked: were Soviet policies in Estonia different as well, and therefore is the geopolitical affiliation of Estonia the “real” independent variable, in that it caused both Soviet policies in the ESSR and the way Estonia’s minority crisis was handled by Russia and the West?

The answer is that there is no obvious sign of endogeneity present in Soviet policies, which were at least as responsible for the creation of institutionalized identity divisions in Estonia as they were in Moldova and Georgia. Far from treating Estonia and the other Baltic republic more mildly than the other twelve Soviet republics, Soviet policies in the Baltics often reflected a harshness and mistrust of the local people and their leaders that was absent in other republics. However, further research should attempt to delve deeper than the official policies themselves, into the informal rules and policies that developed in Estonia. For instance, why did the USSR allow the Communist Party of the ESSR to become a repository of moderate Estonian nationalism while it ruthlessly repressed any expression of Moldovan nationalism within the

Communist Party of the MSSR? Is the reason that the Estonian nation was seen as a “western” or advanced nation and therefore more legitimate?

Or was it a result of the “Romania factor”, which was absent in Estonia? In Moldova, the ethno-linguistic affinity with Romania made the specter of a hegemonic domination of Transnistria within a combined Moldovan-Romanian state both more likely and more threatening than the prospect of a Finno-Estonian domination of Estonia’s Russians. It was more likely because while some Moldovan nationalist politicians openly flirted with the prospect of uniting with Romania, no musings about union with Finland were heard from Estonian politicians. It was more threatening because Romania’s population – at some 21.3 million, dwarfed Finland’s population of just over 5 million. A third possibility was that the difference in how Estonia was treated in the Soviet period stemmed from a perceived cultural difference, with Russians perceiving Estonians as inherently more moderate and pragmatic than either Moldovans or Georgians and thus allowing them more leeway. Whatever the answer, further research is needed to determine whether official Soviet policies in Estonia, which bear no hint of endogeneity, concealed more deeply seated attitudes about Estonia that might explain some of the anomalies observed here.

The next question not conclusively answered in this dissertation might be entitled, “What role for culture”? In researching the four case studies examined here, it became difficult to escape the conclusion that the political and social cultures of the three countries played some role in shaping the outcomes observed. The vignette related to me by Ada Marshania, a Deputy of the Supreme Council of the Abkhazian Government in exile and former Deputy of the Parliament of Georgia, serves to make this point. Marshania noted that the loud and nearly violent debates among the members of the Georgian national movement shocked the visiting representatives from the Baltic States, who reminded them that the fate of their country hung

in the balance, and that this was more important than the issues they were arguing over.<sup>721</sup> The recollection of Endel Lippmaa about the way the Estonians handled their declaration of sovereignty also makes this point. Lippmaa recounted, “We have in fact done what Lithuania did, but by a long series of such small steps that it was difficult for Moscow to tell when we got really nasty. What Lithuania did was take a big step, as if Moscow didn’t exist”.<sup>722</sup> The result of this incremental approach was that Estonia was able to avoid the type of violent crackdown that occurred in Lithuania in early 1991. In Georgia and Estonia especially, there were predictable patterns of reaction to stimuli – time and again, where Georgians reacted rashly and aggressively, Estonians reacted calmly and incrementally. Further research is required to determine whether cultural differences played a role here.

This research should avoid the non-analytical, overly simplistic approaches often seen in journalistic accounts, such as the “fiery food, fiery tempers” explanation contained in the 1993 *Economist* article on the South Caucasus.<sup>723</sup> These approaches often ascribe outcomes to culture without taking the time to define and operationalize culture as an independent variable and developing a framework to test its effects. Also to be avoided are purely quantitative approaches, which can be overly crude. Often dichotomous, these approaches can reduce “thick” characteristics that may have causal effects to “thin” indicators, often proxies, which may fail to capture the actual causal variable. The research effort undertaken in this dissertation has demonstrated that culture exists and it exerts an effect on outcomes, but the current methods available to political science have had only partial success in defining it, operationalizing it and rigorously testing its effects. Several scholars have made progress in

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<sup>721</sup> Ada Marshania, Deputy of the Supreme Council of the Abkhazian Government in exile and former Deputy of the Parliament of Georgia, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.

<sup>722</sup> Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 242.

<sup>723</sup> Author not given, “The Transcaucasus: Fiery Food, Fiery Tempers”, *The Economist*, 24 July 1993, 55.

defining culture. These include Ross, who defines it as “the shared system of meaning that people use to make sense of the world”,<sup>724</sup> and Laitin, who notes that culture “embeds common knowledge beliefs that are transmitted across generations”.<sup>725</sup> What remains is to operationalize these definitions and test the effect of culture in specific historical cases.

I hesitated before including the final unanswered question and avenue for further research here. In the end, however, I am unable to attain a sense of completeness in this research effort without doing so. The final unanswered question can be stated specifically as, “What are the effects of thought and discourse on outcomes in the material world?” More generally, it might be stated as “What is the effect of energy on matter?” I hesitated before including this question for two reasons. First, in its general form it is so broad that it might be difficult to study. Second, it strays far outside the boundaries of political science into disciplines of which I have only a very general knowledge, specifically quantum physics.

Nevertheless, the questions of the effect of thought and discourse on material outcomes and the general relationship between energy – of which thoughts and words are a form – and matter are so important that to not include them here would have been a disservice. The currently-held opinion in quantum physics sees energy and matter as much less discrete phenomena and the boundary between them as less much less concrete than does classical physics. If this opinion is correct, then it is certainly possible that widely-held thoughts and widely-propagated discursive frameworks have the potential to manifest themselves in material reality. In other words, if enough energy of similar type is emitted, is it possible that this energy can eventually coalesce into material form?

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<sup>724</sup> Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*, 2.

<sup>725</sup> David Laitin, *Nations, States and Violence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 78.

If so, this might help explain why the presence of violent rhetoric was correlated with violence in both Georgia and Moldova, while its absence was correlated with a peaceful outcome in Estonia. It might also shed light on larger debates in political science, such as that between rationalism and constructivism. The fact that the scientific progress required to gain this knowledge resides far outside the social sciences should not be an insurmountable obstacle. Social scientists should engage their counterparts in the physical sciences, especially quantum physics, in an attempt to better understand their work. If this understanding leads to insights that can be applied to political science, these insights in turn lead to a better comprehension of the processes that lead to political violence, and this comprehension helps avoid or mitigate that violence, mankind as a whole will be enriched by the effort. And this should be the ultimate focus of all human scientific endeavor.